

2014


## Insight for Teacher Preparation Program Administrators: Enhancing Pre-service Educators' Intercultural Sensitivity and Deep Proficiency in Culturally Responsive Teaching through Short- Term Study Abroad

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### Recommended Citation

Gresham, Gloria; Griffin, Paula; Hasbun, Tracy; and Boatman, Vikki (2014) "Insight for Teacher Preparation Program Administrators: Enhancing Pre-service Educators' Intercultural Sensitivity and Deep Proficiency in Culturally Responsive Teaching through Short-Term Study Abroad," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol9/iss1/6>

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***Insight for Teacher Preparation Program Administrators:  
Enhancing Pre-service Educators' Intercultural Sensitivity  
and Deep Proficiency in Culturally Responsive Teaching  
through Short-Term Study Abroad***

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Teacher preparation program administrators face the issue of expanding curricula to prepare teacher candidates for the diverse population of students they will encounter (Trent, Kea, Oh, 2008). Globalization demands that teacher candidates grasp how to function in a more integrated and interdependent society (McGrew, 2005). According to Smith-Davis (2004) students from non-English speaking countries compose the fastest growing United States K-12 student population, and those identified as limited English proficient were over 10 million in 2004. The United States Census reported in the “New Census Bureau Report” the number of individuals five and older who speak languages other than English at home more than doubled in the past three decades (2010). If teacher preparation program leaders fail to prepare future educators with the dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary to meet the needs of the nation’s school population, the national security and economic development may be hindered, and the position of the United States in the world community may be challenged (Zanh, 2011).

Teacher preparation program leaders are faced with how to strengthen “teacher candidates’ level of intercultural sensitivity” and to prepare them to implement culturally responsive pedagogy through course content and other activities (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008, p. 188). Integrating multicultural education throughout all courses instead of adding a stand-alone course dedicated to cultural awareness and instruction is one manner to enhance candidates’ level of intercultural sensitivity, and this means is supported by many researchers (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004). Another way to heighten intercultural sensitivity and gain skill in delivering culturally-responsive teaching

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strategies is through cross-cultural experiences (Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; McAllister & Irving, 2002; Nieto, 2006). One such cross-cultural experience that deans, department heads, and faculty may explore is short-term study abroad. Short-term study abroad is more affordable and attractive to university students who cannot or will not commit to a semester or yearlong study abroad experience (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). As defined by Donnelly-Smith (2009), short-term study abroad experiences are those where students participate for fewer than eight weeks. These experiences have the potential of positively impacting teacher candidates' intercultural sensitivity (Lawton et al., 2006). Donnelly-Smith stated that little formal research was displayed in the literature that described study abroad outcomes (2009).

The purpose of this paper is to reveal how a short-term study abroad experience affected teacher candidates from a Texas regional university, and thus enhanced their intercultural sensitivity and deepened their knowledge and skill in culturally-responsive teaching strategies. This study was unique from other studies presented in the literature because the focus was how another country implements early childhood education and prepares future teachers. Teacher candidates were afforded an opportunity to compare Italy's early childhood education system to the system they were more familiar with in the United States.

### **Literature Review**

To frame this inquiry, a review of literature included the definition and rationale for study abroad experiences, negative and positive benefits of short-term study abroad, characteristics of effective short-term study abroad experiences, and changing the cultural and instructional awareness of participants as a result of study abroad.

Short-term study abroad experiences in higher education usually follow one of three models: week-long programs conducted usually during spring break, three- or four-week programs occurring during the January break, or summer experiences involving up to eight weeks (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Peterson et al. (2007) defined study abroad experiences as academic programs occurring outside the students' home country that are intended to enrich their learning experiences. Donnelly-Smith (2009) explained that short-term study abroad experiences are the most common type for undergraduates in the United States. Less than two percent of all higher education students in the United States participate in any type of study abroad experience (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). The Institute of International Education's 2012 Open Doors Report corroborated the Donnelly-Smith study and revealed that only about two percent of United States' students study abroad. The majority participating are involved in short-term study abroad.

Contrasting views of the benefits of short-term study abroad were presented. Some researchers indicated short-term study abroad experiences were more vacations than scholarly endeavors (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Other experts relayed concerns that these types of experiences focused more on traveling and exploring rather than on academic learning outcomes (Coryell, 2011). Ritz (2011) revealed that those who oppose short-

term study abroad experiences believe that transformative learning cannot take place in such a short time. Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins (2002) and Green (2002) concurred by stating that not all study abroad experiences have at the core important learning or transformational results.

In contrast, numerous benefits of short-term study abroad experiences were demonstrated. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) discovered that students who engaged in short-term study abroad experiences exhibited increased willingness to participate in courses outside of their major, had more confidence to travel in longer-term experiences, were more interested in interdisciplinary studies after the experiences, and displayed increased cultural perception of globalization. Paige et al. stated the duration, short-term versus longer experiences, of global engagement was not significant (2009). Benefits of short-term study experiences revealed by Tajés and Ortiz (2010) were changes in mind-set, attitudes toward differing cultures, and eagerness to learn about other cultures and self. Dwyer (2004) also agreed with Tajés and Ortiz by stating that these types of experiences changed the global perspectives and cross-cultural effectiveness of participants. Corda (2007) added that short-term study abroad increased participants' self-reliance and self-confidence. Love and Goodwell-Love (1995) found that by adding study abroad experiences into higher education, faculty were incorporating emotional and social components to their intellectual education. Ritz (2011) likewise believed that these experiences, while increasing a global view, awareness of differing cultures, and self-assurance, also provided faculty with opportunities to help students develop emotionally and socially. Another byproduct of study abroad experiences was affirmed by Ritz (2011). In his study of a short-term study abroad experience in Costa Rica, he found that the emotional and social connections among faculty and students were strengthened thus allowing for more open discussion. This open relationship thus positively impacted the development of students and their learning outcomes (Love & Goodsell-Love, 1995).

Effective, short-term study abroad experiences have common characteristics. Donnelly-Smith (2009) stated that short-term study abroad experiences have a strong connection to coursework and are an essential part of a larger experience. Five best practices according to Spencer and Tuma (2002) were start with very clear academic content, guarantee that faculty have the knowledge and skills to conduct experiential teaching, ensure that the experiences integrate with the local community studied, use experts as lecturers from the host country, and require participants to engage in ongoing reflection. Another best practice reiterated by Donnelly-Smith was preparation for students and faculty (2009). As Gardinier, and Colquitt-Anderson so eloquently stated, "...students should arrive at the destination with a grounding in both the academic and cultural contexts through a combination of pre-departure lectures, guided research, online discussions, readings, and cultural events related to the trip" (2010, p. 26).

Short-term study abroad experiences can provide a vehicle for changing cultural awareness. Orndorff (1998) conducted a study that evidenced participants who experienced short-term travel perceived transformative changes in understanding of other cultures. Sleeter (2001) and Wiest (2004) agreed that study abroad experiences enabled

pre-service teacher candidates to experience cultures of students they may teach and to develop a cross-cultural understanding and world view. Likewise, Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) conducted a broad study investigating the outcomes of short-term study abroad. These researchers revealed that students deepened appreciation for foreign cultures and increased in their ability to make connections between home and host countries. Lindsey (2005) completed a qualitative study of values development in United States and Scottish social work students who participated in a study-abroad program. She discovered that participants became more receptive to new ways of thinking. The Institute for the International Education of Students (2000-2011) conducted a broad study of former participants of its programs from 1920 to 1999. Findings disclosed that international programs positively impacted participants' cultural-understanding.

Literature concerning teacher instructional change and study abroad experiences was reviewed. The research of Sandgren et al. declared that study abroad experiences had a positive outcome on "globalizing and enriching an instructor's domestic teaching" (1999, p. 25). Raby (2008) expressed that spending time in a foreign country was a revealing experience providing participants with opportunities for professional development. Taylor (2008) disclosed that transformative learning was the vehicle where adults validated their beliefs, and this type of learning afforded them opportunities to engage in a meaning-making process that was more accepting of differences. Ritz (2011), a supporter of transformative learning, acknowledged that study abroad programs placed students in a different cultural context which created a feeling of incongruity. He relayed that this feeling created opportunities for validating held beliefs and constructing beliefs that were more inclusive of others from differing cultures. The review of literature provided the foundation for a case study.

### **Methodology**

Researchers employed a case study method to discover how an Italian short-term study abroad experience affected teacher candidates (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Case study is a method that provides "intensive descriptions and analyses of a bounded system" (Merriam, p. 19). The present investigation was implemented for 12 days in May of 2012 in Italy. The study abroad experience was a requirement for a Maymester course titled Elementary Education 475/575: Special Problems/International Study of Professional Roles and Responsibilities in Italy.

Short-term study abroad is an annual experience offered by the Department of Elementary Education in the university of the participants in this study. Only students who attended this university at least one semester in the 12 months prior to the experience and maintained a grade point average of 2.5 were eligible to apply. Space was limited to no more than 30 students. So, students were selected on a first come, first serve basis. Scholarships of approximately \$800 were provided by the university's Office of International Programs, and to apply for the scholarship, students wrote a 500-word essay and completed a scholarship application. Scholarship recipients were required to attend

one university event provided by international students and were to prepare a class presentation or video about the experience no later than three weeks after the trip. Over the past several years, the Department of Elementary Education offered experiences to Germany and Italy, but only one experience per academic year was offered. All of the participants for this 2012 Italian experience (two graduate and 22 undergraduate) agreed to participate in the study. Participants were female and between 20 and 40 years of age. Two were Hispanic and 22 were White. Twenty were seeking early childhood through sixth grade certification, one was seeking grade four through eighth grade mathematics certification, and three were from other disciplines: Child and Family Development, Accounting, Secondary Education. Sixteen had never traveled outside of the United States. English was the native language and only language spoken by 22 of the participants. Two of the participants had some knowledge of Spanish, but none of the candidates spoke Italian. Participants had only taken one foreign language course in their higher education career, and only one foreign language course was required in their degree program. There were no expectations for participants to know or use a second language to be included in the study.

To prepare for the experience, participants engaged in three pre-departure meetings. Meeting one was an overview of the itinerary, travel expectations, and course requirements. Meeting two focused on understanding how to embrace and maneuver in the Italian culture. In the last pre-departure meeting, the research expectations and double-entry journaling were explained. Also, participants accessed training on the culture and history of Italy through the university Office of International Programs. This preparation consisted of participants completing a guided research questionnaire requiring them to search for answers and display their understanding of customs, cultural expectations, and history of Italy. All teacher candidates were enrolled in an online course and were assigned various research assignments focusing on the locations, history, culture, and early childhood instructional practices of educational institutions in Italy. For example, each candidate selected one of the early childhood institutions to be visited, accessed information about this institution via the internet, and created a brochure that was uploaded into a class discussion board. Members, through online discussion postings, engaged in conversation about each institution.

The Italian experience included visits to the following locations: Milan, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Tuscany, Siena, and Rome. Early childhood schools and other educational institutions visited were: Nuova Educazione (nursery and primary school), department of Università di Milano-Biocca, Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School, Loris Malaguzzi International Center (Reggio Emilia Approach), Federazione Associazioni di Docenti per l'Integrazione Scolastica (school of students with special needs), Kindergarten Firenze, International School of Florence, Sapienza Università di Roma and the Department of Educational Sciences, and Scuola Primaria Pubblica di Roma. Each institution or school visit lasted for about four hours. During this time, participants toured the facilities and listened to lectures delivered by institution faculty members concerning the educational philosophy of the institutions. When attending early childhood schools, teacher

candidates spent an hour or two with teachers and children in their classrooms. Many times, the teachers integrated the teacher candidates into class activities along with the children. At one institution, candidates viewed children rehearsing for an upcoming play. The play was entirely delivered in Italian and no translator was provided. So, candidates had to piece together what was happening only by the gestures and actions of children. When candidates attended Sapienza Università di Roma and the Department of Educational Sciences, they learned how future teachers were prepared in Italy and how different and similar teacher preparation was to their preparation in the United States. Also, participants visited cities and towns surrounding each institution. Expert, English-speaking tour guides provided overviews of each location enriching the experience with historical and cultural-related accounts. In each location, participants were provided time to walk, talk, and socialize with the locals.

Various qualitative data sources were used to determine themes and for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data included double-entry journal entries, transcribed focus group conversations, and PowerPoint presentation text. Double-entry journals were used as the holding place for the private reflections of teacher candidates, and this method was selected because double-entry journals guided candidates to reveal what was observed specifically and to think metacognitively as they responded to what was observed. For the 12 days of the trip, each participant was responsible for completing at least one entry each day. The double-entry journals utilized a two-column format. On the left side of each entry, participants noted observations (sights, sounds, thoughts), and on the right column, participants connected to or analyzed the information that was written on the left column ("Double-Entry Journals," 2000-2012). Researchers (one researcher for six participants) conducted a focus group the day before participants returned to the United States. Each researcher asked a series of prepared questions, and all responses were taped using a digital recorder. At the conclusion of the trip and as an assignment for their online university class, participants created PowerPoint presentations (one per member) as a reflection of the trip that included photos, videos, and text. Presentations were uploaded into their online course.

To analyze data, first, focus group data was transcribed, read, sorted, and coded according to emerging themes. As additional data from the journals and PowerPoint presentations were added to the focus group data, a rich picture of themes emerged. This thick description was a way to achieve transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coded data and emerging themes were checked by each researcher to verify accuracy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this as member checking, and this process helped to establish credibility. Data analysis provided clear findings of how the Italian short-term study abroad experience affected teacher candidates.

## **Findings**

Much revealed was congruent with previous research. After data was analyzed, two themes emerged.

***Appreciation for the pedagogy taught in their university classrooms.*** As Raby (2008) espoused, the Italian experience was truly an opportunity for professional development for participants. Participants realized the child-centered, socially engaging, research-based pedagogy taught in their teacher preparation program had merit. The following quote is an example showing the importance of research-based instruction:

It was really refreshing to see that everything [implemented in the classrooms] was research-based. As long as we know our research and our theorists, we can tell them why they are [learning] it.

Participants witnessed how child-centered instruction was critical to student achievement in Italian early childhood schools. Through child-centered instruction, children in Italy exhibited they were self-sufficient, creative thinkers who valued the teacher and their learning (Brown, 2008). This quote from one of the participants indicated how she embraced the need for child-centered instruction:

Everything we have observed has been very student-centered. It is all based around the development of the child. They [Italian teachers] include more movement [in their teaching] and focus more on understanding. They touch, they smell, they paint; they use all the senses.

Data revealed participants understood that social interaction in Italian schools was important to the teaching of content. In each classroom, children were socially engaged with their peers and teacher. As participants noted in the data, teachers and children, in unison, participated in physical activity as they stood and chanted chorally to rehearse content. Participants noticed the classroom environment in most of the schools was family-like. In one of the schools, teachers moved from kindergarten to sixth grade with the same children so that they would “know” their children and not waste valuable learning time each year in learning about them. Social interaction and knowing your students was important.

Participants formed deeper understanding of content integration, a research-based strategy supported by the teacher preparation program of the participants. As Hinde (2005) revealed, student achievement is enhanced when teachers know how to integrate areas such as the arts with other content areas. Data analysis indicated participants were intrigued with how Italian art was integrated into day to day content. Italian students’ exhibited an understanding of and appreciation for the arts in their culture. One participant said, “Here in Italy, they [teachers] teach through art.” Another echoed, “They [Italian schools] have art, art, art in every school.” Art and music permeated instruction in Italian educational institutions. Children copied the art of the masters like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Picasso and portrayed Roman historical accounts through elaborate plays. As one participant exclaimed, “They [Italian students] will be more creative in the end [because they understand artists and drama of the past and are allowed



to create]. Another crystalized her understanding of content integration through this comment:

I think you should teach different ways, and let students decide their way. To provide more emphasis on the arts in our classrooms, you can integrate [content areas like] math with art and music.

As participants embraced the pedagogy of child-centered, socially engaging, research-based instruction supported by their teacher preparation program, they realized that living in a global society required future teachers to embrace culturally responsive teaching.

***Urgency for culturally responsive teaching.*** Another theme discovered was the critical need for culturally responsive teaching. None of the participants had knowledge of the Italian language prior to the trip, but because Italians are expected to learn and speak English from an early age, participants had little difficulty navigating local schools and venues. Many Italians spoke at least some English, but there were times when participants were placed in situations where lecturers at the visited educational institutions were relaying information in Italian. Interpreters at each educational institution were used, but their skill in relaying content in English was hampered by their inability to communicate in English fluently, or their heavy Italian accent disrupted understanding. It was obvious to participants that most of the lecturers were not very skilled or lacked experience in using interpreters. The lecturers would speak for lengthy periods of time before allowing the interpreters to break in to relay in English what was said. Thus, lectures were hard to follow.

Also, participants displayed in the data that as they were touring different cities and towns on their free time, they could not fully portray to the locals their desires through verbal communication, but when they added gesturing to their speech, they were able relay their meaning. Teacher candidates learned to successfully maneuver in shops and restaurants by pointing to what they wanted and by utilizing Italian phrases they were integrating into their daily language. As participants found gesturing and short Italian phrases enhanced their verbal message, they understood what researchers such as Sime (2006) and Tissington and LaCour (2010) discovered. Gestures used skillfully complement the “co-occurring verbal message” (Sime, p. 224), and short phrases enhance comprehension (Tissington & LaCour). Examples of quotes from the data revealing participants’ journey to understanding what it was like to be a language learners follow:

We have been in English learners’ shoes. I think back on how frustrated I was [when I could not speak the language].

Another echoed this thought:

Until you experience it [not knowing a language] you do not know; it opened [not being able to understand the language] in how to communicate with others from another language; I thought I was empathetic and learned I was not.

Through emersion into settings where participants did not grasp the spoken language, not only did they gain empathy for language learners and increased intercultural sensitivity as Sleeter (2001), Wiest (2004), Tajes and Ortiz (2010), and Ritz (2011) revealed was an outcome of short-term study abroad, their empathy for what it was like to be a language learner was a springboard to consider implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies. When the candidates toured classrooms in Italy, they experienced how the teachers in the schools integrated them, non-Italian speakers, into the daily classroom activities through gesturing and realia (real objects). These types of experiences assisted the candidates in gaining an understanding of what culturally responsive teaching means and how to implement classroom strategies to meet the needs of language learners. This participant's statement acknowledged this self-confidence, "It is [culturally responsive teaching] not as scary as I thought it was going to be. We experienced what it is like to be a second language learner in the classroom."

As teacher candidates viewed how the teachers in Italy embraced the teaching of foreign languages and the study of other lands and their cultures, they learned valuable strategies to implement in their future classrooms that would assist students from other cultures. One example was mentioned time and time again in the data. In a fourth grade classroom in one of the schools, a foreign exchange teacher candidate from a university in the United States had previously completed his student teaching field experience in that classroom. In the halls outside of this fourth grade classroom was a map of the United States with a colored dot showing the present location of this student teacher. Also, pictures of the United States flag and other photos of locations in the United States were posted near the map. This teacher displayed how she and her students were honoring the culture of this former student teacher. One of the teacher candidates revealed what she had learned from seeing experiences such as this:

We can make them feel welcomed by learning about some of their language and saying some things in their language. I realized the importance of visuals, concrete objects, gesturing, and labeling in your classroom. You can incorporate other cultures into your teaching.

Ritz (2011) titled their self-confidence in implementing culturally-responsive teaching self-assurance. Teacher candidates were gaining confidence in teaching language learners and were connecting and valuing what they were taught in their teacher preparation program. The experience provided these candidates a manner to construct how important culturally responsive teaching is to language learners and helped them solidified what they were taught in their teacher preparation program about child-centered, research-based instruction.

## **Implications and Discussion**

Findings of this study offered critical insight for administrators of teacher preparation programs into how short-term study abroad experiences affect teacher candidates' intercultural sensitivity and how it deepens their knowledge and skill in culturally-responsive teaching strategies, but the short-term study abroad study was limited because it was a one-time experience of 24 teacher candidates in Italy. Further investigation of how short-term study abroad experiences affect teacher candidates in Italy and other countries is warranted. Additionally, follow-up study of how this experience affects these participants in their own future classrooms would add depth and understanding of the long-term effects of short-term study abroad.

Short-term study abroad experiences are avenues for applying what candidates have learned in their teacher preparation coursework and field experiences. These types of experiences allow participants to deepen their understanding of pedagogy designed to meet the needs of diverse learners. Terms like content integration, research-based pedagogy, child-centered instructional strategies, and constructivist philosophies become crystalized in their thinking.

Participants in short-term study abroad are thrown into situations where they must fend for themselves linguistically speaking. Although guided by experts and professors, they navigate their way through language barriers and learn to implement communication strategies to be understood. From these experiences, participants gain real empathy for what is to be a language learner in a foreign land. As teacher candidates gain empathy and view how teachers in another culture who embrace cultural differences practice their craft, they visualize how they will implement culturally responsive teaching strategies to enhance the learning of their future language learners. Culturally responsive teaching strategies are no longer unfamiliar and scary terms. Participants now have handles or pegs to hand knowledge gained in how to teach students from diverse cultures and languages.

Another implication of this short-term study abroad experience is that teacher preparation program administrators should seek ways to provide study abroad opportunities in order to prepare future teachers to become global members who embrace other cultures, other languages, and other ways of educating children. At a minimum, teacher preparation programs would benefit from offering courses that embrace the call for changing pedagogy in public schools to meet the needs of students who live in a global community. Language learners and cultural responsive teaching are not topics to be "covered" in courses; they are topics that must be deeply addressed and a part of field experiences where candidates work with teachers who on a daily basis understand and implement strategies to meet the needs of culturally diverse learners. Study abroad focusing on learning about and experiencing other cultures and languages should be a requirement for teacher candidates, not just provided as an opportunity.

Teacher preparation program leaders, deans, and department heads must heed Zanh's (2011) warning. If we do not provide teacher candidates with experiences to assist them in developing the dispositions, knowledge, and skills to become global citizens and do not foster their ability to prepare their future students to be active members of our global community, the position of the United States as a member of the world stage may be damaged. As supported by the findings of this study and the work of Orndorff (1998) and Chieffo and Griffiths (2004), short-term study abroad is a vehicle to encourage transformative change in the way teacher candidates perceive the world, other cultures, and the global society in which they live.

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