

Teaching in Thailand: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Work with Diverse Student Populations in the United States

Karla W. Eidson, PhD & Rebecca A. Wentworth, PhD

Sam Houston State University
1908 Bobby K. Marks Dr.
Box 2119
Huntsville

Abstract

Cross-cultural immersion experiences have been considered to be an effective way to prepare American pre-service teachers for culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The literature review shows few studies have investigated pre-service teachers' cross-cultural experiences in non-English speaking countries, specifically Asian countries. This qualitative study examined ten American elementary pre-service teachers' teaching and learning experiences in Thailand. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: understanding and respecting Thai culture; developing empathetic dispositions towards non-English speaking students; exchanging teaching strategies and resources; reflecting on professional and personal growth; and initiating a proactive stance as culturally responsive change agents. Recommendations are provided for the type of cultural immersion experience that encourages neophyte educators to not only learn about others, but also learn from and with others.

Keywords: Thailand; Cross-Cultural Immersion; Teacher Preparation; Classroom Diversity; Teacher Dispositions

1 Introduction

American schools have become increasingly diverse in the past decade as more and more classrooms are populated with students from a greater diversity of cultures and languages. Non-English-speaking students comprise the fastest-growing American K–12 student population, and the number of students identified as having limited-English proficiency (LEP) has reached 10 million (Smith-Davis, 2004). In spite of staggering numbers, research demonstrates that pre-service teachers are not adequately prepared to teach students when the students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds differ from their own (Gay, 2012; Howard, 1999; Merryfield, 2010).

With these changes, teacher preparation programs must prepare future educators to collaborate with, appreciate, and value the students, families, administrators, environments, and systems with whom they will work. Also for consideration is developing and nurturing world-minded perspectives in teacher candidates. In the United States, instructors who prepare future teachers are limited to indirect teaching strategies such as case study and role playing that provide scenarios such as What if you need to communicate with a non-English speaking parent and you don't know their language? What if your new student from Asia avoids eye contact? What if a child from Mexico refers to you as 'teacher' instead of 'Mr. Gardner'? Other traditional strategies used by university instructors to spark cross-cultural discussions include use of children's literature, local museum exhibits, films, and guest speakers. Although conversations, questions, and required course readings evoke thoughtful reflection and personal disclosure, pre-service teachers are often lack hands-on experience working with students of diverse backgrounds. Noddings (2005) states that it is much easier for a pre-service teacher to empathize and care about the whole child, including a child's culture, when given face-to-face encounters and interactions in a class rooms opposed to solely a textbook experience. Traditionally, the combination of class discussions and activities, literature, and field experience has been judged adequate for preparing elementary teachers to be successful, culturally responsive practitioners. In the changing face of changing student demographics, however, we are left to question if there is a component missing from pre-service teachers' preparation. This study is positioned within the theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and cross-cultural immersion experiences. Proponents of culturally responsive pedagogy value the salient cultural reference points of each student within the learning community and use that knowledge to engage all students in instructional practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995).

In fact, practitioners who seek to bridge the gap between school and home cultures within their classroom are engaging in culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests educators begin a culturally responsive approach by questioning the nature of the student–teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling and society, and focus on teaching by presenting problematic scenarios on a cultural level. Noticing, addressing, and valuing the social differences of children’s interactions, behaviors, and choices and the resulting impact on young students’ engagement with the curricula and classroom community. For pre-service teachers to initiate a culturally responsive stance and awareness, culturally diverse field experiences are not optional. These placements can be difficult to obtain in a traditional elementary field placement, and Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests the need to “present more robust portraits of teaching” (p. 484), therefore ensuring a richer and more authentic depiction of the various cultures around us.

2 Literature Review

Cross-cultural immersion experiences are an effective way to help pre-service teachers gain a broader and more global perspective (Cushner, 2007; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2010; McAllister & Irvine, 2012; Nieto, 2016). Also, cross-cultural immersion experiences are linked to development of culturally responsive pedagogies. Wilson (1982) avers cross-cultural experiential learning assists in the development of global and cross-cultural perspectives, which helps improve the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills for teaching in diverse environments. Cross-cultural experiential learning requires teachers to immerse themselves in unfamiliar cultures as well as reflect on those experiences to broaden their pedagogical approaches and beliefs to become successful culturally responsive change agents. Other multi-cultural global educators and researchers share this view and believe that face-to-face experiential learning with people different from themselves will help pre-service teachers develop cross-cultural awareness that, in turn, will impact these pre-service teachers’ pedagogical stances (Cushner, 2007; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Deering & Stanutz, 1995; Merryfield, 2010; Nieto, 2016). A great number of American universities have successfully designed and implemented some form of a cross-cultural immersion program within the United States and/or overseas (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). Most notably, Indiana University is known for conducting cross-cultural immersion projects on Native American reservations and overseas in countries such as Britain, Ireland, Kenya, and Spain, to help pre-service teachers become better prepared for teaching students with culturally diverse backgrounds (Mahan, 1982; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007).

A review of the literature on overseas student teaching experiences indicated that most American overseas immersion programs occurred in Europe, especially English-speaking Western European countries with Latin America/Caribbean locations being a distant second (Thomas, 2006; Zachrisson, 2004). Although there is an increase in the number of American students going to Asian countries in recent years, there is a lack of research exploring American pre-service teachers’ experiences in Asian countries (Thomas, 2006; Zachrisson, 2004). Sleeter (2001) and Wiest (2004) offered a review of various cross-cultural immersion programs. Examining the impact of these various immersion programs on pre-service teachers, researchers agree that cross-cultural immersion programs, especially overseas teaching experiences, have enabled pre-service teachers to experience their future students’ cultures on a personal level and to develop a cross-cultural understanding and global perspective. This, in turn, has positively affected pre-service teachers’ instructional practices (Aguilar & Pohan, 1998; Bryan & Marsha, 1997; Cooper, Beare & Thorman, 1990; Ference & Bell, 2014; Malewski & Phillion, 2009; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Sleeter, 1996; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Stanitski & Fuellhart, 2003; Wiest, 2004). These goals hold true today when developing globally-minded educators is an ever-increasing need. To cultivate a culturally responsive stance during which learning is optimized in the context of children’s cultures, cross-cultural experiential learning is recommended. Many educators and researchers believe that to work more successfully with culturally diverse students, teachers need to adopt a culturally responsive pedagogical stance (The Education Alliance, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; National Education Association, 2008). To this end, cross-cultural experiential learning assists pre-service teachers understanding of their students’ cultures and to teach through their own cultural and experiential filters (Cushner, 2007; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2010; McAllister & Irvine, 2012; Nieto, 2016).

Teacher education programs could nurture a culturally responsive stance by providing pre-service teachers with cross-cultural teaching and learning opportunities to help them develop cross-cultural awareness, global perspectives, empathetic dispositions, skills and competence to teach from a more culturally responsive perspective. In the present study, a group of ten American pre-service elementary teachers enrolled in the Thailand Study Abroad Program (TSAP) at a southern state university and provided data to the researchers during and after their student teaching experiences in the United States and Thailand in Summer of 2017.

The TSAP prepares emerging teachers for multicultural educational environments by promoting experiential knowledge and skills in culturally responsive pedagogy through international teacher education experiences. One goal of the TSAP was to impact pre-service teachers' professional practice with teaching experience in a context in which all learners operated with limited English proficiency. In turn, the teachers would be better equipped with the essential tools needed to adapt to unfamiliar educational systems both locally and internationally, and they would be able to relate more interactively with students and students' families from differing racial, cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, it was expected that students would develop broader and more authentic global perspectives and comparative knowledge of educational systems in other countries. The purpose of this research was to investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions of their overseas student teaching experience and their perception of the impact this experience may have on their future teaching in culturally diverse school settings, specifically in regards to their continuing development of a culturally responsive pedagogy. Three research questions guided the study: (a) How did pre-service teachers perceive their cross-cultural teaching experience in Thai schools? (b) How did pre-service teachers perceive their professional and personal growth as a result of this cross-cultural teaching experience? (c) How can a culturally responsive pedagogical stance be developed during a cross-cultural immersion experience?

3 Thailand Study Abroad Program

The genesis of this program was an introduction to a small school outside of Chiangmai, Thailand, when the lead author, one of the researchers of this study, was in Thailand working with Chiangmai University in the College of International Education. After a proposal to work between the two schools and arrangements for school placements and housing were settled, pre-service teachers were invited to apply for a three-week cultural immersion experience in Thailand to take place in the month of June, 2017. A course focused on five objectives: (a) Improve cross-cultural understanding and global awareness; (b) Improve learning and teaching skills in multicultural settings; (c) Increase knowledge of ways to investigate educational practices; (d) Make balanced comparisons between different educational contexts; (d) Carry out research on learning and/or teaching in an international context. Assignments included field experience in a Thai elementary school, writing a teaching and learning journal, participating in cultural exchange activities, and preparing a presentation for peers and faculty.

4 Study Design

4.1 Participants

Participants were 10 undergraduate pre-service elementary education student teachers from a cohort of 19 who participated in TSAP during summer 2017. The participants included one Asian American, two African Americans, two Mexican Americans and five Caucasians. Ages ranged from 20 to 25 years and included nine females and one male. Two of the ten were seeking additional endorsements in special education, one of the ten was seeking a bilingual teaching endorsement, and two of the ten specialized in music education.

4.2 Field Placement

Each pre-service teacher participating in the study taught English to elementary students in grades first to sixth each afternoon. Additionally, pre-service teachers were invited to teach and/or assist in English activities during the morning classes in which they observed. While in Thailand, participants' three-week cultural immersion experience was created to include: (a) teaching English approximately one hour per day to Thai students from first to sixth grades; (b) visiting places of historical or cultural significance; (c) showcasing cross-cultural learning and teaching experiences through presentations to faculty and peers; and (d) reflecting formally and informally in both written and verbal format on personal and professional growth.

4.3 Data sources and data collection

For this study, a variety of data sources were used to examine participants' perceptions of their cross-cultural teaching and learning experiences. These included students' short essay responses in the TSAP application form; semi-structured interviews with each of the participants before and after their field experience in Thailand; pre-service teachers' journal entries; informal conversations with the pre-service teachers in one-on-one 'coffee talks'; collaborative research projects and presentations, and researchers' formal and informal classroom observations. Individual semi-structured interviews conducted before and after the cultural immersion experience were typically 30 minutes in length. Interview questions were based upon tenets of cross-cultural experiential learning, as noted above.

The pre-trip interview protocol consisted of six open-ended questions focused on participants' beliefs about and expectations of their overseas teaching and learning experience. Questions include: a) Tell me why you want to participate in this study abroad program; b) What do you expect from this cross-cultural teaching experience; and c) What concerns you most about the upcoming trip. The post-trip interview consisted of six open-ended questions, including: a) Tell me about your teaching and learning experiences in Thailand; b) Were your expectations realized? Why or why not; and c) How might this experience affect your teaching in American schools.

5 Data analysis

Data from the pre- and post-interviews, reflective journals, email correspondence and culminating presentation reports were analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). First, the researchers individually read and reread all of the interview notes, journals, field notes, and presentations, and then put them into identifiable tables framed by the three research questions. Line-by-line open coding generated numerous categories resulting in a coding manual. For instance, during the pre-trip interviews and in application essays, students reported concerns about language barriers and fear of unfamiliar foods. Initial coded categories were collapsed and renamed until final themes were identified. In this case, these two themes became categorized under 'understanding and respecting Thai culture'. Findings from the data sources were triangulated, resulting in common themes representing participants' perceptions, changes, and growth on individual and collective levels. Trustworthiness of the study was achieved by multiple researchers and data sources, 'in situ' participant observation (e.g. researchers' classroom observations), use of constant comparison methods (e.g. triangulation across data sets), and the creation of an audit trail documenting all phases of the study (e.g. researcher log).

6 Findings and interpretations

Data analysis indicated that the study abroad pre-service teaching experience in Thailand had a notable impact on the participants in terms of their understanding of a different culture and ways of working with non-English speaking students. In turn, when analyzing the multiple data sets collected throughout the three-week experience, these ten elementary student teachers' culturally responsive pedagogical stances appeared to have grown and expanded during the TSAP. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: understanding and respecting different cultures; developing empathy with and for second-language learners; exchanging teaching strategies and resources; reflecting on professional and personal growth; and initiating a proactive stance as culturally responsive change agents.

6.1 Understanding and respecting different cultures

A predominant theme that emerged from the data was participants' new understanding and respect for a culture with which they were unfamiliar. This finding affirms the central tenet of culturally relevant practice, which underscores the need for educators to recognize and infuse students' cultural connections within the classroom environment (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995). Nevertheless, researchers learned that this transformation was slow to develop even though, prior to the exchange experience, all participants stated on their applications and during pre-trip interviews that they expected to grow by becoming more open and socially aware. In the application, Beth responded to the question 'What do you expect to learn from your study abroad field experience?' by writing: 'What I want to gain personally is a more open mind and an understanding of Asia and Thailand in particular.' Ironically, when asked about concerns prior to her leaving for Thailand, she revealed cultural stereotypes, as well as a surface-level interpretation of culture by focusing on food. 'You have to be careful about the food,' stated the 23-year-old student. 'I'm scared to death of the food.' This turned out to be a common response from the participants prior to departure and continued to surface while in Thailand. Several homesick pre-service teachers sought comfort by planning a trip to a nearby hamburger restaurant instead of a historical site.

Upon return to the United States, not all of the students had gained an appreciation for Thai cuisine. Mary seemed to progress beyond a superficial view of 'food within a culture' and stated in the post-trip interview that she missed the large amount of peaceful time devoted to 'sitting there at a meal and eating'. She acknowledged the devotion to time taken during the lunch hour, highlighting the importance of pace within the Thai lifestyle. Some students who were further along in their pre-service education and had taught in culturally diverse schools in the United States, had a beginning awareness of cultural differences and how classroom demographics influence teaching and learning. These notions, developed through classroom interactions, university courses, and personal experiences, were clearly stated in participants' short essay responses in the TSAP application form and interviews prior to trip. For example, Anna, one of two students earning a bilingual teaching endorsement, talked about her bilingual field placement in the United States and saw 'differences' as a challenge.

‘The one thing for me that is going to pose the biggest challenge and that will be most overwhelming for me [in my future classroom in the United States] is the huge degree of differences in the learning abilities and learning styles and cultural differences you can have in one classroom. And I saw this especially in some of my bilingual placements, where I have a class of 20 students where I might have five to ten cultures represented in that one classroom and that poses a huge challenge.’ By contrast, interactions with guides, locals, students, and teachers in Thailand enabled participants to learn about a different culture from personal and professional interactions. Sara observed in the post-trip interview, ‘I learned a great deal about the culture in Thailand, not only the school culture but the home and social culture.’ These first-hand experiences helped pre-service teachers develop an understanding of how behavior and thinking is shaped by culture and how important it is to respect individual cultures. This understanding is difficult to obtain from a book or a class, but led Beth to view ‘differences’ as opportunities rather than challenges. ‘I always knew that there were other cultures around me, but now I have a true understanding of how different one’s culture can be from mine and how this different culture impacts who they are and how they function in the world. I now have a more open attitude towards individuals that are different than me. I want to learn more about the many different cultures that surround me in my everyday life. I believe I would receive a better understanding of the different cultures only if I visit and experience them first hand. I know I could never have received the knowledge I have gained by visiting Thailand from a textbook or even a class.’

Beth’s journal excerpt attests to her growth from before the trip to mid-trip. She grows from worrying about Thai food to acknowledging the need for cultural exploration. Furthermore, participants considered their cultural immersion experience in Thailand as a life-turning point, believing that the experience changed their way of thinking about their own culture, a dominant culture, and ‘other’ cultures. To them, the dominant culture, literally the predominantly white Western culture, no longer meant the right way or the only way. Wendy, the eldest participant, commented in a post-trip interview. ‘The biggest change in me is that the white power has taken me down many, many levels because I will no doubt be an advocate for not only that culture, but also all the cultures because I now know more about Thai culture. . . I’m a changed person. And I don’t see that as a temporary thing, either. I’m much more aware of people. . . just because I might be the dominant culture where I am doesn’t mean that it’s *the* culture. It doesn’t mean that it’s *the* way or the *right* way. It’s just. . . I’m different from everybody else and I’m just one piece of the pie.’

Wendy, a team leader of the group, came to the study abroad experience enthusiastically. She shared that having never been to another country, but seeing so many people coming to the United States, she believed that American culture was the best. One of her purposes of going to Thailand was to teach the Thai students and teachers about American culture and share her strategies for teaching English. However, learning more about Thai culture and interacting daily with Thai people enabled her to reflect on her ‘white Western culture’ compared with other cultures. She developed a genuine respect and appreciation for Thai culture and no longer looked at Thai culture and other cultures in a condescending way. This is what she meant by ‘the white power has taken me down many, many levels.’ In other words, Wendy’s power was taken down a few notches. She and others experienced being a minority; her whiteness offered minority status (Malewski & Phillion, 2009). This cross-cultural experience enabled students to question stereotypes and to question aspects of their own culture they had not examined before (Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Malewski & Phillion, 2009). Although participants encountered language barriers and were exposed to a new environment, participants were grateful that they were treated well and their American culture was highly respected. It is likely that this respect helped them become more appreciative of the host country culture. Jack, the only male participant in this study, talked about how he was treated by the Thai people he encountered in his post-trip interview, saying, ‘The Thai people have taught me what it is to be proud of our own cultures. It is not just that they are friendly to us as Americans; it is that they are eager to share their own culture with us because they are proud of their own culture. For example, I have learned about patriotism from them in how much they love their King who recently passed away. Everyone loved him and there were shrines everywhere we went showing respect to the King. In American, no one thinks anything of making fun of the government in power. In Thailand, it is actually against the law to speak poorly of the King!’

Additionally, many participants felt that cultural immersion in another country gave them the opportunity to rethink racial issues existing in the United States, and it freed them from some of the challenges they had to face at home in the United States. This was first illustrated by Sara, who was one of two African American students in this group. She did not realize that most Thai citizens have not seen or interacted with a Black person. During her time in Thailand, Sara was treated with respect and admiration, almost at a celebrity status. Sara reported in her reflection journal that she was happy that she was able to live an ‘easy life’ [sic] in Thailand and did not have to worry about the racial prejudices she encountered in the United States. ‘Traveling to Thailand was long, but worth every minute. It gave me the opportunity to settle and free my mind of the challenges that were in the United States.’

I felt like Thailand was the time for me to focus on what I like to do, which is to teach and enjoy myself at the same time. I relaxed and let the worries I had in the United States drift to the back of my mind. It was very fun having people come up to me and ask to get a picture with me. I felt like a celebrity!’ Another interesting case was Jessica, a Chinese American who, adopted as a toddler, had never been to Asia. Compared with other participants, she seemed to enjoy life in Thailand the least, acknowledging that she felt as though she should feel connected to or somehow a part of the Asian culture. By contrast, she didn’t feel any connection with the Thai people. ‘Since I look Chinese, people expected me to love the food and even speak Thai! I am American, and I didn’t fit in any more than anyone else did. The only thing that was really good about looking Asian, is the students really responded to me in the classroom. One little girl in particular wanted to sit in my lap every day.’

Many participants grappled with their own identities. They compared their personal and professional cultural experiences in Thailand with similar experiences at home. For three-weeks, participants examined firsthand the meaning of being ‘the other’. Often, being the other involves being invisible, unseen. Yet, this concept of otherness is a ‘contradictory phenomenon’ – one may ‘stick out like a sore thumb’ (Madrid, 2011). The Chinese-American participant was able to ‘hide’ in Thai culture more easily than other participants because of her visible cultural markers. The African-American participant was seen and conscious of being dissimilar, as were the Caucasian participants for different reasons. The difference for the African-American participant was that her ‘otherness’ in Thailand did not have negative consequences like it had in the United States. In Thailand, her unique appearance was respected, and she felt celebrated. She shared how it was a nice time out from negative stereotypes at home in the United States. It bears repeating that each American pre-service teacher’s cultural boundaries and experiences were broadened and authenticated by exposure to and participation in Thai culture; however, each pre-service teacher grew at an individual pace. Some realizations took place immediately whereas others took place later in the trip and after returning to the United States.

6.2 Developing empathy with and for second-language learners

As noted earlier, some older participants considered their teaching in American schools challenging because of the diverse student population, especially new immigrant students who struggled with English language learning. Even though all of the participants took a required course in culturally responsive teaching practices, they all still felt frustrated and overwhelmed while teaching in Thailand. The language barrier that pre-service teachers encountered in Thailand on a daily basis was far greater than they had expected, yet it helped them to identify with their prospective ESL students. Young elementary aged immigrants in the United States are likely to feel removed from the familiar new home, new community, new school as they are plunged into unfamiliar settings and likely to be uncertain of what is expected of them in their new classroom environment. This first-hand experience in Thailand enabled participants to develop an empathetic disposition toward non-English speaking students they now had at least a snapshot of what it is like to be the only person in the room without strong skills in the dominant language. Thus, each of the student teachers acknowledged that they were determined to make extra efforts to establish a supportive classroom community that would embrace students of different cultures. Stacy, the youngest one in the group, regretted that she was not in the ESL endorsement program but glad she made the decision to come to Thailand to better serve her future students in the United States. Stacy commented at the end of the trip in her journal, ‘I came over here to help the teachers learn more effective teaching strategies, and I have learned and gained so much myself. I am grateful for the resources we have in the US. I have learned how to teach with little or no resources. I have learned how to teach students who do not speak the same language as you do. I have learned how to help other professionals and how to collaborate so that everyone moves forward. And, probably most important, I have learned what culture shock feels like, and I will now be able to better understand my ESL students who are coming from other countries. I want to help my students as they adjust. I know that they will be frustrated, scared, annoyed, and emotional. I know that even when they [nod] their head yes or say that they understand that they may not. The language barrier can be so overwhelming that students may give up trying to voice their thoughts, opinions, needs, or wants, and will just agree so they can stop the frustrating struggle of trying to communicate. Now that I have experienced living in a foreign country and being a ‘foreigner’ for almost a month, I will be able to better understand and help my students in this situation.’ Several pre-service teachers shared similar feelings in their reflection journals and interviews, reporting a deeper understanding and stronger connection to second-language learners because of their experiences in Thailand.

6.3 Exchanging teaching strategies and resources

Large class sizes and a lack of resources in Thailand were huge challenges to the participants, forcing them not only to be creative and flexible in teaching, but also to learn how to collaborate and share ideas and materials.

Collaboration was ongoing while TSAP participants were in Thai classrooms. These pre-service teachers demonstrated a constructivist elementary classroom teaching style, and they utilized efficient techniques, such as student-centered small group activities, hands-on activities, and self-directed learning centers. Their endeavors were viewed just as successfully as those of the existing teacher at the school and were even reported in the newsletter circulated to the school network. This acknowledgment symbolized an exchange of respect and admiration, not just an exchange of teaching ideas. Participants developed partnerships with their Thai counterparts and reported collaboration with American and Thai peers in classroom, roundtable discussions, and observations. Linda stated the public dialogue was the highlight of her cross-cultural exchange. 'Getting [the opportunity] to, and just getting to ask questions of them and them asking questions of us about American teaching and what we do in this case or [to describe] our [different] teaching experiences and our education.'

Learning was reciprocal; American teachers and Thai teachers shared and gained valuable teaching ideas from one another. Nearly all of the participants in this study believed that they developed a deeper understanding of and new ways of teaching English language learners while working with the Thai teachers and students, which perhaps is one of the most important outcomes of their three-week immersion experience in Thailand. Prior to teaching in Thailand, most participants had field placements in American elementary schools, where there were a large number of English-language learners. Additionally, on the college campus, they had obtained some basic knowledge of how to work with second-language learners from cultural diversity classes, literacy classes, and from the ESL endorsement program. However, teaching in Thailand for three weeks gave participants intensive, first-hand opportunities to work directly with students who are learning English as a foreign language and who are struggling with language learning. Participants were forced to rethink their previous learning about how to teach English-language learners. They learned from the Thai- and volunteer-teachers to adopt more practical and effective teaching and communication strategies, especially strategies that can help create meaning, engage students, and promote learning. During an open discussion about their learning in Thailand, Wendy reflected about the importance of scaffolding during meaning-making, 'From ESL training, I know about slowing your speech, about using reality, about language acquisition, and how children acquire a language, but what I didn't realize was that while they know the vocabulary, you have to find the right word to build that conversation on. You just can't go there and say, talk real slowly and say, "I have a meeting tomorrow at five o'clock. I won't be home.' That doesn't work. You have to start with a core word like "tomorrow" and let them have a little bit of time to digest what that word is. And then you start building on that meaning. I now know those strategies. That is probably one of the biggest strategies that I learned over there for second-language learners.'

Wendy was not alone in making such a comment. Participants all acknowledged that their experiences with their cooperating teachers undoubtedly strengthened their future work with second-language learners in American classrooms. In fact, in their post-trip interviews, journal entries, and daily conversations with researchers in Thailand, all of the participants acknowledged that they had attempted several ESL teaching strategies from their American college courses and field placement schools, such as reading aloud to students, using repetition, demonstrating and modeling, offering verbal clues.

Incorporating visuals and pictures, simplifying directions, labeling and categorizing, and singing/dancing and dramatizing when teaching English lessons in Thailand. Nevertheless, they never expected that they would have to use these strategies so creatively and dramatically in Thai classrooms on a daily basis due to the enormous language barrier, large class sizes, and lack of school resources. Participants felt excited and proud of themselves when they saw students learning with interest and making progress because of their efforts. They believed that their teaching experiences in Thailand better prepared them to teach new immigrant students, as well as students with diverse learning needs, using strategies that make more sense to them.

6.4 Reflecting on professional and personal growth

While in Thailand, participants were engaged not only in teaching but also in many other cultural and educational activities. For example, participants visited cultural and historical sites every weekend, went shopping, and ate in restaurants. As recognized by this group of ten pre-service teachers, these activities broadened participants' minds and gave them opportunities to grow both personally and professionally. Participants unanimously reported that they became better people and better teachers because of this overseas experience. Typical observations shared during the post-trip interviews included, 'I had a very interesting experience, which has shaped me to become a better teacher, learner, [and] most of all, a better individual,' and 'I never imagined that we would get so many great experiences from a professional standpoint'.

This experience gave participants the opportunity and the confidence to collaborate with professionals in the host country. Michelle observed in her post-trip interview that she learned a lot of teaching strategies from her cooperating volunteer teacher who was from the Philippine Islands in creating, designing, and implementing classroom dialogues and improvisational scenarios that are both amusing and relevant to Thai culture and student life. Jack reflected thoroughly in his final journal entry on his personal and professional growth in many aspects. He wrote: My stay in Thailand was enlightening on many levels. ‘I was happy to be immersed in a culture that was established thousands of years ago, and I was delighted to be able to see some of that history firsthand. I think that it was very good that we were living as Thai people live, albeit in somewhat more privileged conditions than many. I felt that I was really seeing the soul of the city and receiving an authentic experience in Thailand. The opportunity to learn the language and customs of South East Asia will be invaluable to me for the rest of my life, because that, I believe, is how we best know a people and learn to empathize with them, and as a result, how we best know ourselves. I certainly consider myself a better person since my experience . . . My students would have to take on more responsibility, just as Thai students do. This is maybe the most important thing that I will take away from my experience: I must take advantage of my advantages and give every child the attention she deserves.’

Like Jack, the other participants also felt strongly that they learned and could continually learn from each other and exchange ideas in the future – not just while in Thailand. The researchers were pleased that students realized and took advantage of the many opportunities to learn from and with these Thai teachers. Learning from and with host country citizens is a vital component of this study abroad program. Pre-service teachers were able to move beyond a ‘tourist’ approach (Quezada, 2015) and acknowledge the inner workings of Thai culture. It is a rewarding experience for the researchers to see the change in pre-service teachers’ pedagogical stances over time. What these pre-service teachers gained is evidenced by the jobs they aspired to and received, as well as their current classroom practices that highlight their continued efforts in developing as culturally responsive educators.

7 Implications and conclusions

This study investigated ten American elementary pre-service teachers before, during and after a three-week student teaching experience in Thailand and intended to illustrate how this experience might affect their development as culturally responsive practitioners. Three research questions guided the study: (a) How did pre-service teachers perceive their cross-cultural field experience in a Thai school? (b) How did pre-service teachers perceive their professional and personal growth as a result of this cross-cultural teaching experience? (c) How can a culturally responsive pedagogical stance be developed during a cross-cultural immersion experience? The findings from this study indicate that student teachers perceived this cross-cultural immersion experience in Thailand as extremely beneficial to their future teaching career, noting that they gained both personal and professional knowledge, skills, and insights as a result of their participation. Each pre-service teacher encountered expected and unexpected obstacles and challenges in Thailand. Language acquisition proved difficult; cuisine was new to some palates, and homesickness had an impact.

Regardless, participants reported the positives heavily outweighed the negatives, and the obstacles that were expected prior to departure made them easier to navigate. For unexpected obstacles, students relied on peers and faculty to work through issues and turn even uncomfortable circumstances into experiences of learning and growth. Additionally, the findings indicate that each of the student teachers grew beyond their initial starting point as cultural change agents in regards to becoming culturally responsive practitioners at the elementary level. As Bryan and Marsha (1997) have stated, overseas field experiences can be a rewarding experience that dramatically changes the perspectives of emerging teachers. This experience proved no different – more open-minded and world-minded perspectives emerged and developed in TSAP participants, but certainly at an independent pace set by each individual. The American pre-service teachers in this study developed new understandings and respect for Thai culture, with increased empathetic dispositions toward immigrant students. Rodriguez (2000) argues that, although there are many goals and structures for cultural immersion programs, gaining empathy is necessary for achieving what she terms an ‘elusive perspective shift’. It is not enough to be physically transported; one’s attitudes must be transformed as well. This theory was the backbone of this cross-cultural immersion program.

The pre-service teachers reported they learned new and effective teaching strategies for second-language learners from their Thai and volunteer English teacher counterparts, in addition to learning with and from their peers. They learned to be flexible and collaborative in teaching in general, and became more appreciative of the resources in American schools and the impact on learners.

This cross-cultural immersion experience offered student teachers a unique opportunity to broaden their mind- set, to collaborate with people in other countries, and to grow personally and professionally. Additionally, participants began to take and/or recognize that a proactive stance ensures a richer and more meaningful learning experience. These findings corroborate what Birmingham (2013) has argued – that the challenges of cultural awareness and adjustment not only call for the development of new teaching skills but become an impetus for pre- service teachers’ moral and personal growth. The researchers found a symbiotic relationship between student teachers’ personal growth and professional development the two go hand-in-hands. A culturally responsive pedagogical stance can be nurtured through a cross-cultural immersion experience, and opportunities for pre-service teachers to go abroad have become more feasible in recent years. However, caution needs to be taken as to how participants can benefit most from their overseas experience; that is, they are not just learning about others, but also learning from and with others. Our goal for this study abroad program was to consciously step outside of the ‘tourist perspective’ while studying abroad, since ‘exploring’ as a tourist can potentially limit participants’ learning (Quezada, 2004).

7.1 Before the cross-cultural immersion experience

Coaching should begin prior to departure with a minimum of three or four ‘team’ meetings, during which participants discuss culture shock, ESL strategies, relevant current events, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Readings could include Arturo Madrid’s (2011) chapter *Missing people and others: Joining together to expand the circle*, Kyung Hee Kim’s (2015) article *Learning from each other: Creativity in east Asian and American education*, or selections from Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1994) *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Additionally, participants should prepare thematic teaching activities to potentially implement in classrooms and create resources to take to host schools and teachers.

7.2 During the cross-cultural immersion experience

While overseas, faculty member or members should host frequent meetings to discuss and reflect upon ‘critical moments’. Critical moments would be anything of significance that a participant would want to share from their reflection journal something of importance that stood out to them. These moments may include success stories, hurdles or obstacles, amusing anecdotes, questions for the group, or other topics as appropriate to the situation. Critical moment meetings (CMM) would assist pre-service teachers in becoming more proactive practitioners who are co-constructing their own culturally responsive pedagogy. In this study, participants’ comments and feedback in their journal entries, post-trip individual semi-structured interviews, and researcher’s observations revealed a range of growth in their adoption of a culturally responsive teaching stance. Similar critical moment reflection activities should also be conducted with the overseas teachers to maximize the learning opportunities of both host and exchange teachers. These intentional CMMs can cultivate individual, as well as collective, reflections with the potential to transform teaching practices. Ideally, participants in study abroad programs would learn about, with, and from American peers, as well as cross-cultural peers.

7.3 After the cross-cultural immersion experience

To address variations and to fill portions of developmental gaps, post-trip conversations need to continue in small-group and individual conversations, continuing conversations that took place during the experience abroad. Overall, researchers learned that better preparation prior to departure, more intentional coaching and reflecting while abroad, and follow-up small group conversations upon return to the United States are invaluable to encouraging a rich, lasting experience for all participants. This multi-faceted approach encourages pre-service teachers’ progress along a culturally responsive continuum. More than ever, American teachers need to be prepared to teach for diversity, and they need cross-cultural learning and teaching experiences to achieve this goal. An overseas experience provides an incalculable opportunity for students to explore a culture that is different from their own and converse reflectively about their lived experiences within a safe and unique setting, with a familiar mentor to guide and prompt their discussions. The findings of this study demonstrate the value of such an experience, as well as its impact upon emerging teachers’ lives. Teacher education programs need to provide pre-service teachers with similar opportunities to help them develop the necessary attitudes, skills, and competencies they need to work effectively with culturally diverse students as culturally responsive practitioners and change agents.

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