

Chapter 3

Cultural Immersion: Exploring Ways to Increase Cultural and Global Awareness Among American College Students

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ABSTRACT

In the globalized 21st century economy, many American higher institutions have substantially increased efforts to internationalize their curriculum through study abroad programs. These efforts are grounded in the longstanding belief that study abroad participation improves intercultural competence among students. Higher institutions aim at providing students the opportunity to a meaningful experience in a different culture to expand their cross-cultural understanding. However, there is limited research to support this claim; thus, a major competing explanation for differences found between students who do and do not study abroad continues to be the possibility that these differences existed prior to international participation. This chapter highlights how international experience was structured to enhance pre-service teachers' cross-cultural understanding and global awareness. The author argues that opportunities to experience cultures other than one's own, such as the cultural immersion experienced during this study in Tanzania, would enhance intercultural competence among students.

INTRODUCTION

The American educational policy makers, employers, and higher education leaders have recognized that American college graduates must acquire the ability to communicate and collaborate across racial, ethnic, and cultural differences if they are to successfully engage, compete, and contribute in the 21st Century global economy (AAC&U, 2007; APLU, 2004; Bikson, Treverton, Moini, & Lindstrom, 2003; Lincoln Commission, 2005). Research seems to suggest that study abroad participation can improve a range of intercultural attitudes and skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sell, 1983). Substantial increases in institutional support for study abroad programs and potential federal funding for study abroad scholarships

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have increased to boost student participation. Some institutions have instituted, or are seriously considering, substantial curricular changes to require study abroad as a prerequisite for graduation (Chmela, 2005; Fischer, 2007). As a result, institutions have come up with different kinds of study abroad models to serve students.

In 1998, Cruz pointed out that more and more teachers were being asked to incorporate global education into their classroom. He defined global education as “a flexible body of issues, skills, attitudes, and sensitivities that enable individuals to be thoughtful, responsible, participatory citizens of their local community, state, nation, and world. The world is becoming more interconnected, and the United States is becoming more culturally heterogeneous. Schools need to help students understand and thrive in these conditions (Cruz, 1998). Educational standards and curriculum mandates are becoming increasingly clear that teachers need to incorporate information about the world in their classes. Despite the fact that multilingual skills and cross-cultural understandings are needed to compete in the world arena, “American students continue to be overwhelmingly monolingual and often intolerant of other cultural values and practices” (Cruz, 1998 p, 26). At present daily life is largely affected by interdependent, cross-cultural, and international connections. Because multicultural education approaches are concerned primarily with those cultures and ethnicities found within given national boundaries, Global education has a much wider scope than multicultural education.

Buffalo city has been identified as the third poorest in the nation. The city has a very diverse population with one in nine residents being foreign born; and Buffalo Public Schools have identified at least 70 different languages that are spoken in the city’s school hallways. While at least 47% of the city’s population self-identify as non-white, most teacher candidates are Caucasian. This reality suggests that for teacher education candidates to optimize their classroom effectiveness in working with students from underrepresented groups, it is vital that they are as culturally fluent as possible. It is perplexing that with the local school district serving approximately 38,000 students; 75% of those students were identified as being from underrepresented minority groups. Further, only about 14% of the teachers in the district are from minority groups (“West Side Sustainable Community Plan”, SBS, 2012). This data remains a major concern because it is a contradiction to the mission statement of most Colleges and the Schools of Education in Buffalo. This calls for teaching models to support teachers in becoming effective intercultural and global agents.

A cultural immersion program to East Africa was started to provide students an opportunity to meaningfully experience other cultures different from their own. The Tanzanian project seeks to measure and build students’ cultural and global awareness via the development of alliance with Tanzania educational institutions. Through these cross-cultural experiences, students gained exposure to Tanzania culture and its educational system. Students gained invaluable social and cultural awareness and because of this expanded their world view. It was hoped that this experience would better prepared teacher candidates for their teaching profession. The pre-service teachers had opportunities to observe and practice Tanzanian methods of teaching as part of the learning experience.

The teacher education programs in most colleges attracts white, middle class female students who have limited experiences with diverse populations. The limited experiences of pre-service teachers working with diverse populations create an imbalance in teaching and learning. This imbalance negatively affects the ability of pre-service teachers to relate to their students. On one hand, teaching is done strategically, and on the other hand, learning is done sporadically. Gay (2010) calls it a mismatch between White, middle-class teachers and students of color who are from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

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