

# The Long-Term Effects of International Student Teaching Placements: Implications for Policy and Practice in Higher Education

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## Introduction

University teacher education majors in the United States participate in student teaching as a requirement for their degree programs. During student teaching, students observe veteran elementary and secondary school teachers teaching classes and also practice their own teaching skills by instructing children. These practice teaching experiences are under the supervision and guidance of experienced teachers and university faculty.

Some universities offer the opportunity for education majors to do their student teaching abroad. NAFSA: The Association of International Educators (NAFSA) asserts that, "Through internationalization of curriculums and programs in teacher education, colleges of education can foster the formation of teachers with a global vision and global understanding who can contribute to the education of tomorrow's global citizens" (NAFSA 2010). The National Council for the Accreditors of Teacher Education (NCATE), which accredits university teacher education programs, concurs stating that the primary goal of teacher preparation experiences abroad is to foster global perspectives in future teachers (NCATE 2008).

The perceptions of university student teachers who participated in international student teaching are well documented in the literature. Student teachers anticipate benefits to their future as teachers including having greater: global vision and competence (Kissock and Richardson 2009; NAFSA 2010; NCATE 2008); personal awareness and self-confidence (Bradley, Quinn and Morton 2009; Kissock and Richardson, 2009; Martin 2012; Marx and Moss, 2011; Stachowski and Brantmeier 2002; Wilson 2009; Wilson and

Flournay 2007); job opportunities (Bradley, Quinn and Morton 2009; Richardson and Kissock 2009); and increased ability to self-reflect on their professional practice and implement change (Gaudino, Moss and Wilson 2012). There is scant literature involving studies with classroom teachers who previously student taught abroad to determine the lasting effects of student teaching abroad, if any, on their careers and teaching. Were the benefits anticipated by student teachers who student taught abroad the actual benefits teachers who student taught abroad experienced? This study attempted to fill this gap by interviewing a university coordinator of an abroad student teaching program and alumni of the program who are now practicing educators and providing recommendations for university international student teaching programs.

This study, conducted in the summer of 2017, was designed to examine the long-term effects of international student teaching placements on teachers. Twenty eight study participants were enrolled in an international student teaching placement in five cohorts between 2009 and 2013, and all responded to the call to participate in this study. These participants had been placed in three different schools in the United Kingdom for an eight-week period of student teaching. At the time of the study, all participants were in teaching or related educational careers. How do these interviews reflect, or not, the current understanding of the need to provide university teacher candidates with a world view that reflects the current population of today's students? More than that, how will research probing the teaching lives of future teachers who participated in international placements add to the discourse surrounding expectations of teachers and university teacher

preparation programs in the twenty first century? These were the questions guiding this study.

Analysis of the participant narratives provided a holistic picture of ways in which study participants continue to reflect on the impact of the international placements. Teacher participants reported significant positive effects on their career and professional practice as a result of their experience student teaching abroad including developing: increased cultural awareness and ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners; personal confidence and classroom management skills; the ability to provide holistic instruction; the ability to self-reflect on professional practice and implement change; a desire to be selective in pursuing and accepting teaching positions; and increased job opportunity. Based on existing literature and the findings of this study, this paper provides recommendations for policy and practice in university international student teaching programs.

### **Theoretical Framework and Perspective**

This study is grounded in the framework of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism as presented in the Bennett's (2004) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (M. Bennett 1986, 1993; J. Bennett and M. Bennett 2003, 2004). DMIS was developed with a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) using theoretical concepts to explain patterns that emerge from systematic observation (Bennett 2004). Bennett (2004) described ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism as existing on a spectrum of six development stages of cultural difference experience through which one may progress: Denial of cultural difference; defense against cultural difference; minimization of cultural difference; acceptance of cultural difference; adaptation to cultural difference; and integration of cultural difference.

Teachers who are ethnocentric rely on their own culture as central to their reality whereas teachers who achieve ethnorelativism experience their "own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities" (Bennett 2004, p. 1). The DMIS purports that interaction with cultural difference

generates pressure for change in one's worldview. This happens because the individual's ethnocentric worldview, which has been sufficient for managing relations within his or her own culture, is inadequate for developing and maintaining new, necessary cross-cultural social relations. This need for such cross-cultural relations creates pressure to develop greater competence in intercultural matters. This distinction is important because it supports that developmental interventions, such as international student teaching programs, are appropriately aimed at expanding student teachers' worldview towards ethnorelativism.

This theoretical perspective holds the significance of providing varied contexts within which future teachers develop understandings critical to educating students in the twenty first century (Bennet 2004; Cushner 2007). Bryan and Sprague (1997) concluded that the abroad student teaching experience had positive effects for teachers in initial hiring, retention in teaching, attitudes towards students, attitudes towards a second language, curriculum choices, teaching flexibility, and teaching strategies. Teachers overwhelmingly stated that the abroad experience helped them to get a job and also remain in the teaching field. Teachers gained respect for individual differences of students and cultural differences and learned to be flexible in teaching in varied places, with varied resources, and diverse students. DeVillar and Jiang (2012) concluded that teachers who previously student taught abroad: learned to teach creatively and flexibly; developed an appreciation for the resources available in classrooms in the United States; transferred and adapted certain techniques to their US classrooms in accordance with classroom needs; and found it difficult to integrate some practices into US contexts which are more standards and test driven.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

In designing this study, the faculty director was interviewed individually and in-person. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about the history, development, implementation, and goals of the program from the faculty director who was both the

founder and director. Data was collected via recording and hand-written notes by the researcher.

The director provided the lead researcher with the contact details of all program participants; once contacted, one hundred percent of the 28 alumni from the program participated in this study, and all were currently employed as educators. Focus group methodology was utilized in order to best understand and explore the perceptions of the teachers about how, if at all, their abroad student teaching experience had influenced them as teachers.

### ***Defining Focus Group Interviews***

Focus group methodology was chosen for this study in order to best understand and explore the perceptions of the teachers. Morgan (1998, p. 9) states that “focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them.” Focus groups “promote self-disclosure among participants... [which allows the researcher] to know what people really think and feel” (Krueger and Casey 2000, p. 7). Focus group interviews have five features including: “(1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest” (8). Krueger and Casey (2000, p. 26) assert that it is best to “plan three to four focus groups with any one type of participant”, which provides a more accurate account of the participants’ perception than one or two groups. Focus group interviews should be considered when trying to: understand the range of ideas or feelings that people have about something; understand the differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people (often, people in power see a situation or issue differently from those who are not); encourage ideas to emerge from a group; and gain information on qualitative data already collected (p. 24).

In particular, these interviews provided a broad range of narratives that expressed perspectives of the teachers participating in this study and reflected their eagerness to share their ideas with former colleagues. The questions posed to the focus groups were:

1. In what ways do you think student teaching abroad influenced the overall course of your

career? Your teaching? Your professional practice?

2. Did your student teaching abroad affect your ability to reflect on your professional practice and implement change? How so?
3. Do you feel that your student teaching abroad benefitted you in the hiring process? How so?
4. In summary, what were the greatest benefits you experienced from student teaching abroad?
5. In summary, what were the greatest challenges you experienced from your international clinical experiences?
6. Are there any other topics you would like to discuss?

### ***Procedures***

Systematic steps were followed in each focus group. The researcher posed the question orally and, when participants finished responding to each question, a member check was performed by repeating back to participants the key points that they had raised and requesting their suggestions and confirmations. Member checking is a means of ensuring that the researcher has understood statements made by subjects and that subjects agree with the researcher’s interpretation of their statements (Creswell 2014; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers 2002). The researcher’s involvement in the focus group discussion was to read the questions, answer any questions from subjects who needed clarification on the questions, redirect conversation back to the question if the conversation became irrelevant to the question posed, conduct member checking, and ask subjects for further clarification of their responses if it appeared to be needed. The goal was to keep discussion focused on the questions and to limit the possibility of researcher perceptions and bias affecting the conversation.

Data were transferred to a Tape-Based Abridged Transcript by the researcher. Krueger and Casey (2000, p. 131) describe the Tape-Based Abridged Transcript approach by stating that it, “Relies on listening to a tape recording of each focus group and then developing an abridged transcript of the relevant and useful portions of the discussion . . . it is a condensed version of the focus group discussion with irrelevant conversation removed.”

Data from the abridged transcript was organized using both NVivo software and a Long-Table Approach (Krueger 1998; Krueger and Casey 2000). Trends and patterns were coded and analyzed both within role alike groups representing each cohort and across the role alike groups representing all cohorts collectively.

## **Findings**

The faculty director had a clear vision and viewed student teaching abroad as, “a way to help students become globally competent teachers who can teach diverse learners and be leaders of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.” She wanted students to, “understand the underlying pedagogical decisions and self-reflect on their professional practice and implement change.” The faculty director also wanted to have a larger effect on their future lives as teachers by equipping her students with the ability and desire to be discerning in pursuing teaching positions and have an advantage in the hiring process.

### ***Focus Group Responses***

Participant responses in this study aligned with the vision of the faculty member and also indicated some additional findings. Foremost, study participants stated that student teaching abroad had a significant effect on their lives with many deeming their experience as “transformational to my life both professionally and personally.” As a result of the experience, they selectively sought teaching positions that had some of the same attributes as in England and believe that their abroad student teaching experience has benefitted them in the hiring process. They felt that student teaching abroad was “key to being hired” because their districts “purposefully seek to hire teachers who have experience teaching in diverse settings including teaching abroad.” They cited specific questions posed to them during interviews about their increased ability to teach diverse students and indicated that their districts formally recruit teachers with abroad experience and account for it in the hiring process.

### ***Improved Cultural Awareness and Understanding and Ability to Differentiate Instruction for Diverse Learners***

Participants also indicated that student teaching abroad increased their cultural awareness and understanding and ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners. One participant summarized that, “This exposure to greater diversity in students, more detailed lesson planning, and teaching larger class sizes (30-40 students each) helped us to better understand and meet the needs of students when we assumed a teaching position.” Another teacher spoke specifically to how student teaching abroad, “helped with empathizing with my students who are new to the country. My school is about 80 percent ESOL students and student teaching abroad with a diverse population of students helped me to know how to best meet the needs of these students.”

### ***Expanded Teaching Methods and Holistic Instruction***

Participants asserted that the classroom environment and approach to teaching in England was “much more holistic,” learner centered, promoted teacher and student creativity, and was not “stifled by standardized assessments like in America.” They used a project-based learning approach to teach projects that incorporate many subjects. For example, they combined the teaching of music and space. The teacher played a recording of Holst’s *The Planets* for students to discuss how music evokes feelings. Then students read poems about the planets. Finally, they studied about space in science class. In this way, teachers “could initiate curriculum” and had “more flexibility to teach” than in the US. As a result of experiencing this in their student teaching abroad, teachers stated that they both wanted to and were able to continue this holistic, problem-based approach to instruction immediately in their first year of teaching. They felt that this was a “significant expansion and enhancement of our teaching methods.” As a result, they stated that they wanted to bring these practices into their teaching, however, several indicated that these practices “were not appreciated” in their school.

### ***Increased Self-Confidence and Classroom Management Skills***

Participants discussed how student teaching abroad helped them to become more confident as they assumed their first teaching position. While student teaching abroad, they had to, “adjust to a new culture, new

expectations, and deliver high-quality instruction and their success in doing so enhanced their confidence.” They feel that meeting this immense challenge helped them to develop professional self-confidence. One stated, “The word I think about with student teaching abroad is perspective. Total immersion in the program and culture is a unique experience that I was very lucky to have. When I came back to the USA, I really felt ready for my own classroom.” Another stated, “My horizons were so broadened because I had the opportunity to live and experience the culture” which was followed by the comment, “I felt like I had a first year teaching experience in England that allowed me to adjust to and better manage my own classroom when I was hired.”

### ***Increased Self-Reflection on Professional Practice to Implement Change***

Participants indicated that the faculty director and cooperating teachers influenced their ability to self-reflect and make change to their professional practice. Prior to student teaching abroad and working with this faculty director, they stated that “little attention was paid to our ability to reflect on our professional practice and implement change.” One student stated that the faculty director, “Encouraged us all along to self-reflect while we were here at in the USA and that continued and increased in England” while another commented that the faculty director, “developed a trusting atmosphere and taught us how to develop trusting relationships with other teachers so that we could collaborate and self-reflect together.” Alumni felt that, in this way, the faculty director had prepared them very well for their experience in England where self-reflection on professional practice to implement change in teaching was the norm for teachers. All participants agreed that they brought this skill into their subsequent teaching positions and that this practice has helped them to “be more successful in our first years of teaching” and “deliver better instruction.”

## **Discussion**

Findings from this study add to the limited body of knowledge on this subject and aligned with some

findings of Bryan and Sprague (1997) and DeVillar and Jiang (2012). Foremost were that every participant asserted their gratitude to the universities for offering an international student teaching experience, that they would recommend international student teaching, and some felt that it should even be a requirement for graduation. More specifically, participants felt that their international student teaching experience helped them to: gain respect for individual differences of students and cultural differences, learn to be flexible in their teaching, improve their classroom management skills, and acquire a job. Likewise, they felt that the techniques they had developed abroad were, at times, difficult to apply to classrooms in the United States due to the test-driven nature of education. Teachers in this study indicated a greater influence of student teaching abroad on their lives than previous studies including that they were: more selective of teaching positions; hired because of the experience, felt greater self-confidence in themselves and their teaching ability, and were better able to work with diverse student bodies. Finally, it is noteworthy that no participants indicated any drawbacks or negative effects to their teaching and professional practice as a result of student teaching abroad.

This study, along with the study by Gaudino, Moss, and Wilson (2011), found that teachers and student teachers indicated that student teaching abroad, and working with a faculty director and cooperating teacher who emphasized self-reflection, helped them to develop their ability to do so. The ability to self-reflect on professional practice and implement change is important in the career of the teacher as many states have moved towards a teacher evaluation system based on rubrics by Danielson (2007), Stronge (2009), or Marzano (2014) which place value on teacher reflection to improve practice.

Literature surrounding international clinical placements, along with this study, point to implications for university policy and practice. Student teachers who student taught abroad and teachers who previously student taught abroad, as well as national organizations, acknowledge benefits from student teaching abroad that cannot be realized in local, domestic placements. These benefits surround their development of a more

ethnorelativistic worldview which then positively influences teaching and professional practice as educators (Bennett 2004). Yet, international student teaching programs remain uncommon because there is a lack of support by university personnel towards international experiences (Kissock & Richardson, 2009; Peretz, 2001; West, 2009). Faculty opinions stated include: concern about meeting local standards, difficulty in supervising international experiences, and not recognizing the value of international clinical experiences.

### Recommendations

Universities that do not offer an opportunity for student teaching abroad may want to pursue establishing such a program so that their students could have this type of opportunity to improve their practice. Universities need to acknowledge the contrasting perceptions regarding student teaching abroad that exist and work with faculty to resolve concerns in a way that benefits students. Additionally, accrediting bodies could provide incentives to institutions offering this option. While it may not be possible to require teaching abroad as an admission or graduation requirement, other means suggested in the literature can be utilized to enhance global educational awareness.

Universities should examine how their policies and practice can better assist education majors with developing reflective skills which are important to their professional practice. University supervisors and cooperating teachers are in a key position to assist teacher candidates with developing the skill of self-reflecting to improve professional practice. Universities should consider how they can assist supervisors and cooperating teachers with developing skills to lead these guided, cognitive discussions with teacher candidates. Accrediting bodies could support these efforts through policies requiring and assessing these aspects of education programs.

Finally, both the literature and subjects in this study suggest that teacher candidates who participate in international clinical experiences have an advantage in the job market. Clearly, there is widespread alignment in the

beliefs of universities and supervisors, companies offering abroad student teaching experiences, student teachers, and teachers. However, there is no large-scale published data specifically relating international clinical experience and how it does or does not influence hiring. This is a substantive topic that warrants further investigation.

### Conclusion

The primary university supporting the program described here withdrew support after the first five years (due to funding); the program leader successfully transferred the program to another university under the leadership of a former student and continues to provide support for that program. In conclusion, as faculty at two different institutions, both the primary researcher and the program leader share a strong commitment to the value of international student teaching programs based on the findings of this and others studies. Data analysis is completed for this part of the study but the primary researcher and the leader of the study continue to discuss how early student teachers “make sense” of an international placement and have a desire to pursue more comprehensive case studies of every student in their lives today...probably an overwhelmingly challenging task!

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