

From the Arctic to the Tropics: A Thematic Analysis of Teacher Candidates' Reflections of Two Cross-Cultural Programs

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Abstract

This study describes how one university prepares culturally responsive teacher candidates through Alaska and Thailand cross-cultural summer study trips. The study addressed the impact of the Alaska and Thailand cross-cultural experiences on teacher candidates as described in their reflective writings. The reflections addressed their socialization and depth of understanding and appreciation of children and adults from another culture. The authors looked for parallel themes that emerged as characteristics of both experiences.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, global learning, teacher preparation, intercultural competency, reflective journals, teacher education

1. Introduction

The authors are teacher educators at Helen DeVos College of Education at Lee University. Students at the university are required to participate in a cross-cultural experience, either at home or abroad. Academic cross-cultural experiences generally include seven hours of coursework.

The authors used Schon's writings (1983, 1987, 1991) to lead them to an epistemology of practice based on the idea of reflection-in-action. Schon (1983) describes this as research in the context of practice in which the researcher "is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case in which he/she does not separate thinking from doing...and can proceed not bound by the dichotomies of Technical Rationality" (pp. 68-69). Schon legitimizes professional memory and the importance of experience as a resource for the education of professionals.

The reflections written by the teacher candidates constituted a source of narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2007). Reflective writing provided an important part of the documentation for this study. The authors have used reflective writing throughout the teacher education program to strengthen the relationship between the instructor and the student as well as to improve the learning experience of the teacher candidate. (Moon, 2006; O'Connell & Dymont, 2011). Reflective writing gives the teacher candidate a voice and an opportunity to express thoughts and changes they notice during their experience. Reflective writing also enhances the teacher candidate's metacognitive abilities and promotes their self-orientation and responsibility for the process of their personal and collaborative learning (Farabaugh, 2007). Dymont and O'Connell (2011) also note their advantage in improving learning through a connection between theory and practice. These reflections provided significant data and insights not always achieved through other means of data collection.

The Alaska and Thailand trips offered a required education course titled Teaching Diverse Learners. As a part of this course, teacher candidates developed a socialization paper as well as culturally responsive lessons or activities and written reflections. They differentiated instruction as they taught children in each of these culturally diverse settings. In their coursework prior to the trip, the candidates investigated the concept of culture and its impact on habits, behavior, beliefs, and values. They also learned how to make informed observations and reflections.

The authors have described these two university cross-cultural programs, along with background of how each prepares participating candidates to be culturally responsive and globally competent future teachers. They conclude with a thematic analysis of the reflections written by students participating in the Alaska and Thailand cross-cultural experiences.

2. Related Literature Review

The necessity for teacher education programs to ensure that their candidates are effectively prepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students is well documented (Garcia et al., 2010). There is also a need for globally competent teachers. In their Framework for Internationalizing Teacher Preparation, The Longview Foundation (2008) recommends that teacher preparation programs “provide field experiences that support the development of preservice teachers’ global perspectives” (p. 6). They further recommend that programs facilitate “at least one in-depth cross-cultural experience for each pre-service teacher in another country, or in a multicultural community in the United States” (p. 6).

The framework also notes the importance of providing “appropriate orientation, supervision, and debriefing to tie these experiences to prospective teachers’ emerging teaching practice” (p. 6). Teachers must be culturally competent to meet the needs of their students in a globalized world. Several researchers support the need to develop teacher candidates’ cultural competence and global learning (Armstrong, 2008; Cushner, 2009; Larson, L. & Brown J.S., 2017; Lee, 2011; Zhao, 2010). Tolisano (2014) challenges teachers to “keep up by becoming globally competent enough to prepare our students for their nascent world” (p. 34) and to critically reflect on professional practices that keep global learning at the center of teaching. Triandis (1994) believes that an important facet of cultural competence is understanding the meaning of “subjective culture.”

Teacher candidates should be able to communicate effectively and act appropriately in a variety of intercultural situations. Lonner and Hayes (2004) explain that “intercultural competence is multidimensional involving emotional, contextual, and interpersonal intelligences in the creation of a person who is emotionally caring yet controlled, sensitive to interpersonal dynamics, and genuinely perceptive when in complex and highly interactive situations” (p. 92).

Several researchers suggest that intercultural experiential learning should be a part of every teacher education program, and the cultural immersion experience should be carefully planned with purpose and reflective feedback from students (Armstrong, 2008; Cushner, Longview Foundation; Sleeter, 2007).

3. The Alaska Cross-Cultural Experience

The Alaska Cross Cultural trip provides teacher candidates with an opportunity to learn about the five geographical groups of Alaskan natives, the Inupiaq, Athabascans, Aleuts, Tsimisian/Tlingit/Haida, and Yupik/Cupik. This cross-cultural experience dispels the idea that Alaska is one big land of ice and snow, populated by native Eskimos who live in igloos. Few realize that Alaska is more than twice the size of Texas, yet only has the road system of Rhode Island. Most villages are small and off the road. Anchorage holds two-thirds of the population of the entire state. The teacher candidates in this study traveled to destinations such as Anchorage, Talkeetna, Soldotna, Kenai, Homer, and Kotzebue, Alaska; they were exposed to the native Alaskans in each area.

3.1 *The Village of Kotzebue*

Immersion in the culture is vital for teacher candidates to become knowledgeable about this group. The teacher candidates’ greatest exposure was to one native group, the Inupiaq, who live in the hub village of the Northwest Arctic Borough. Kotzebue, Alaska is a remote Inupiaq village located 30 miles above the Arctic Circle, and is only accessible by air, or (during the summer months) by boat. This village population of 3,000 is composed primarily of native Alaskans who live a sustainable lifestyle, meaning they live off the land. Eighty per cent of the people are Inupiaq, with the remaining population being a mixture of Asian, African American and Caucasian. Because of the high concentration of native Alaskans, the teacher candidates learned much about this population. They were immersed in the culture through several activities in June Nelson Elementary School, the Boys and Girls Club and an organized “Spring Fling” at a local church. The following is a composite of experiences and events that comprised the Alaska cross-cultural trip

3.2 *June B. Nelson School*

June B. Nelson School enrolled 394 students during this experience. The teacher candidates made connections with the classroom prior to the trip. They either wrote letters, Skyped, or in some way communicated with the students in the school. Many of these children had never been outside northwest Alaska. The teacher candidates implemented a variety of communicative activities such as being pen pals, making valentines and Christmas cards for them, and creating a Flat Stanley project based on the book’s character. This group shared the alphabet book, *V is for Volunteer: a Tennessee Alphabet Book*, prior to departing for Alaska. Prior to the group’s arrival, the third-grade group from June B. Nelson School had created an alphabet book for Lee teacher candidates called *K is for Kotzebue*, based on life in their village.

The children shared the book with the Lee teacher candidates, which oriented them to the village.

The teachers and students at the school welcomed the Lee teacher candidates into their individual classrooms. The candidates observed students and teachers in a school similar to those in Tennessee, except that the June B. Nelson School also incorporates much of the native Alaskan culture within its curriculum and activities.

3.3 Kotzebue Boys and Girls Club

Another venue where teacher candidates worked with Kotzebue children was the Kotzebue Boys and Girls Club. The candidates volunteered for an after-school activity in which they played games, worked on art projects, and helped the children with academics. The interaction between the children and the teacher candidates was extremely successful. The candidates bonded with many of the children. This piqued the Inupiaq children's curiosity about the teacher candidates' lives in Tennessee. The Boys and Girls Club staff was grateful to have so many volunteers to help with this energetic group.

One of the highlights of the time in Kotzebue was the "Spring Fling" that the candidates planned and implemented at the host church. Lee teacher candidates provided many activities to celebrate the impending summer holidays such as face painting, storytelling, jewelry making, and a host of arts and crafts.

The teacher candidates' reflections on the Alaska cross-cultural experience revealed that they recognized the disparity between native teachers and native students. At the June B. Nelson School, most of the teachers are white. Though the teacher candidates observed differences in the children of Alaska, they also noted their similarities with children from their home culture. Initially, the teacher candidates felt uncomfortable, but as the experience continued, they gained a more holistic view of the native Alaskan children and their culture.

4. The Thailand Cross-Cultural Experience

Students who participated in the Thailand Cross-Cultural trip traveled to Chiang Mai, Thailand for approximately 14 days. Chiang Mai is the largest city in Northern Thailand.

Before the trip, students were taught the basic cultural taboos for interacting with Thai people. They learned to be respectful of Buddhist monks and not touch them and to take their shoes off in temples, homes, and small shops. They learned not to point or use their fingers or feet inappropriately, as well as to dress conservatively. Most importantly, since they were around many children, they learned not to touch a Thai child on the head. They were also taught that Thailand is a soft culture, and loud voices and angry outbursts have no place. They practiced the Thai greeting, the Wai, which replaces our habit of shaking hands. The most challenging habit for them to avoid was speaking in loud voices in restaurants as they talk excitedly about their day's experiences.

While in Thailand, Lee teacher candidates taught Thai children as well as hill tribe children who lived in the hills of Chiang Mai. There are six major tribes or ethnic minority groups of hill tribe people. They are Karen, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, and Mien. The people provide for themselves through sustainable farming and raising livestock. They migrated to Northern Thailand to escape ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

The hill tribe people deal with poverty and limited education. Some hill tribe children who live in Chiang Mai are permitted to go to Thai schools, while those who live in the hills must provide for their own schools and education. The Lee teacher candidates were exposed to both settings.

4.1 Thai Elementary School: Rongrien Wat Chang Kian

This public Thai school is located next to the Buddhist monastery, Wat Chang Kian, near the University of Chiang Mai. It serves Thai children and hill tribe children grades Kindergarten through grade 9. Their children with special needs are included in the regular classroom, and each has a teacher's aide who sits with them and helps them with instruction. Teacher candidates arrived in the morning before the opening ceremony and spent a day at the school teaching English through the arts. Students at the school spoke some English, but Thai was the predominant language used. Each class had approximately 30 children and there was no air conditioning in the rooms.

4.2 YMCA English Camps

The Director of the YMCA invited local Thai and hill tribe children to attend two English camps taught by the Lee teacher education candidates. These camps each lasted for a full day. Approximately 100 children attended the camps housing 10 learning centers with two teacher candidates per center. The children rotated from one center to another throughout the day. At the centers, the Thai children practiced English through reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills taught through vocabulary games, arts, and interactive activities.

4.3 Chiang Mai International School (CMIS)

The teacher candidates spent one day at CMIS which is the oldest international school in Chiang Mai. It is a diverse international school with over 500 students from 30 different countries. Lee students toured the school and then observed classes throughout the day. There are generally three to five students each summer who say that they would like to return to CMIS for part of their student teaching experience. To date, nine teacher candidates have returned to CMIS for one of their student teaching placements.

4.4 House of Faith Orphanage

The House of Faith Orphanage, established by Pastor Somnuk and Lily Montreladrasma, is in the mountains of Chiang Dao and is about 60 miles from Chiang Mai. The northern region of Thailand near Chiang Dao is populated predominately by hill tribes. The orphanage takes in children from the hill tribes who suffer extreme poverty and are subject to sex trafficking. Lee teacher candidates made two trips to the orphanage and interacted with approximately 20 children housed there, ranging in age from five to 18 years. They taught many of the same activities there that they did in the Thai school and in the YMCA English camps.

5. Research Approach

This research was a qualitative, phenomenological study which investigated ways of perceiving and interpreting events by the individual (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). This perspective is significant in studies that address processes of teaching, learning, and education. It helps educators develop programs of learning and ways of teaching adjusted to diverse populations of learners (Entwistle, 1997; Prosser, 2000).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) note that reflective writing provides a trustworthy source for mapping of data into categories that are built from the respondents' point of view. This study attempted to highlight five prominent themes that emerged from the teacher candidates' reflective writings of these two cross-cultural experiences.

5.1 Research Method

The study focused on the reflective writings of 14 teacher candidates who were rising seniors. Seven candidates were part of the Alaska trip and seven were part of the Thailand trip. The research was conducted at the end of these two-week cross-cultural experiences during the May summer session prior to their Fall student teaching experience. The teacher candidates were majors in elementary education leading to teacher licensure.

The teacher candidates were asked to keep a reflective journal of their experiences with the culture of the children they taught and others with whom they interacted. The candidates were encouraged to express themselves freely, as the reflections were not graded. At the end of the cross-cultural experience, the reflective writings were collected and carefully read by both researchers. The purpose was to determine prominent themes rising from the reflections and to note similarities and differences between the Alaska and Thailand experience.

5.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers followed the thematic analysis form of qualitative data analysis and discovered some common themes within the written reflections. The discovery of the themes is supported by quotes from the journal entries that describe what occurred from the teacher candidates' perspective and the processes they experienced. These quotes enabled the readers to examine the validity of the research, since, according to Geertz (1973), they provide a "thick description."

The researchers used Inductive coding and created codes based on the qualitative data itself. All codes came directly from the reflective writings. The authors divided the qualitative dataset into theme samples and created codes that covered the theme samples. The samples were reread, and codes were applied. New codes were created where needed until all data was coded. An Excel spreadsheet was used to keep track of the codes. This helped keep the research organized throughout the data analysis process. As the researchers coded new data, new codes were added, and categories and themes were reorganized as needed. Labels were used for each code and a description of the theme to which the code referred. The authors grouped responses with the same themes under the same code, even if they did not use the exact wording. For example, "This experience helped me step out of my comfort zone, and be open to children" covered responses including phrases such as "I feel more comfortable than ever about my interactions with children and adults who are different from me."

Five prominent themes emerged from the reflective writings. These were placed in a hierarchical framing which made it easier to group different phrases under one code. The codes were recorded manually. Excerpts from various student reflections provide a sample of all the reflections.

6. Findings from Alaska and Thailand Experience

This study follows the reflective writings of two groups of 14 teacher candidates, seven candidates in each group. Reflective writings of the teacher candidates were used to document their experience in the cross-cultural programs. Using inductive coding, the authors discovered the following five themes in order of prominence:

1. Positive experience and increased cultural awareness
2. Receptiveness and warmth of children in the culture
3. Increased flexibility in adapting to diverse learners
4. View the cross-cultural experience as transformative or life-changing
5. Confirmation of the candidate's calling to teach

6.1 Sample Excerpts from Teacher Candidates' Reflections

1). Positive experience and increased cultural awareness:

This was a beautiful experience. There are certainly differences in the culture of Kotzebue, particularly how it seems these children practically raise themselves, but these children are pretty much like any other kid I've met at home. (Student 1, Alaska)

The community in Kotzebue was very tight-knit and everyone knows everyone and could possibly be related. Parents were not worried about where their children were during the day because they trusted the people who live in the community. The Inupiat people are also very quiet; they do not really have an extroverted personality to outsiders, but that is because they do not know them and do not want to get attached if they are not going to stay. (Student 3, Alaska)

I had never realized just how difficult communicating with someone who does not speak English could actually be until we were placed in front of a classroom of students with very little knowledge of the Thai language. (Student 1, Thailand)

Teaching at the Thailand school was a fantastic experience. Going to Thailand has really made me fall in love with the Thai people and their culture (Student 4, Thailand).

2). *Receptiveness and warmth of children:*

The children were wonderful. The experience did, indeed impact my personal socialization. (Student 2, Alaska)

The entire state of Alaska is breathtaking, but the people and community of Kotzebue were so heartwarming and loving that they made a lasting impact on my life. These schools have really left me with a sense of purpose. (Student 3, Alaska)

The students and teachers were very welcoming, and it was easy to start conversations with them. (Student 6, Alaska) Interacting with students in Alaska was a wonderful experience. (Student 8, Alaska)

My trip to the orphanage was a better experience than I could ever imagine. Physically, they do not have a lot and are poor. But other than that, they are rich. They have the most thankful and giving hearts of anyone I have ever met. They have so much joy and you can see it all over their faces. They accepted us and loved being around us. (Student 6, Thailand)

3). *Increased flexibility in adapting to diverse learners:*

My experience in this diverse classroom was nothing short of amazing. At first, the students were wary of me, they saw me as a stranger, and I don't think that is helped with my accent and skin color. They were curious as to where I had come from, why I was there, and they wanted to know more about me. (Student 4, Alaska).

Overall, tutoring made me realize that each student's ability to learn was not hindered by their cultural or geographical upbringing, and just because a culture is traditional does not mean it is primitive or strange. (Student 5, Alaska)

It was so enjoyable and again showed how language and country barriers can be crossed, and don't really matter. We all were able to laugh together and enjoy quality time, despite not being able to communicate completely. (Student 7, Thailand)

4). *View of the cross-cultural experience as transformative or life-changing:*

My visit to Alaska has made an impact on me that I can never forget. God has crafted us all to be different for a purpose and I have discovered why He did that. (Student 6, Alaska)

I met some unreal Inupiaq Eskimo children, who touched my life forever. (Student 7, Alaska)

My time in Thailand was one of the best two weeks of my life. It was a beautiful thing to be able to experience a culture so drastically different, and it opened my eyes to so many things I had been blind to before. (Student 7, Thailand).

5). *Confirmation of the student's calling to teach:*

This experience helped me to step outside of my comfort zone and open up to children I was not familiar with. For the first time, I felt like I was qualified and belonged in a classroom. (Student 1, Alaska)

When I first discovered I wanted to teach, it was because I loved children, but I realized that wasn't enough to just love them; I needed to be 100% committed to helping them grow and laying the foundation for learning and growing up to be the best person they can be. (Student 3, Alaska).

I feel as if all the learning, ideas, and dreams for my future classroom that I experienced in Thailand were a reminder of my call to teach. Seeing those children looking up with expectant eyes and the joy on their faces when they understood the English they were saying filled my heart to overflowing. (Student 3, Thailand)

6.2 Review of the Literature on the Five Themes

(1). Positive experience and increased cultural awareness

Various studies have shown teacher candidates' responses to study abroad experiences to be generally positive. The candidates learned much about different cultures (DeVillar & Jiang, 2012; Quezada, 2004; Quezada & Alfaro, 2007; Savicki, 2010).

(2). Receptiveness and warmth of children in the culture

No scholarly literature was discovered on the topic of how children from other cultures accept visiting teacher candidates to their culture.

(3). Increased flexibility in adapting to diverse learners

Several researchers noted that teacher candidates who had studied abroad cited increased flexibility in adapting to diverse cultures and learners (Anderson, 2012; Armstrong, 2008; DeVillar & Jiang, 2012; Larson & Brown, 2017; Lee, 2011; Stachowski, 2003).

(4). View of the cross-cultural experience as transformative or life-changing

Cross-cultural experiences were perceived by many preservice teachers as transformative or life-changing (Dunlap, 2006; Clement & Outlaw, 2002; Fry, Paige, Jon, Dillow, & Dom, 2009).

(5). Confirmation of the student's calling to teach

Although there are many studies on the positive impact and need for study abroad programs, no studies were found on how study abroad programs confirmed a teacher candidate's calling to teach.

7. Conclusion

Teacher candidates from both the Alaska and Thailand cross-cultural groups, though experiencing different cultures on different continents, described five similar themes in their written reflections. Both groups indicated positive experiences which had increased their cultural awareness, as well as helped them develop flexibility in adapting to diverse learners. The written reflections of both Alaska and Thailand students described their cross-cultural experiences as transformative and/or life-changing. Several students also noted confirmation of their "calling to teach."

The evidence discovered in this research affirms the authors' theory that immersing teacher candidates in other cultures is worth the effort and is an asset in preparing them for their future classrooms.

Author Note

This manuscript is not under consideration nor has it been published in any other journal.

Dr. Laura Anderson, Professor of Education, has enjoyed a 28-year tenure at Lee University. Her research interests are in children's literature, literacy, and cross-cultural experiences.

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