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Student Teaching Abroad Inter-Group Outcomes: A Comparative, Country-Specific Analysis

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Abstract

As student diversity becomes the norm in U.S. schools, future teachers must be comprehensively prepared to work with the increasingly diverse student population through application of informed instruction that enhances general and individual student learning and outcomes. Teacher Education programs increasingly promote student teaching in international settings as a substantive step to develop teachers who embody these new competencies and instructional practices. The proposed paper presentation offers a framework and analysis highlighting similarities and differences between two groups of student teachers in Belize (2005 and 2008). Findings are comparative and relate to the type and degree of (1) cultural-, professional-, and character-development influences on student teachers, and (2) emergent common intergroup patterns.

Introduction

Background

Our nation's schools continue their inexorable demographic march toward greater student diversity, even as their parallel march toward teacher and administrator diversity remains virtually locked in place. Accreditation bodies and teacher preparation programs have adapted their rhetoric and standards accordingly to ensure that these variables are integrated within the curricula and program experiences of students aspiring to become teachers. National teacher accreditation bodies—such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC)—and the 13 regional agencies recognized by the United States Department of Education or the Council of Higher Education Accreditation, or both, maintain a common goal: to ensure a high level of educational quality at the institutional level. The fundamental goal for teacher education programs, in turn, is more specific: to develop competent teachers to formally educate the nation's P-12 students—that is, teachers who can, within their school setting, function and respond in a meaningful and timely manner to their diverse students' individual and collective needs, regardless of context or circumstance.

Thus, as student diversity continues to flourish, teacher candidates must be professionally prepared to work effectively with the increasingly diverse student population that characterizes our nation's schools. Teacher candidates, once in the self-contained classroom, must be prepared to offer instruction, assessments, and environments that are responsive to students' diverse needs and will enhance students' learning and outcomes, as they engage in the wide and complex array of subject matter areas associated with their schooling experience. The ultimate goal of our nation's schools is to erode the disproportionate achievement performance gap across groups, particularly between categories of race, ethnicity, language, gender, and socioeconomic status.

In 2002, the college of education at a state university in the U.S. Southeast expanded its existing model of study abroad to include student teaching experiences by placing its first student teacher in China. In 2004, the program extended the student teaching model to Belize, Central America, placing student teachers at various host schools in three cities. In 2006, the model expanded to Mexico. This paper first presents the researchers' operational framework and methodology, as well as analysis and findings incorporating and comparing two groups of student teachers in Belize during 2005 and 2008. Secondly, this paper articulates preliminary implications relating to (1) cultural-, professional-, and character- development (CPC) influences on participating student teachers and (2) emergent CPC development patterns associated with both groups.

Problem

The level of knowledge, pedagogical skills, and dispositions that pre-service and practicing teachers have regarding students of cultures different from their own is of major importance. This axiom is particularly relevant as teacher ethnicity is predicted to remain predominately white over the next few decades, even as the diversity of student ethnicity continues to increase, reflecting ethnic and racial backgrounds other than white (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). Students designated as minority, for example, comprised 41%, or 22,500,000, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008) of the estimated fifty-five million students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Additionally, in 2006, 23%

(12,650,000) of all students had at least 1 parent who was foreign-born, and 5%, or 2,275,000, of all students were themselves foreign-born (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008). Nearly 11 million (20%) of the students spoke a language other than English at home, 7.8 million (71%) of whom spoke Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Moreover, minority groups will account for some 65% of the U.S. population growth in the two-decade period of 2000-2020 (Hodgkinson, 2000, 2001).

In stark contrast to the above data, the percentage of the nearly 3.5 million (The 2008 Statistical Abstract) public elementary and secondary teachers in the United States designated as white in 2004 was 83% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Since the 1990s, the expectation of heightened competence of knowledge, skills, and dispositions has extended also to school administrative leaders (Hafner, 2005)—a professional group that is also overwhelmingly white. Ninety-five percent (95%) of public school superintendents in the United States, for example, were reported as white in 2000 (Björk & Keedy, 2001), as were 82% of public school principals in the 1999-2000 school year (Gates, Ringel, & Santibañez, 2003).

While improvements in particular academic indicators have been made over the past three decades by Hispanic, African American, and other designated minority students, overall a significant academic gap persists (Whitehurst, 2005) and drop-out rates among these groups remain high (Fry, 2003). Population projections indicate that students from Hispanic, Asian, African American, and Multiracial categories will overwhelmingly contribute to the increase in enrollment figures as the non-Hispanic White (NHW) population continues to decline relative to the replacement level of its particular category.. The disparity is transformational in terms of race and ethnicity. The demographic shift is stark and compelling: projections forecast that the Non-Hispanic White population, from 2030 to 2050, will “contribute nothing to the Nation’s population growth”; conversely, “the Hispanic-origin population [will] contribute 39 percent [of the Nation's population growth] from 2000 to 2010, 45 percent from 2010 to 2030, and 60 percent from 2030 to 2050” (U.S. Census, 2008).

Researched-informed scholarship has characterized teacher education programs as offering insufficient preparation for prospective teachers to work effectively with diverse populations (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1999) or to address, much less integrate, global issues within their future classrooms (Jennings, 2006). Professional Associations such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have realized the importance of addressing the preparation of teachers to teach diverse students in schools. For example, NCATE’s Standard 4: Diversity requires teacher education programs to demonstrate evidence of providing curriculum and experiences that would prepare future teachers in effectively addressing the needs of all students, that is, “students with exceptionalities and of different ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, language, religious, socioeconomic, and regional/ geographic origins (NCATE, 2008, p.29).

The above review offers strong evidence and a compelling argument that teachers—as front-line professional educators—must learn at the outset of their professional preparation to understand the diverse students whom they teach, to include the students’ languages and cultural backgrounds (Cushner & Brennan, 2007). First-hand contact in a school setting within a representative culture is a direct way of providing a solid foundation for this diversity requirement. This opportunity complements and extends multicultural and related course work taken within the teacher preparation program prior to the international student-teacher experience.

Literature Review

International Student teaching

More than one hundred universities and colleges in the U.S. offer student teaching abroad opportunities through participation in a larger consortium or through developing their own programs (Quezada, 2004). Many teacher education institutions realize the need to change the contrasting reality of increasing number of minority students in schools and the lack of substantive intercultural experiences and skills among the majority of teachers (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2000; Melnick & Zeichner, 1998). Student teaching abroad experiences have served as a catalyst for beginning teachers to start on a path of learning about another culture and people through direct interaction with that culture and people (Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Mahon & Cushner, 2007), concurrently with their guided professional development experience. There is consistency in the literature—generally based on students' personal reflections and surveys, program evaluations, and perceptions by host educators within the particular international contexts—documenting the acquisition of student teachers' professional and personal knowledge, skills, and dispositions while teaching abroad (Baker, 2000; Bryan & Sprague, 1997; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahon & Cushner, 2007; Stachowski, Richardson, and Henderson, 2003). Three general areas characterize this acquisition process of student teacher growth and development: instructional pedagogy, learning about oneself, and an authentic appreciation and understanding of multiculturalism (Bryan and Sprague, 1997; Clement & Outlaw, 2002; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Stachowski & Visconti, 1997; Stachowski & Chleb, 1998; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003).

Tang and Choi's (2004) review of the research literature sheds additional light on student teaching abroad contexts by demonstrating the differential effects on student teaching abroad experiences among different host countries with respect to instructional and supervisory practices and socio-professional contexts. Interactions between teachers and student teachers, for example, may differ in length and frequency, in location, and in topics according to the country. Roose (2001) provides a listing of factors that powerfully influence cross-cultural education internships of prospective teachers: (1) the effects of culture on schooling; (2) understanding school as a culture; (3) understanding students and learning; (4) curriculum; (5) professional development; and (6) attraction to difference.

Transfer of learning

In the context of student teaching, transfer of learning is an overarching goal. Teachers work diligently to see students at various educational levels experience this transfer of learning. They hope students will master concepts so thoroughly that they will naturally share these ideas with others and transfer the learning in new settings. In spite of this overarching goal, research indicates that transfer of learning is rarely spontaneous, especially when the learning context is markedly different from the context of the application (Cree, Macaulay, and Loney, 1998; Cree and Macaulay, 2000; Dickson and Bamford, 1995; Ngeow, 1998; Perkins and Saloman, 1988; Whittington 1986). Perkins and Saloman (1988) noted that this transfer of learning requires ingenuity and deliberate effort "to discover the connections" (p. 27). Cree et al. (1998) emphasized the metacognition and "mindfulness" involved in this type of abstract thinking (p. 26).

The gradual release of responsibility model (Frey & Fisher, 2006; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Ritterskamp & Singleton, 2001; Weaver, 2002) may be the innovation that is needed to build those connections and cause the transfer of learning to occur naturally and effectively in various student teaching contexts. The model involves these steps. (1) Initially, the teacher models a conceptual skill or demonstrates a particular strategy. (2) Next, the teacher provides support, or scaffolding, for practicing the conceptual skill or strategy in a large group of students, using an activity such as shared reading. (3) Then the teacher facilitates practice with the conceptual skill or strategy in small groups, using an activity such as guided reading. (4) This collaborative practice prepares students for independent achievement. A teacher's guidance during this gradual release of responsibility enhances students' learning and equips them to make discoveries and experiment with new concepts.

According to Duke and Pearson (2002), this model shifts the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the students. As preservice teachers gradually learn to assume responsibility for their own learning, they may themselves be more likely to provide appropriate guidance to their students and become teacher-leaders during student teaching and in various contexts. Collaborative practice and independent achievement encourage students to see concepts from multiple perspectives and experience new levels of learning. Within this model, the students experience the benefits of learning for themselves, and new discoveries perpetuate this learning process. Education becomes a significant part of the students' lives when they experience the benefits of recording ideas and sharing concepts in a language-rich classroom.

Connection to the study

The study presented in this paper supports, refines, and adds to the above literature. It supports the literature by demonstrating general and positive effects of two distinct groups of student teachers associated with their respective, semester-long student teaching experiences in Belize during two academic years. It refines the above literature by rigorously addressing and comparing inter-group student teacher abroad experiences within the same country context during two distinct academic periods. Methodologically, it also contributes to literature refinement by (1) having student teachers in both years placed in different school settings (public and private); (2) analyzing the effect—both general and contrastive—of the respective contexts and school settings relative to student teachers' cultural-, professional-, and character-development; (3) addressing the type and degree of common inter-group CPC-development patterns, and (4) analyzing the extent of transfer of learning on the part of the student teachers and the application of gradual release of responsibility on the part of the collaborating teachers. Finally, the study applies a rigorous research approach based on Glaserian grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory may be defined as a “set of rigorous research procedures leading to the emergence of conceptual categories [...] related to each other as a theoretical explanation of the action(s) that continually resolves the main concern of the participants in a substantive area” (Grounded Theory Institute, 2008). The present analysis restricts itself to the emergence stage.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this comparative study were to apply a modified form of Glaserian grounded theory to determine the effect of student teaching abroad experiences in Belize in 2005 and 2008, and in so doing, generate subsequent questions from the emerged categories. Thus, the authors generated questions 2 through 4 after they first analyzed, coded and categorized data associated with question 1.

- Q1. What are the type and degree of patterns that emerge from a student teaching abroad experience as evinced by the content analysis of student teachers' individual electronic journals from 2005 and 2008?
- Q2. What is the impact of student teaching in Belize on participating student teachers relative to their: professional development, self-development, and cultural responsiveness?
- Q3. What are the similarities in the above three impact areas on the participating student teachers in Belize from 2005 and 2008?
- Q4. What are the differences in the impact on the participating student teachers in Belize from 2005 and 2008?

Methodology

Spanning a two-year period (2006-2008), the research is primarily qualitative in nature, complemented by descriptive statistics. Content analyses of weekly student teacher journals, pre- and post-attitudinal collaborating teacher assessments, pre- and post-self-assessment surveys, interviews, and site visits comprise the methods designed and applied. Eleven (11) white, female, non-Hispanic student teachers participated in one of two semester-long international student teaching experiences in Belize. A group of seven student teachers taught within Belizean schools in fall 2005, and a second group of four taught there in spring 2008. Nine of the participants specialized in elementary education, and two (from the 2005 group) specialized in middle grades; however, all were placed in elementary school settings.

The data gathered for analysis include student teacher-generated weekly electronic journals, open-ended questionnaires, and interviews from participants' collaborating teachers during each academic year. Specifically, weekly e-journal reflections of two elementary and two middle grades participants in Belize from 2005 and all four elementary participants were gathered, coded, and analyzed. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to participants prior to their departure to and upon their return from their respective international contexts. Finally, interviews from participants' collaborating teachers during each academic year by the researchers complemented the above data gathering methods. The data were analyzed utilizing content analysis and descriptive statistics. DeVillar and Jiang coded the first group's (2005) weekly journals and identified nine (9) emergent themes and sixty (60) topics (DeVillar, Jiang, & Bryan, 2006). This instrument was utilized as the baseline schema for the second group.

Results of Data Analysis

Journal Reflections

As a result of the analysis of journals, sixty categories/topics and nine themes emerged from the data corpus and, as mentioned above, were defined by DeVillar and Jiang (see Appendix A for description of themes). The nine themes that emerged were: *Instructional Engagement, Professional Development Characteristics, Personal or External Instructional Assessment, Emotional Preparedness, Comparative Schooling Awareness, Perceived Role, Cultural Responsiveness, Perceived Student Attributes, and Student Teacher Observations.*

In the analysis of the Belize 2005 journals, five of the nine themes emerged in greater frequency than the other four—a phenomenon common to all the 2005 Belize student teacher journals: *Instructional Engagement, Personal or External Instructional Assessment, Professional Development Characteristic, Cultural Responsiveness, and Emotional Preparedness.* Two of the five common themes related to instruction (Instructional Engagement and Instructional Assessment), focusing on the multiple aspects of the participants' subject matter instruction and productivity in the classroom, their assessment of student learning, and on their self-assessment in the area of instructional preparedness. The theme of *Professional Development Characteristics* related to the professional growth and development of the student teachers. Analysis of e-journals indicated two substantive findings regarding student teachers within this thematic area. First, they gained particular insight into their role as professionals through the process of interacting with collaborating teachers, students, and parents. Second, they demonstrated enhanced professional commitment to the students despite references to challenging contexts, which included lack of instructional materials and reliable and easily accessible electronic technology and classrooms of students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

Within the theme of *Emotional Preparedness*, Student teachers tended to share the following three qualities: (a) determination or confidence, or both, to overcome the challenges they were facing in their international context; (b) enthusiasm toward working with the diverse students and collaborating teachers in their respective classroom and school settings; and (c) hope for success within their teaching and learning contexts.

The analysis by DeVillar and Jiang of the e-journals submitted by student teachers in Belize in 2008 followed the identical methodological framework and yielded the following results. Four of the nine themes emerged in greater frequency than the other five—a phenomenon common to all the 2008 Belize student teacher journals: *Instructional Engagement, Personal or External Instructional Assessment, Emotional Preparedness, and Cultural Responsiveness.* In comparison to the 2005 student teachers' journal analysis results, the theme absent in 2008 group was *Professional Development Characteristics.*

Within the four common themes shared by both groups, the same topic of determination, confidence, hope, or enthusiasm in the theme of *Emotional Preparedness* was discussed by both groups in their journals. However, with respect to the other three common themes, the 2005 group's journal discussions focused much more on *Instructional Engagement and Personal or External Instructional Assessment*, while the 2008 group journals discussions emphasized *Cultural Responsiveness.*

Specifically, under the theme of Instructional Engagement, the 2005 group focused on both the multiple aspects of their subject matter instruction and their assessment of student

learning, while the 2008 group focused their discussion on their assessment of student learning. Similarly, under the theme of *Personal or External Instructional Assessment*, the 2005 group discussed both their perception of their limited instructional preparedness and instructional productivity, while the 2008 group discussed their positive perception of their instructional productivity. In contrast, under theme of *Cultural Responsiveness*, the 2005 group discussed their cultural engagement intensely, while the 2008 group discussed three additional topics relating to their awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of the Belizean cultures.

End-of-Program Questionnaire Findings

Both 2005 and 2008 Belize student teachers completed a 6-item questionnaire after their respective student teaching abroad experiences. With respect to the anticipated effect of the student teacher abroad experience on employability, 5 out of 7 student teachers in 2005 group considered that it would have a positive effect on their employability. In contrast, the 2008 group did not exhibit any pattern in their responses as to prospective adverse or positive effects on employability. Two participants, for example, were unsure of the effects of their experience on their employability and mentioned that they had not been interviewed yet; one person felt at a disadvantage, and another commented that she would have probably had a job if she had stayed in Belize.

In terms of *anticipated change in attitudes* towards their future students, the majority of the student teachers in the 2005 group (5) and all four students in the 2008 group responded that they would experience a positive change. Regarding the *effect* of the student teaching abroad *on the way they will teach*, all students in both groups responded positively. Both groups commented on their enhanced sensitivity to students' backgrounds and needs as well as enhanced creativity in lesson planning and adaptability with respect to resources. In response to their perceived *enhanced instructional flexibility* due to their student teaching abroad experiences, all 2005 group and the majority of the 2008 group (3) responded positively.

Relative to the question of *increased curricular choices* due to the international student teaching experience, 6 of the 7 Belize student teachers from the 2005 group and all within the 2008 group responded *positively*. Additionally, the 2005 group commented positively on the value of integrating technology, culture, and realia in instruction and having an enhanced sense of instructional creativity, while the 2008 group focused their comments on selecting a more multicultural material and designing lessons that would meet the needs of students from all cultures. In response to the question of *attitude change toward the use of a second language in teaching*, 4 of the 7 student teachers in the 2005 group and all 2008 group responded positively. Three participants in the Belize group responded positively to gaining an enhanced motivation to learn a second language, while one responded positively relative to attaining a heightened respect for bilingual speakers. The 2008 group's comments focused on the beneficial value of knowing a second language as a teacher, while one participant wanted to learn Spanish.

In summary, with respect to similarities, all members of both groups considered that the international teaching experience had had a positive impact on their teaching, and 10 out of 11 members in both groups deemed this experience to have increased their instructional flexibility as well as their curricular choices. In addition, 8 of the 11 participants—4 of the 2005 group and all 4 in the 2008 group—proclaimed a positive attitude change toward second language use in their classroom and 9 (5 from 2005; 4 from 2008) an anticipated attitude change toward students due to their student teaching abroad experiences. The only stark difference between the two

groups was with respect to the anticipated effect of student teaching in Belize on employability. While 5 out of 7 of the 2005 participants considered this experience as having a positive effect on employability, the 2008 group had no discernible pattern in their response, as their responses varied.

Interviews with collaborating teachers

Collaborating teachers in Belize from 2005 and 2008 were enthusiastic about their student teachers' creative teaching ideas. They described a reciprocal relationship in which they provided guidance and insights early in the semester. Then, the student teachers followed the collaborating teachers' advice, explored resources from the Internet, and shared ideas from their university classes. About her student teacher, a collaborating teacher from 2005 stated, "She taught me a lot. Not only her classroom management ideas, but also there is a whole new way of teaching. Rubrics. [...] They never taught us how to use them in our classroom" (personal communication, 2008). This teacher was pleased when her student teacher showed her how to use rubrics, and she mentioned other ways learning was transferred. All of the collaborating teachers except one enthusiastically described specific ideas they gleaned from their student teachers.

A lecturer and director of internships in Belize noted that the student teachers were very strong in their content, and said, "Our teachers have gotten so much from these teachers" (personal communication, 2008). She emphasized the new teaching methods that teachers in Belize learned from student teachers. The reciprocal benefits were evident when she noted the ways in which student teachers gained ideas for classroom management and ideas for relating to students from diverse backgrounds. She said, "In Belize, we have so many cultures in one classroom" (personal communication, 2008). Then she discussed the benefits of interaction in a classroom with a "wide range of culture."

Collaborating teachers from 2008 provided specific details about the reciprocal exchange of teaching ideas and cultural exploration. A teacher described the artistic bulletin board and literacy activities her student teacher designed. Additionally, she noted, "I think they learned quite a lot. As a matter of fact, they can almost tell me more about places [in Belize] than I know myself because I haven't really been there. So they have learned about things I have never even noticed" (personal communication, 2008). This teacher was pleased when her student teacher arranged a pen pal program with a similar class in the United States. She enjoyed seeing the pictures and letters her students received during the exchange. She mentioned that she planned to continue using some of the creative ideas and classroom management strategies that worked effectively for her student teacher.

A collaborating teacher from 2008 described her friendship with her student teacher as the most rewarding aspect of the experience. She shared cultural highlights, such as her favorite Belizean foods, and was glad to see the ways in which her student teacher grew professionally. She stated, "I think it helped her a lot, too. She is a young girl, and I think it helped her to mature in Belize [...] being here [...] to meet a lot of parents. She learned a lot of things from the children" (personal communication, 2008). Collaborating teachers and student teachers emphasized the loving relationships that developed during this experience as they learned from each other.

Findings and Discussion

Commonalities in professional and personal knowledge, skills and dispositions

Student teachers in both groups acquired professional and personal knowledge, skills, and dispositions consistent with Quezada's (2004) literature review on student teaching abroad. Specific attributes included skill development in instructional pedagogy, learning about oneself, and an authentic appreciation of multiculturalism or a different culture (Bryan and Sprague, 1997; Clement & Outlaw, 2002; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahon & Cushner, 2007; Stachowski & Visconti, 1997; Stachowski & Chleb, 1998; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003). With respect to instructional pedagogy, student teachers emphasized instructional engagement, that is, the manner in which they interacted with their students in the classroom. They particularly focused on the topic of subject matter instruction—the content area or areas they were teaching.

The end-of-program questionnaire results indicated that all members considered that the international teaching experience had had a positive impact on their teaching, and 10 out of 11 members in both groups deemed this experience to have increased their instructional flexibility as well as their curricular choices. Regarding the directionality of student teachers' emotional state, student teachers' journal entries emphasized a consistent state of positive emotional preparedness. As a general pattern, student teachers specified their determination, confidence, enthusiasm or hope when they encountered professional and cultural challenges in their student teaching experience. In terms of an authentic appreciation of multiculturalism or a different culture, student teachers emphasized the theme of cultural responsiveness, focusing most strongly on their engagement in the host culture.

Moreover, most of the participants (4 of the 2005 group and all 4 in the 2008 group) demonstrated in their end of program questionnaire a positive attitude change toward second language use in their classroom. This finding indicates an appreciation and understanding of the value and challenge of linguistic diversity within an instructional setting and the importance of instructional pedagogy to adapt instruction to meet this challenge. Student teacher journal entries also reflected this attitudinal change, albeit in substantively distinct ways, as the three journal-entry examples below demonstrate.

I do think the experience here will be beneficial when I return. I have had to use some Spanish even if it is just one word, to communicate with my students. This will help if I am at a school with a higher percentage of Hispanic students. The hardest part is communicating with the parents who only speak Spanish. I do not know enough to carry on a conversation about a child's behavior or performance in the class. I would recommend to any teacher taking Spanish as an elective in school or classes outside of school. In order to have cooperation from the parent, a teacher must be able to communicate effectively in both English and Spanish (ST3BSI.J2, 2005).

In addition to realizing the importance of learning Spanish to better meet the needs of students and their parents, both groups exhibited a consistent state of positive emotional

preparedness, specifically, determination, confidence, enthusiasm, and hope throughout their journal reflections regarding their student teaching and cultural experiences in both trying and successful circumstances.

Evidence of transfer of learning

As they taught in Belize, the student teachers in this study spontaneously shared the strategies they found most effective during their university classes in the U.S. They did not just discuss these learning strategies, but they experienced the effectiveness of these strategies during class sessions. Since these student teachers knew the impact of these strategies, they shared them with their students and collaborating teachers in Belize. These student teaching experiences contrast with research indicating that the transfer of learning is rarely spontaneous, especially when the learning context is markedly different from the context of the application (Cree, Macaulay, and Loney, 1998; Cree and Macaulay, 2000; Dickson and Bamford, 1995; Ngeow, 1998; Perkins and Saloman, 1988; Whittington 1986). These students were given opportunities “to discover the connections” (Perkins & Saloman, 1988, p. 27). Ingenious research-based strategies in their university classes helped them to discover the metacognition and “mindfulness” involved in this type of abstract thinking (Cree et al., 1988, p. 26). This research study highlights the ingenuity that was required when student teachers in Belize transferred their learning from the university setting to elementary school classrooms.

This transfer of learning may have occurred because these student teachers experienced the model of gradual release of responsibility in their university classes (Frey & Fisher, 2006; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Ritterskamp & Singleton, 2001; Weaver, 2002). The gradual release of responsibility empowered these student teachers to build understanding for themselves in university classes as they actively constructed new levels of achievement. This model prepared them to become teacher-leaders as they became proficient with new learning strategies. Since these student teachers collaborated with their peers and presented ideas in university classes, it was natural for them to follow similar patterns of interaction with their collaborating teachers in Belize.

Connection between international student teaching and future teaching in the U.S.

Student teachers in Belize reported that they had exerted a positive impact on students in their respective classrooms; however, there was more *reflection* in the Belizean 2005 group *on the connection* between student teaching and future teaching in the United States. Student teachers echoed this connection in their responses to the end-of-program questionnaire. Specifically, with regard to the *effect* of the student teaching abroad experience *on the way they will teach*, the 2005 group’s comments exhibited a richness in elaboration and detail, stating their enhanced sensitivity to students’ backgrounds and needs and their own enhanced creativity in lesson planning and ability to adapt in the face of limited instructional resources.

One of the student teachers shared the following regarding what she learned from her experience. “I learned to accept people for who they are regardless of age, gender, race, or ethnicity. You have to look past the outside appearances to see what lies within” (ST3BSI, 2005). Another participant summarized her experience with respect to its connection to teaching in U.S. schools in the following way:

In the US, I am the majority when it comes to the color of my skin. Belize first taught me what it was like to be the minority, how one feels and experiences an environment where there are few like them. It showed me cultural or ethnic or social-economic level does not affect a child's ability to learn and that their individual learning experiences can help others learn academics or socialization & acceptance (ST4BBC, 2005).

What these students shared demonstrates their developed awareness and understanding of diversity issues as well as their commitment to multicultural education, which supports previous literature (Merryfield, 2000; Mahon, 2003; Paccione, 2000).

Reflection of cultural engagement, cultural appreciation and cultural acceptance

In contrast to student teachers from the 2005 group, whose reflections shed more light on their professional insights and commitments relative to the connection of their experiences in Belize and their future teaching in the U.S. diverse classrooms, the 2008 student teachers' journals tend to focus more on their cultural experiences in Belize. This group of student teachers was in love with the culture, particularly its perceived values regarding family, friendship, and life. As one student teacher shares in her journal entry:

As week three comes to a close, I have to admit that I am falling in love with the country and its culture. Everything here is so different than in the states. Different doesn't always mean bad though, as a matter of fact it may be better. Priorities here are much different, families are seen as your most valuable possession and life dominates the day, not time. [...] I was speaking with a student last week and I mentioned something about "my home" back in the States. He responded by saying "but you are home, your home is here now and I hope you don't ever leave." And although his words were small the impact was very big. For the first time since I have been here I did feel home. I felt like despite our different backgrounds and lifestyles we could peacefully co-exist together, me and Belize (ST1SIJ3, 2008).

Another student teacher reflected in her journal below on how kind, friendly, and helpful the people had been to her and other student teachers:

Most people have gone above and beyond to make us feel welcomed. They gave us kitchen supplies [...] they have also invited us into their homes. We have met people that have offered to take us into Belize City whenever they are going and people have offered to show us the sights free of charge. They have accepted us as their own. It is a wonderful feeling to know that we are appreciated here. The children have gotten attached and we haven't even begun teaching yet (ST3SIJ2, 2008).

This same student teacher mentioned in her Week Four journal that she and her colleague had made friends to the point where people passing on the street and those driving would stop their cars to talk to them. She also expressed how much she loved the people there. In addition, she reflected on the absence of anxiety in her life and the feeling of happiness for the first time:

The motto in Belize is to go slow. Growing up in Georgia, I have always had very bad anxiety. [...] Here I don't experience any of that. It's like I have been displaced my whole life. For the first time since I was a child, I can actually say that I am happy. It is an amazing feeling. [...] Life in Belize is slow, relaxing and worry-free. If you walk at a fast pace, people will tell you to slow down. [...] Now I know how to walk like a Belizean (ST3SI.J6, 2008).

The cultural experience in Belize transformed this group of student teachers and has changed their outlook on life, as one of them wrote in the farewell letter to her teacher and the students:

Four months ago, I came to a small country in Central America hoping to make a difference in the life of a teacher and her 34 Standard Three students. To my surprise, one teacher and her 34 students would be the ones to change my life, forever. [...] I feel blessed to have had this opportunity, I feel love from your warm greetings, kind words and amazing affections, I also feel heartbreak because I know if you are reading this then I am back in Atlanta and you are in Belize. I can't imagine a day in my life will ever go by that I will not think of you [...] thank you for showing me how to live a life where love comes first and stressing over things you cannot control comes dead last. I'm not sure that I will ever recover from my time here in Belize; if I'm lucky, I won't. If I'm smart, I will strive to live my life by what I have learned here, everyday. It almost seems ironic that I came here to do my student teaching and the students would be the ones to teach me (ST1SI, 2008).

Implications of the Study

The study's findings may contribute to teacher educators' and educational administrators' understanding of the spate of research-informed advantages associated with international student teaching programs, thus enhancing the development of such programs and provision of such experiences to more pre-service teachers in teacher education institutions. In addition, international contexts, such as Belize, that have similar multicultural settings to those found within U.S. public schools may be conducive to a student teacher's learning and may positively influence a student teacher's future practice as a teacher within culturally diverse U.S. public school settings. This finding may be helpful to international staff and teacher educators who make decisions regarding sites for international student teaching placements. That is, site

selection criteria for prospective student teachers would entail both the anticipated value of the in-country, comprehensive student-teaching experience and the anticipated relevance of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions each student teacher would gain and could transfer to his or her future U.S. classroom. Finally, the finding regarding reciprocal learning involving U.S. student teachers and their Belizean collaborating teachers may motivate more schools in Belize, and in other countries, to open their schools to student teachers from the United States.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings of this study contribute to the current literature on student teaching abroad in the following areas. First, U.S. student teacher groups experiencing their student teaching abroad in the same country and school contexts, but in different semesters, may exhibit group patterns evincing differential impacts and influences on their cultural-, professional-, and character-development. Second, emotional preparedness—specifically, determination, confidence, enthusiasm, and hope—is an integral element in the student teaching abroad experiences and contributes to the student teachers' character development. Third, U.S. student teachers in this particular type of international setting develop a relationship of reciprocal-learning with their collaborating teachers, as they learn from them and, at the same time, contribute to the development of the collaborating teachers, particularly by transferring knowledge and skills learned in the student teachers' U.S. teacher education programs. The gradual release of responsibility model may enhance this transfer of knowledge. Fourth, an international context having similar multicultural settings to those found within low-income/high needs U.S. public schools may generate close cultural and professional parallels in the reflections of student teachers.

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Appendix

Description of Themes (summary version)

No.	Theme	Description
1	Instructional Engagement	Refers to diverse forms of classroom-related activities mentioned in journals
2	Professional Development	Refers to diverse forms of qualities mentioned in journals relating to professional development as a teacher
3	Instructional Assessment	Refers to diverse forms of classroom-related assessments by oneself or others mentioned in journals and relating to the student teacher's state of preparedness and delivery regarding the instructional process or aspects of it
4	Emotional Preparedness	Refers to diverse forms of expression mentioned in journals by the student teacher, relating to his or her self-described emotional state of preparedness regarding an aspect of the student teaching experience, internal to or outside the schooling context
5	Comparative Schooling Awareness	Refers to comparative or contrastive forms of school-site-related activities mentioned in journals
6	Perceived Role	Refers to diverse forms of expression or actions mentioned in journals by the student teacher, which relate to his or her self-described or externally-characterized role as student teacher
7	Cultural Responsiveness	Refers to diverse forms of expression mentioned in journals by the student teacher, which relate to his or her local cultural experiences, including their interpretation, assessment and influence
8	Perceived Student Attributes	Refers to student teacher's perceptions with respect to the students he or she observes or interacts with during the course of the student teaching experience
9	Student Teacher Observations	Refers to student teacher's observations, participatory or non-participatory, at the school site