The transformative effect of study abroad: Australian teaching experience on US pre-service teacher identity formation

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This study describes the transformational effect of a short-term study abroad experience on a group of US pre-service teachers (PST). The PST participated in a cross-cultural exchange, which included a six-week placement in an Australian school where they assumed many teaching responsibilities. The PST reported experiencing collaboration as a structural feature of their Australian school experience in distinct contrast to their highly compartmentalized organizational structure of mainstream US schooling. This broadened perspective of shared teaching roles impacted students such that they expressed a belief that they, too, could incorporate this approach to teaching in the US. Not only the exposure to the complexity of teacher roles and responsibilities, but their inclusion as near-peers prompted the PST to experience, for some for the first time, the sense of actual identification as teacher.

Keywords: teacher identity; teacher education; study abroad; pre-service teacher; cross-culture

INTRODUCTION

The preparation of a competent and well-rounded teaching workforce is the goal of any teacher preparation program. While programs may structure and privilege requirements in different ways, finding ways to support pre-service teachers (PSTs) as they develop their teacher identity is an important component in that process. This paper explores how one small, liberal arts university in North Carolina attempted to broaden PST classroom teaching experiences by providing PSTs with the opportunity to participate in a short-term study abroad experience in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. While the original intent was to provide a comparative teaching experience which would expose students to best classroom teaching practices in Australian schools, the experience had a much greater effect on the development of their teacher identity.

Participants were asked to use reflective writing and journaling as ways to capture their responses throughout their experience; prior to departure, during the six-week stay, the semester following their return to the US, as they re-entered US classrooms, and, finally, during their final semester as they took on the role as "student teacher" prior to their graduation.

TEACHER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Identity, according to Gee (2001), is a way that we recognize the "kind of person" we are within a certain context. The different identities we develop and manifest in certain situations do not stand in isolation; they are inextricably linked. Teachers make choices every day: the way they dress, how they behave around students, how they interact with colleagues, how they choose to communicate with parents, and the manner in which they engage students in the curriculum. All of these choices help explain to the rest of the world how they define what it means to be a teacher (Gee, 2001).

Literature exists that highlights the importance of identity in teacher development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hoban, 2007; Olson, 2008; Sachs, 2005). Teacher identity contributes to the sense of efficacy a teacher has and impacts the motivation and commitment they exhibit. Ultimately, job satisfaction, effectiveness and retention are also impacted by teacher identity (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006; Harlow & Cobb, 2014). The developmental process is not static; it is a dynamic, constant, ever changing process that begins in teacher training and continues throughout teachers' teaching careers. As teachers work within schools and extend those experiences into the greater community, further identity shifts occur (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As PSTs take part in additional experiences, these shifts continue to collide and reorganize their definitions of teacher. The importance of this identity development cannot be overstated. As Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005, pp. 383-384) affirm:

> *Developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers; committees to their work and adherence to professional norms . . . .the identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether they seek out professional development opportunities and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role.*

Knowing the importance of supporting teacher identity development in PST, institutes of higher education must purposefully structure programming that aligns with that goal (Harlow & Cobb, 2014).

Providing PST with varied experiences during their teacher-training program can be one way to help expose them to the many definitions of "teacher" so they can begin to form their own teacher identity. Many of these field experiences, limited by the reality of logistics, occur within public and private school classrooms near the campus of study. PSTs take on the attitudes of those held by the schools, cooperating teachers and educational systems in which they are immersed (Kelleher, 1987). If those field experiences stay within the realm of "familiar", PSTs may exhibit limited personal growth (Kuechle, Ferguson, & O'Brien, 1995). Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson and Fry (2004) attest that placing students in contexts that challenge those norms also challenge their own identity development, allowing for reflection on those beliefs and the potential for personal growth.

One way teacher education programs can push students outside their routine classroom exposures is to provide opportunities for PSTs to participate in study abroad programs. Increasing numbers of teacher training programs are providing study abroad opportunities for their students (Pickert, 2001, Schneider, 2003). Study abroad experiences can have a transformative effect on PSTs (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011) and, in addition to developing increased global competence, PSTs demonstrate a heightened self-awareness (Vatalaro, Szente & Levin, 2015) and increased confidence (Cushner, 2007). The literature surrounding the impact that international experiences have on PSTs is significant. Willard-Holt (2001) summarizes these outcomes in the following statement:

> *International student teaching experiences may potentially change beginning teachers' thinking about themselves, curriculum design and teaching strategies . . . enhance skills and abilities of effective teachers; force examination of personal beliefs, habits and values; and encourage commitment to open-mindedness. p. 506.*

The potential for PSTs to change their thinking about some of the many facets of teacher identity warrants the involvement of teacher educators and teacher education programs. PSTs need to be encouraged to go beyond what is known and comfortable and teacher education programs need to provide opportunities to incorporate local and, if possible, global experiences into their programs. These experiences in the field not only provide meaningful opportunities to apply theory into practice but also can act as a catalyst for development (Brindley, Quinn & Morton, 2009; Yang, 2011).

THIS STUDY

Queens University of Charlotte is a small, Liberal Arts university located in Charlotte, North Carolina. As part of a commitment to the expansion of students' global perspectives, all undergraduate students are invited to participate in a faculty-led, short-term study abroad program between their junior and senior years. The 23 PSTs who took part in this study were part of the North Carolina Teaching Fellow program, a prestigious state scholarship program designed to enhance and deepen the training experiences of aspiring primary and secondary teachers. The six-week program was specifically designed to allow the Teaching Fellows a cross-cultural teaching experience by allowing them to observe, plan and co-teach alongside an Australian educator. The hope was that this experience would allow the PSTs to expand their understanding of how others view "best practices" and bring that fresh understanding back to North Carolina classrooms. PSTs were placed in schools around NSW, and included both primary and secondary schools as well as public and private institutions.

Over the three-year period prior to departure, the participating PSTs had spent close to 100 hours in a variety of US public school classrooms observing, tutoring and, in limited cases, teaching lessons. Having been exposed to a variety of schools, teachers and teaching styles during that period allowed the PST to begin to gain perspectives on what it means to be a teacher in North Carolina. During their stay in NSW, they would have a six-week cross-cultural teaching experience and then return to the US re-entering those public schools for the final year of their education program. The first semester of that year they would again be in a variety of schools observing and tutoring. The final semester would include their semester-long "student teaching" where they would be required to take over and live the role of teacher for a six-week period.

All PSTs were required to write reflections throughout the process. The focus of the reflections was, initially, just a means to capture the overall experience through the eyes of the PST. The researcher knew the PSTs would bring their understandings of US classrooms with them to Australia. By asking comparative questions, it was hoped that, upon their return, PSTs would be able to determine if the study abroad program had an effect on the lens through which they saw US classrooms.

METHODS

The method chosen for this research was phenomenology. Phenomenological research is structured around narratives provided by participants of a shared experience. Those narratives provide a basis through which the researcher can investigate the effects and perceptions of that

experience. "Phenomenology (is) focused on the subjectivity of reality, continually pointing out the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them" (Willis, 2007, p. 53). Since the researchers wanted to study the lived experiences of the PSTs and had no preconceived notions as to what the findings of the research would reveal, looking at the data through a phenomenological lens makes the most sense. Phenomenology can help researchers look at data over time and help participants make meaning of their experiences (Fellows & Liu, 2008).

Participants

The participants consisted of 23 undergraduate students, all of whom were rising juniors. Six of the participants were male, 17 were female. Seven of the students identified as African American, the remaining 16 students identified as Caucasian. Three of the students were majoring in elementary education, 20 were majoring in secondary education. Of the 20 secondary education students, 11 specialized in the content area of English/Language Arts, five in the content area of Mathematics, two in the content area of History, and two in the area of Biology.

Data collection

Data collection took place at four points throughout the program: at the end of the spring semester prior to departure to Australia, at the end of the six-week experience in Australia, at the end of the fall semester upon return to the US, and then again at the end of the spring semester, after completion of their "student teaching" experience. At each of these points, PSTs were given a series of questions (see Appendix) that asked them to reflect on their (likely) experiences in Australia and compare them to their current placements in US schools. The PSTs were asked to respond to the questions in a narrative, informal and conversational format. This less structured writing style allowed students to focus on the content of the narrative and not on the literary conventions, thus lowering the affective filter and yielding more honest and candid results.

Data analysis

Prior to departure abroad, the narratives were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is used by researchers to develop concepts from the data by coding and analyzing at the same time (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Constant comparative methodology incorporates four stages: "(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105).

Pre-departure participant data was evaluated by charting the data, then coding and analyzing the contents. A list of preliminary codes was generated during the first pass. New codes were created as data were reread, and several independent coding events were required to ensure that all ideas were labeled with an appropriate code. The final code list was generated from both the literature and from specific coding "events" during the reading of the data (Constas, 1992).

Once the final code list was generated, the data were reviewed through repeated readings to identify the frequency, omission, and/or declaration of emergent themes (LeCompte, 2000). These themes were then reduced and either integrated or reframed for reuse throughout the analysis process. Once the second round of data was gathered and analyzed (using the same process described above), those findings were compared to the pre-departure codes. Using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the data was examined for similarities, differences, analogies, co-occurrence of events or actions, sequence, corroboration, and triangulation (LeCompte, 2000). This pattern was repeated after each data collection point.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

After analyzing the narrative, major themes emerged from the data.

Impact of structural design of schools

More PSTs commented on the difference in the structural design of schools than any other theme. There exists a stark contrast in the logistical makeup of US versus Australian schools. In the majority of schools in the US, teachers are provided a "homeroom" classroom. This "homeroom" is used by the teacher and their students and is not shared with anyone else. Teachers are given keys to the room so that no other teacher can enter without permission. Walls are decorated with posters, charts and materials chosen by the teacher. The teacher's and students' personal effects are kept in this classroom. The classroom essentially belongs to the teacher for the school year.

This is in stark contrast to the concept of the "staff room" that most PSTs were introduced to during their time in Australia. The realization that teachers were not assigned a "homeroom" and were asked to float among classrooms was a foreign concept to the PSTs. While staff rooms in the US do exist, referred to as "the teachers' lounge", as the name states, they are not areas meant to house teachers for planning and collaboration, but rather a place to grab a drink and a snack, or quickly eat lunch. According to the PSTs, having teachers' cohabitate in the shared space of the "staff room" allowed them to collaborate, plan and build community in ways not possible in the US system.

Several PSTs commented on how having teachers centrally located in a departmental staff room allowed for increased collaboration and planning opportunities. "The faculty setting is more communal in Australia. They keep all the history (HSIE) faculty members together in one room. Throughout the day they can work together and talk about students issues and curriculum matters," commented a PST placed in a secondary school. "I liked the concept of the staff room," commented another PST, "it provides so many chances for collaboration. Teachers are constantly sharing what worked (or didn't work!) and brainstorming ways they could do it better. The English department felt like a team rather than a mere group." A PST placed in a primary school made this observation, "The one main difference I see between NC schools and Australian schools is that teachers in Australia know how to collaborate, it [is] like it is expected."

The criticism of the structural design of US schools came through loud and clear: "in US schools a teacher's office is their classroom, this somewhat isolates them from the rest of the faculty." Another PST commented: "In the US teachers prefer to stay in their classrooms with the door shut doing what they want to do. They don't bounce ideas off each other." Another bemoaned the effects of that isolation:

> *North Carolina teachers seem to have lost their enthusiasm because of how we (teachers) are separated from one another; we miss out on so much peer support and constant communication of ideas that seem to keep Australian teachers motivated, that support system reaffirms our teaching and develops new means of problem solving.*

> *North Carolina teachers lose out on the collective transfer of ideas that happen in the (Australian) staff room.*

Collegiality

In addition to the 'staff room' providing a collaborative planning space, many of the PSTs felt the levels of collaboration led to greater collegiality than they had experienced in US schools. "The camaraderie among the (Australian) teacher was very refreshing." A PST in a primary school remarked, "Teachers supported each other and acted as one large entity instead of separate teachers held together by a building." The independent nature found in US schools was picked up by another PST who reflected on the differences between US and Australian schools:

> *...there is little collaboration between teachers here (in the US), we keep to our own rooms, and we become extremely defensive if we are criticized by our colleagues. If one American teacher does something different than the others they are often criticized for it.*

In contrast another PST made this observation: "the teachers felt collaboration was important and that everyone can learn from someone else." A secondary student summed it up this way:

> *There is so much more collaboration here than in the US, and I love it! Except for the occasional department meeting, (in the US) you're on your own. You're in your own room, planning your own lesson, grading your own tests. And don't even think about seeking another teacher for advice! . . . I didn't feel uncomfortable or intimidated (in Australia) asking the teachers for advice, or even giving advice.*

The collegiality that emanated from the teachers was not limited to the Australian faculty, it was shared with the American PSTs. Again, this was something that they had not encountered during their many hours in US schools. "[I]n Australia I became a fellow teacher. I was part of the faculty and got the 'behind the scenes' teaching for the first time. It helped me see how I would actually interact with the seasoned teachers and administrators." This PST went on: "everyone was a big family – all the teachers worked together and openly invited the interns to collaborate as well." This theme was mentioned by several PSTs. "In NC they are less likely to give control to a student teacher. In Australia they gave me free reign. I think it is why I performed better (during my student teaching experience in the US)" Another PST added: "We were treated like colleagues and given access to the same things as the teacher."

What is an Australian Teacher?

In sorting through the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, it became apparent that, without overtly asking the question: "What does it mean to be a teacher in Australia?" the question was, nevertheless, answered in four ways through the reflections the PSTs provided. According to the PSTs, an Australian teacher is: 1) collaborative, 2) collegial, 3) behaves professionally, and 4) supports teachers in training.

According to the PSTs' reflections, an Australian teacher is a collaborator. Time and again, the PSTs commented on the collaborative nature of the Australian system. Whether this is due to the physical structure of Australian schools is beyond the capacity of the researchers to argue, however there is something within Australian schools, or Australian society in general, that, according to the PSTs, lends itself to the collaboration.

Australia teachers are collegial. As demonstrated by the quotations from their reflections, the PSTs agree that Australian teachers appear to be more collegial than the teachers they had worked with in the US. After returning to US classrooms, one PST wrote: "I was really dissatisfied with the time teachers spent in a community with one another, building

relationships, sharing resources, so I made a point to try to seek out collegial relationships with teachers at my school . . . I asked teachers about their lesson plans, tried to eat lunch with a different teacher each day."

Australian teachers behave professionally. The PSTs reported that in their interactions with Australian teachers they "carried themselves in a more professional manner . . . they helped each other, and worked closely with each other . . . they carried themselves with dignity." Another PST shared that the modeling of professionalism led to changes in behaviour: "Australia definitely helped me learn how to have a professional conversations with other teachers, other professionals. This is something I will take back to the US with me."

Australian teachers support teachers in training. The collegiality mentioned above extended not only between the Australian teachers themselves, but also amongst the PSTs that were in their classrooms. PSTs reported a difference between how they, as PSTs, were treated by US teachers and how that differed from the inclusiveness experienced in Australian classrooms. Australian teachers demonstrated they valued the thoughts and experiences of the PSTs and were interested in learning from them, even though they were still in the training process.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of teacher identity is a complex process, one that can begin to develop during the teacher training process. It is here that PSTs first begin to understand the professional role they will play in the classroom (Valli, 1997). Understanding the depth and breadth of what it means to be a teacher is a key element in identity formation (Cattley, 2007). Exposing PSTs to a wide variety of professional role models and classroom scenarios during their training program allows for more robust and complex contributions to the development of one's unique identity. Many teacher-training programs in the US, for obvious reasons, rely solely on US-trained teachers to serve as cooperating teachers, mentors and role models of PSTs. This research proposes that, in addition to domestic based classroom experiences, international experiences can also have a positive impact on PST identity development. These cross-cultural comparative encounters can provide US PSTs with a fresh and distinctive look at school structures, teaching practices and professional roles, broadening their lens and altering what is "possible" in classrooms and schools. Australian schoolteachers are given considerable autonomy in their decision-making and allow their PST to have an elevated degree of autonomy in their teaching opportunities (Cattley, 2007). Having the opportunity to take on the role of a PST in Australia, impacted how these PSTs saw themselves and allowed then to compare their experience in the US with that in Australia. Collaboration was a structural feature of PSTs' Australian School experience. The PSTs commented that this was in distinct contrast to the highly compartmentalized organizational structure of mainstream US schools. PSTs were provided the opportunity to compare and contrast the professional teaching roles they had observed in US schools with those of their Australian counterparts. This broadened perspective altered how they viewed the identity of "teacher" and installed, in many of them, the belief that they could bring a little bit of Australia back to their classrooms with them.

Future research involving the participants in this study would provide a needed insight into the long-term impacts of international experiences on PST identity development. It would be of interest to the researchers to examine the following questions: Does the experience in Australia continue to demonstrate an impact in their daily teaching practice and identity as a teacher? Or did the reintegration into the US school system mitigate the experience? Understanding the durability of changes to teacher identity based on cross-cultural experiences would fill a void currently left in the research.

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APPENDIX

Reflection questions

End of Australian Experience

1) Describe the demographics of your school
2) Now that it is over, compare your hopes/expectations for your school experience.
3) What structural aspects of your schools surprised you?
4) Talk about your teacher's attitude toward teaching.
5) Talk about the methods/practices you learned that you might incorporate in your classroom once you return to the US.
6) In your opinion, what was/were the biggest difference(s) you noticed between US and Australian schools.

End of Fall Semester (first semester back in US schools since Australia)

1) Describe the demographics of your school
2) Talk about your teacher's attitude toward teaching.
3) Now that you are back in US schools, what similarities and differences do you see between the US and Australian School systems.
4) What methods/practices that you learned in Australia have you used or implemented in your US classroom?

End of Student Teaching Semester

1) Describe the demographics of your school
2) Talk about your teacher's attitude toward teaching.
3) Now that you have been fully immersed in the duties of a classroom teacher, what similarities and differences do you now see between the US and Australian School systems.
4) What methods/practices that you learned in Australia have you used or implemented in your student teaching classroom?
5) It has been almost a year since Australia … what is your biggest take-away, what is the biggest impact on your teaching from the experience?