

THE IMPACT OF AN INTERNATIONAL TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITY IN THE PHILIPPINES ON PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study was conducted with pre-service teachers who attended a service learning trip to the Philippines and Hawaii. For the purpose of this publication, the eight days the participants volunteered in the Philippines was examined. The researchers analyzed how the service learning trip impacted participants' global perspectives in special education. Thirteen undergraduate and graduate pre-service teachers from a university located in the Southeastern region of the United States participated in the service learning trip. The students were supervised by two university professors and a doctoral student. This trip provided the faculty and students the opportunity to develop cross-cultural experiences as well as collaborate and teach in diverse settings. Data was collected through observations, field notes, focus groups, interviews, journaling, evaluations, feedback, and a follow-up survey. Information gained from this study provided valuable insight about the impact of service learning on students' teaching and global awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Service learning opportunities are designed for participants to volunteer in a community, while simultaneously learning about another culture (King, 2004; Malewski, Sharma, & Phillion, 2012). Service learning experiences also provide opportunities for collaboration and professional connections. The trend for more universities to provide service learning opportunities nationally and internationally is on the rise (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006). Opportunities to travel and learn through service learning experiences and study abroad programs can help develop globally-minded teachers (Gaudelli, 2003). Different programs have grown in popularity over the past few decades and provide an array of opportunities (King, 2004; Malewski, Sharma, & Phillion, 2012; Marx, 2011).

In the literature, there are different terms related to such programs. For example, study abroad (Engle, & Engle, 2003), service learning experiences (McCarthy, 2002), international service learning (Grusky, 2012; Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2008), and Transformational Learning Opportunity (TLO; University of North Florida). For the purpose of this publication, we will use TLO. The University of North Florida defines TLOs as an opportunity that "sets the occasion for life-changing experiences" with "the potential to enrich student learning and personal development" (<http://www.unf.edu/tlo/>).

Purposes of TLOs

Service learning is perceived as a means of energizing classroom curricula, re-engaging students in their own learning, prompting forms of social and civic development, and establishing linkages between universities and schools, including local communities and

community agencies (Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2004). The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL) is a leading proponent of international service learning in the United States. The programs through IPSL combine academic studies, community service, and full cultural immersion to give students a deeper, more meaningful study abroad experience.

Components of Successful TLOs

Although the focus and learning objectives of TLOs vary, there are several key components that make them successful. Sternberger, et al. (2005) concluded that the twin pillars of the integral development of a successful service-learning program are the principles of reciprocity and reflection. *Reciprocity* is vital to the success of a TLO because it is a partnership developed where both parties create a beneficial relationship through communication, knowledge, and resource exchange. This interdependency requires a development of trust between agencies, faculty and students (Sternberger et al, 2004; Vickers, 2004). The pillar of *reflexivity* is the opportunity for reflection that links academic instruction with community service (McCarthy, 2002).

Impact of TLOs

At the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, researchers examined how service learning affects students. Results indicated that participation supports many of the goals of higher education (Austin, 2000), such as enhanced personal and cognitive development of undergraduate students. In an extensive review of literature by Eyler, Giles, and Gray (1999), the researchers noted that service learning promotes personal outcomes (e.g., personal efficacy), interpersonal development (e.g., leadership skills), social outcomes (e.g., reducing stereotypes) and learning outcomes (e.g., critical thinking). King (2004) also identified personal and community benefits of service learning opportunities such as potential enhancement for students to critically reflect on experiences, improving self-esteem, motivation to learn, opportunities to develop leadership and problem solving skills, and development of a sense of community. Service learning provides a meaningful context for learning as well as enhances pre-service teachers behavior, socialization, citizenship, self-esteem, leadership, mentoring ability, attitudes towards diverse communities, professional renewal, and job placement (Vickers et al., 2004).

University TLO Program Description and Goals

A course entitled, *Collaborating with Special Education Teachers in the Philippines*, outlined the course work and teaching hours required during the TLO. Assignments encouraged participants to excel in their learning and achieve the following outcomes: (1) differentiate lessons to meet the needs of diverse learners, (2) demonstrate proficient collaborative skills with peers and hosting teachers, and (3) recognize and value cultural differences through workshops, collaborating with local teachers and University of the Philippines (UP) students, and attending an excursion.

Student learning was assessed through various activities and assignments. For example, all participants were required to teach lessons and follow a journaling schedule while in the Philippines. Journal prompts included:

- What affected you most about teaching in the Philippines? How would you compare it to your teaching experiences in the USA?
- How does your teacher training diverge and converge with the teaching systems in the Philippines?

The authors of this study also examined how the TLO impacted participants' global perspectives in special education. Research questions included: (1) what were the experiences of the

participants during the TLO in the Philippines? And, (2) how did these experiences impact their global perspective and awareness of international special education?

METHODS

Participants

Thirteen undergraduate and graduate pre-service teachers participated in the TLO. Participants included 12 females and 1 male, of mixed decent/ethnicity and varying nationalities, who ranged from 21-45 years old. Eleven of the 13 participants gave their consent to participate in the study. The authors also served as participants by providing reflections and fieldnotes collected during the TLO. The first author is an associate professor of deaf education and has traveled to the Philippines several times over the past two decades. The second author is a doctoral candidate with a research focus on deaf students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). The third author, the co-faculty leader, is an assistant professor of deaf education in Canada and also studies deaf students who are CLD. The fourth author is the lead collaborating professor at the UP campus in Quezon City, who studies both special and deaf education. All U.S. and Canadian participants travelled to Manila, Philippines for one week where they stayed on the UP campus. Four of the students and one of the supervisors traveled to a more remote area in the Philippines to spend four days working at a newly constructed preschool in Bulacan, Philippines.

Settings and Itinerary

The TLO took place in three different settings: 1) local schools; 2) the UP campus; and 3) Taal Volcano. The participants experienced teaching in a local public special education center in Manila and a private early childhood school in Bulacan, Philippines. The participants were paired with a full-time teacher to volunteer, observe, and teach in their classrooms. After teaching in the classrooms, participants conducted literacy and behavior management workshops with the teachers. At the UP campus participants attended lectures, and interacted with UP students during academic and social events. Finally, students attended cultural excursions, visiting a museum and a geographical site, Taal Volcano 50 km (31 mi) south of Manila.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study used ethnography (a descriptive/interpretation of a cultural or social group or systems; Bratlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) to collect data from the participants. Ethnographic data was collected from the following sources: a) demographic information (age, gender, teaching experience, prior experience overseas); b) reflective journals about their school and cultural experiences; c) feedback from teaching observations and evaluations; d) transcripts of discussions and reflections from group debriefing sessions; e) evaluations from participants completed on the last day of the trip; f) surveys completed three months after the trip, providing students with an opportunity to reflect on the impact of their experiences; g) faculty interviews collected six-months following the TLO and student interviews collected three months following the TLO, and h) researcher observations and fieldnotes taken as a participant observer. Following the trip, the fourth author (the UP professor) visited the 10 teachers that had participants in their classrooms and asked them follow-up questions. Eight of the teachers agreed to participate (7 female, 1 male) from classrooms that serve students who are deaf or hard of hearing, DHH, blind or visually impaired, and those with intellectual disabilities.

Participant reflexivity was a major part of the data collection. In participants' journals, they were asked to reflect and respond to various prompts, such as "What are your expectations of this trip?"; "What did you learn from your cultural experiences today?"; and "What affected you most about the school experiences today?" This reflexivity occurred not only during the TLO, but

also after the experience ended as evident in survey and interview responses. Survey questions ranged from “Has your perspective on global education changed from this experience?” and “If you had the opportunity, would you go on another international TLO?”

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis indicative of ethnographic studies (Bratlinger et al. 2005). The authors analyzed the responses by grouping data with similar themes. The themes were then coded and categorized and patterns in the themes were identified. The first author analyzed the data using NVIVO, a qualitative analysis software program (Leech & Onquegbuzie, 2011) and compared the NVIVO results with the qualitative thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Research Question (1): What were the experiences of the participants during the TLO in the Philippines?

Data collected through the ethnographic study revealed that the participants had a wide-range of experiences. Examining the data, two of the most influential experiences were teaching in the local schools and meeting with the UP students on campus.

Teaching in the Local Schools: Teaching in the schools in the Philippines had the greatest impact on the pre-service teachers. The participants taught and conducted workshops which allowed them to gain a better understanding of how to apply the skills they learned in the university setting to real-life experiences. They also realized how important it is to differentiate strategies when working with diverse learners.

The TLO had a great impact on the pre-service participants as well as the local teachers. The local teachers expressed multiple advantages of the experience included: a) allowing the exchange of ideas between the students, professors, and teachers; b) learning new teaching strategies; and c) learning more about the Southeast region of the United States. The teachers reported that this experience gave their students the opportunity for socialization and enhanced their overall confidence. Disadvantages included the fact that the time at the school was too short. They would have preferred more time to learn additional teaching strategies from the participants and faculty. Finally, the teachers made an interesting suggestion that they would like to see videos of how classes are conducted in the U.S. in order to learn more teaching strategies and ideas for setting-up the classroom and managing behaviors.

Interactions on the UP Campus: The UP Special Education Council, a student organization, had students present and interact with the visiting participants. The UP students were able to have in-depth conversations with the participants, who asked questions regarding Filipino history and culture. The UP students felt this exhibited an interest in their culture, so they shared another aspect, Filipino food. The UP students took the participants to food stalls on campus. The only downside reported by the UP students and participants was limited time to interact with each other. In the future, the UP students would like to give extended tours on and off campus to show the participants more about the Filipino culture. The UP students also expressed an interest in going with the participants to visit and experience education in the local public and special education schools.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the NVIVO word cloud analysis showing participants most frequent use of specific text throughout the various data samples.

Participants reported that the TLO brought a whole new level of appreciation to their global perspective and awareness of special education abroad. The participants were appreciative of the Filipina teachers sharing their teaching strategies and interest in the workshops presented. Furthermore, the participants were appreciative that professors and students from UP were willing to share their history and culture. Participants who volunteered in Bulacan were appreciative of the local community who invited them into their homes to share in eating customary foods, storytelling, and household duties. In summary, the participants' global educational perspective matured and expanded through the TLO.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine the experiences of the participants during a TLO and how those experiences impacted their global perspectives on education. Analysis of the data showed the principles of reciprocity and reflexivity were evident and are components of a successful TLO (Sternberger et al., 2005). Through reciprocity, relationships were built that benefited all parties. Through reflexivity participants pondered their experiences, and how the experiences impacted their global perspective on education both informally (e.g., conversations with others) and formally (e.g., journal entries, debriefing sessions, and surveys).

CONCLUSION

Collaborating with Teachers in the Philippines TLO provided participants the opportunity to work with teachers and attend cultural events in the PI. Participants assisted and led lessons within two school settings. As a result of this TLO, participants (1) built cultural competence by developing relationships with Filipina teachers and university students whose cultural backgrounds varied from their own, (2) challenged their cultural of various educational systems (the PI and USA), and 3) shared their understanding of how their existing teacher training diverges and converges with teaching systems globally.

Providing service learning opportunities to pre-service teachers allows them to gain a global perspective of education. As realized by this study, TLOs promote personal and professional growth on several levels: cognitive, leadership, socialization, and critical thinking (Eyler, Giles, & Gray, 1999). In the field of the education of the deaf, it is of utmost importance that we provide these opportunities to pre- and in-service teachers so they can continue to develop and learn, thus improving their professional skillset.

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