


# Please Mind the Culture Gap: Intercultural Development During a Teacher Education Study Abroad Program

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## Abstract

Seeking to deepen our understandings of the ways international study abroad programs may enhance efforts to prepare culturally responsive teachers, the purpose of this case study was to explore a preservice teacher's intercultural development during a semester-long teacher education program in London, England. Such study abroad teacher education programs are offered as an innovative means to promote preservice teachers' intercultural development, providing unique opportunities for these students to confront their ethnocentric worldviews and begin to consider the ways culture influences teaching and learning. Findings from this study reveal that participation in the program positively influenced intercultural development. Themes that illuminate aspects of the participant's study abroad experience that both challenged and supported intercultural development included immersion within both a culture and school along with the essential role of an intercultural guide who promoted reflective practices around issues of culture and self. Implications for preservice teacher education program design are addressed.

## Keywords

intercultural development, teacher education study abroad, cultural reflection, teacher education/development, international education/studies, multicultural education, diversity, student teaching

“Please mind the gap,” a recording prompts travelers each time they get on or off the Underground in London, England. This reminder became a fortuitous and helpful metaphor during fieldwork for this case study of a preservice teacher's experiences during a teacher education study abroad program in London. This study was predicated on a belief that teachers must learn to mind the gap—the culture gap—that may exist between their students and them. Becoming mindful of the ways culture and cultural differences influence our intercultural relationships is at the heart of what Bennett (1993) has described as an ethnorelative worldview that is a prerequisite for culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000).

Teacher education study abroad programs, with immersion experiences in foreign schools, are offered as an innovative way to influence preservice teachers' intercultural development and prepare them for teaching culturally diverse student populations (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003). Romano and Cushner (2007) argue these experiences “can be the catalyst that starts teachers on a path of learning from others as well as forging relationships based on deep and meaningful understandings of peoples' similarities and differences” (p. 224). Seeking to deepen our understanding of the ways international experiences might be part of our efforts to prepare culturally responsive teachers, the authors of this study chose to explore a preservice teacher's

intercultural development over the course of a semester-long teacher education study abroad program in London, England. The following research questions provided the overarching focus of this study: (a) In what ways does a preservice teacher's intercultural development evolve during a semester-long teacher education study abroad program in London, England? and (b) What aspects of the study abroad experience and program challenged and/or supported her intercultural development?

## Review of Literature

### *Culturally Responsive Teaching*

The United States is a multicultural nation, and the cultural diversity of the nation is most evident in the schools; the 27 largest metropolitan areas now have a “majority minority”

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child population (Frey, 2006). There is ample evidence, however, that the educational system is not meeting the needs of many of these students (Lee, 2002). Among other factors, the “culture gap” that exists between White, middle-class teachers and diverse student populations, resulting in students’ experiencing culturally incongruent educational experiences, is a key factor in the persistence of the achievement gap (Janerette & Fifield, 2005). The vast majority of teachers in U.S. schools are European American, middle-class, and monolingual in English and, thus, culturally different from many of the students they teach. These teachers often hold ethnocentric beliefs that negatively influence the educational experiences of diverse students (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). It is imperative that we address this culture gap if we are to meet the educational needs of all students. Teacher educators must challenge preservice teachers’ ethnocentric worldviews and prepare them to teach culturally diverse student populations.

Theorists have identified culturally responsive teacher beliefs, knowledge, and skills that provide culturally congruent educational experiences for diverse students. Gay (2000) explains that culturally responsive teaching makes use of

the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students. It is culturally *validating and affirming*. (p. 29, italics in original)

The foundation of such teaching is an “understanding that school performance takes place within a complex socio-cultural ecology and is filtered through cultural screens both students and teachers bring to the classroom” (Gay, 2000, p. 54). Culturally responsive teachers must know themselves and their students as cultural beings and understand and accept the role culture plays in learning. To be culturally responsive, preservice teachers must first become culturally conscious and intercultural sensitive.

### *Limits of Domestic, Cross-Cultural Field Placements*

Many teachers, however, do not teach in culturally responsive ways. The literature describes the prevalence of ethnocentric worldviews held by many teachers, particularly preservice teachers (Cushner, 2008; Mahon, 2003, 2006, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). The majority of preservice teachers are White, middle-class women raised in culturally encapsulated communities and unaware of their own cultural identities. These young women often have limited intercultural experiences and lack knowledge about the role culture plays in schooling. Understanding the urgency of preparing teachers to work with diverse student populations, teacher educators

seek ways to address preservice teachers’ ethnocentric beliefs throughout their preparation programs. It is generally agreed that preservice teachers need cross-cultural experiences that provide opportunities to uncover their own cultural identities, learn about other cultural groups, and examine the sociocultural aspects of education (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Grant & Gillette, 2006).

To these ends, teacher education programs typically include a combination of multicultural coursework and clinical placements within schools that serve culturally diverse student populations. The literature on multicultural coursework and domestic cross-cultural placements indicates that they can have a positive effect on some preservice teachers’ attitudes towards diverse student populations, though the results are mixed and contradictory (Groulx, 2001). Research consistently points to the importance of providing opportunities for guided reflection within these experiences; without such support, these experiences can reinforce existing beliefs, confirm misconceptions, produce stereotypes, and hinder preservice teachers’ ability to seek alternative ways of teaching (Irvine, 2003; Sleeter, 2001).

A significant concern with domestic, cross-cultural placements in urban schools is that they are themselves imbedded in the dominant cultural hegemony that most preservice teachers implicitly understand and do not question. Thus, even when placements might be in schools that serve culturally diverse student populations, the larger structures and culture of the school system are not dissimilar from the ones that the preservice teachers themselves experienced as students. In these placements, preservice teachers often identify the students as “different” and see the teachers as the “same” as themselves (Pajares, 1992). These preservice teachers often do not question the practices of the schools or see the ways the “culture gap” can negatively affect students.

A clinical placement within a school that serves culturally diverse students does not automatically result in preservice teachers’ examination of the sociocultural dynamic of schooling that is the foundation of culturally responsive teaching. Teacher educators must carefully design cross-cultural placements. These placements must address preservice teachers’ intercultural needs, providing them with opportunities to confront their own ethnocentric views and the support needed to engage in critical cultural reflection.

International experiences, where students are immersed in a different cultural context, may address preservice teachers’ intercultural needs in ways not possible in domestic placements. Advocates for teacher education study abroad experiences suggest that the opportunity to live and work in a foreign culture provides a unique opportunity to transform preservice teachers’ ethnocentric worldviews and set them on a path towards culturally responsive teaching (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003). Thus, the immersion experience in foreign cultures and schools as a central aspect of teacher education study abroad programs is essential for influencing preservice teachers’ intercultural development.

### Teacher Education and Study Abroad

A limited number of studies have focused on teacher education study abroad programs. Researchers have identified immersion within a different dominant context as a significant factor within these experiences (Quezada, 2004; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). Studies have found that these programs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to develop cultural awareness and empathy for diverse student populations (Bradfield-Kreider, 1999; Casale-Giannola, 2005; Cushner & Mahon, 2002). Other studies have found that White, European American teachers committed to multicultural education identify early international experiences as crucial to their intercultural development (Mahon, 2003; Merryfield, 2000; Paccione, 2000). Some researchers caution, however, that preservice teachers may not fully connect their cultural learning in international experiences with future work within domestic culturally diverse schools (Casale-Giannola, 2005; Tang & Choi, 2004).

Perhaps the most extensively studied teacher education study abroad programs are Indiana University's Cultural Immersion Projects, which include the Overseas Student Teaching Project. In one study of these programs, Mahan and Stachowski (1990) surveyed 109 student teachers in the Overseas Student Teaching Project to examine what the students identified as significant learning within the programs. Community people emerged as important sources of learning, including intercultural friendships outside of the school building. When compared to student teachers who remained on campus, they suggest that immersion within an international cultural context "leads to a better understanding of how citizens in the host community live, what they think, and what they value—vital learnings for educators serving the community's children" (Stachowski & Mahan, 1998, pp. 158-159). In another study of these programs, Zeichner and Melnick (1996) concluded that students living and working within a different cultural context provided the incentive for these preservice teachers to reach out to community members to function within the experience.

Looking at a variety of teacher education programs, Cushner and Mahon (2002) conducted an interview-based qualitative study of 50 education students who had participated in international student teaching experiences. Their study found that students reported the greatest impact on two areas of personal development: students' sense of self-efficacy and self-awareness. They also found increased sense of cultural awareness, global-mindedness, and an awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity. The study concluded that the international immersion experience allowed student teachers to

direct what they learned regarding cultural difference into a view of education and their classrooms that transcended beyond the standard student teaching experience. Their responses show an increase in cognitive

sophistication and flexibility, which M.J. Bennett (1993) noted is crucial to increased cultural sensitivity. (p. 55)

The existing research on teacher education study abroad programs points to the importance of immersion within a foreign cultural context and cultural reflection during and after the experience as vital to students' growing cultural awareness. Though much of this research points to the unfamiliar cultural context encountered within study abroad as the catalyst for personal growth and cultural learning, the research has not specifically addressed the process of intercultural development as it unfolds within these foreign cultural contexts. Significantly, the research base lacks a theoretical framework that explains the process of intercultural development during international experiences or that informs the design of study abroad programs with the goal of transforming preservice teachers' ethnocentric worldviews.

### *Intercultural Development Within Intercultural Experiences*

Although the existing research on teacher education study abroad experiences offers insight into the influence of such programs on intercultural development, these studies have not shed sufficient light on the ways these programs influence student growth during the experience. Theories of intercultural development, specifically Milton Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), provide a theoretical framework to understand this process and the ways cross-cultural experiences move students forward in their intercultural development in ways rarely possible within traditional, school-based domestic placements (McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

The DMIS delineates six stages of intercultural sensitivity development, from ethnocentric to ethnorelative thinking. Bennett (2004) defines an ethnocentric worldview as "the experience of one's own culture as 'central to reality'" and where "the beliefs and behaviors that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned: they are experienced as 'just the way things are'" (p. 62). In contrast, an ethnorelative worldview allows for "the experience of one's own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities" (p. 62). In the DMIS, the three ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, and minimization) are "ways of *avoiding cultural difference*, either by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance" (2004, p. 63, italics in original). The ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration) are "ways of *seeking cultural difference*, either by accepting its importance, by adapting perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity" (2004, p. 63, italics in original). According to the DMIS, the way a person experiences and construes cultural difference is crucial to her or his worldview.

The DMIS explains how international cross-cultural experiences can bring into relief a person's cultural unconsciousness, transforming his or her worldview (Bennett, 1993, 1998, 2004; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Bennett (2004) explains that an intercultural experience "generates pressure for change in one's worldview" and suggests that "this happens because the 'default' ethnocentric world view, while sufficient for managing relations within one's own culture, is inadequate to the task of developing and maintaining social relations across cultural boundaries" (p. 74). Concurring, Hall (1998) suggests that students physically experience a foreign cultural context to understand how their cultural "control system" influences their understanding of the world. He suggests that the transformative power of study abroad lies in what we learn about our own culture when we go overseas:

*Culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the ultimate purpose of the study of culture is not so much the understanding of foreign cultures as much as the light that study sheds on our own. (p. 59, italics in original)*

Engagement and immersion within other cultural contexts may be an essential element in the process of transformation from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative worldview. Thus, international cross-cultural experiences, such as study abroad, may be essential to intercultural development.

Teacher education study abroad programs are offered as powerful vehicles to transform preservice teachers' ethnocentric mindsets and foster the dispositions needed to teach in culturally responsive ways. This study uses theories of intercultural development as a framework to describe one woman's growth during a teacher education study abroad experience and to consider the aspects of the experience that supported and/or challenged her intercultural development.

## Method

This article reports on findings from a case study of one preservice teacher, Ana, who was enrolled in a teacher education study abroad program, called the London Program.<sup>1</sup> The study abroad program is a component of a five-year integrated bachelor's/master's teacher education program offered by a large, land-grant state university in New England. The London Program takes place during the fifth year of the program after the preservice teachers have completed their full-time student teaching experience in domestic school placements. It has several important components: opportunities for mentoring and guided cultural reflection, credit-bearing coursework related to cross-cultural issues, and opportunities for intensive immersion into the local culture

(Engle & Engle, 2003). The internship within a school provides the opportunity for an intensive immersion experience and makes this type of program different from more typical study abroad programs.

## Data Collection

Data were collected in three phases over the course of a calendar year, following Ana during her predeparture coursework, over the course of her semester-long study abroad experience, and in the reentry seminar held the semester she returned to campus. The study involved two primary data collection methods: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Given the emergent nature of qualitative research, data sources were identified on an ongoing basis during the study, and collection methods were modified as needed. Referred to as "chain source sampling methodology" (Merriam, 1998), this allowed for data sources and collection methodologies to be informed by the data as it was collected and analyzed and to be responsive to contextual factors and adaptable to circumstances as they occurred over the year with the goal of seeking data that best illuminated the research questions. The methodology and findings reported here are specific to the second phase of the research study, encompassing the 15-week study abroad program in London.

The lead author was a participant observer over the course of the study, including two intensive periods during the London study abroad experience. During these participant observation periods in London, nearly 400 hours of participant observation were logged. This included five full days of direct observation of Ana in her work with students at North School, attendance with Ana at five sessions of her evening courses, and 20 days spent with the group as they engaged in everyday activities during their experience in London. The participant observation periods allowed for a deep understanding of the context of the case participant's experiences and provided occasions for spontaneous conversations and interactions that yielded insights not possible in less authentic communication settings (Patton, 2002).

Five in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with Ana over the course of the study. The first interview, conducted prior to departure, focused on Ana's prior intercultural experiences, reasons for applying for study abroad, and expectations and fears about the experience. The second interview, conducted during the first month of the study abroad semester in London, focused on the meaning Ana was making of the cross-cultural experience at the beginning of the experience and initial impressions and reactions to British culture and schools. The focus of the third interview, conducted near the completion of the semester in London, focused on the meaning Ana was making of her cross-cultural experience at the point of full immersion. The fourth interview, conducted two days after returning to the United States from London, was reflective in nature, with an emphasis

on examining what Ana identified as critical incidents during the semester and areas of intercultural growth. The final interview, conducted five months after the study abroad experience ended, focused on issues of reentry, particularly on how the experience was impacting Ana's understandings of the sociocultural nature of schooling. Consistent with ethnographic methodology, all interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and corroborated by field notes taken during the participant observation periods in London.

Secondary data sources, such as student coursework, student-written journals, and program documents, were used to corroborate and complement the primary data sources. In addition, during the participant observation periods in London, informal interviews were conducted with staff involved in Ana's program, specifically, the London Program director, the two instructors of Ana's university courses in London, and the host teachers and department supervisor with whom Ana worked at North School. These interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a validated instrument, was administered in conjunction with the qualitative data related to the participant's intercultural growth. The IDI, a theory-based instrument, is a tool for use in identifying an individual's phase of intercultural sensitivity based on the DMIS model (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The IDI was administered prior to and after the study abroad experience. The lead author is certified in the administration and analysis of the IDI instrument. These data were analyzed using the associated protocol for the instrument. The result of the analysis is a profile of the candidate's intercultural development along the DMIS continuum. The IDI was used in participant selection and within this analysis in confirmatory manner, consistent with triangulation of qualitative data.

### *Data Analysis*

A constant comparative approach was used for data analysis with a three-step coding process of open, axial, and selective coding (Merriam, 1998). This analysis included all qualitative data sources, including interview, participant observation data, and secondary data sources. The software program QSR NVivo 7 was used for data analysis. This program allows for significant flexibility related to coding and analysis, far exceeding the possibilities of more noncomputerized systems of qualitative analysis. The specifics of this program will not be described; however, this program was a powerful tool in our analysis, facilitating an intensive analysis of large volumes of qualitative data collected for this study.

The first step in data analysis took place throughout the data collection phases of the study. This first step of analysis involved transforming data not already in a text-based format into text through transcription of recorded interviews. The lead author did all the transcriptions of all interviews, student journals, and field notes. An initial, organization

coding scheme was developed to keep track of the multiple data sources that allowed for ease of data retrieval during subsequent phases of data analysis.

Intensive data analysis began after all data had been collected, transcribed, uploaded into NVivo, and initially coded. In the first stage of analysis, open coding, we approached the data in a holistic and open way, seeking to identify, name, describe, and categorize events and phenomena found in the data and guided by the research questions. An initial reading of all data was conducted and notes were taken seeking to identify emerging categories and themes, though no coding within NVivo took place at this time. During a second full reading, data were coded into distinctive chronological codes related to the stages of the study: predeparture, during study abroad, and reentry. This overarching chronological coding scheme allowed for the evolution of Ana's intercultural development to emerge throughout the next phase of analysis. On a third reading of all the data within these larger chronological codes, a first pass at a descriptive coding scheme began to emerge that was later refined in axial and selective coding. The focus of this stage of analysis was to identify and label aspects of the data that illuminated the research questions, though the analysis and coding were left decidedly open to allow themes and categories to emerge from the data. Thus, chunks of data were read, the relevance of the data to the overarching research questions considered, and a code selected or created that labeled or described the data. At this point in analysis, we did not distinguish codes as answering one or the other question, nor did we seek to eliminate any redundancy that was occurring within the coding scheme.

In the next two phases of analysis, axial and selective coding, the lead author conducted reiterative reading of the textual data in a nonlinear process. During reiterative reading of textual data, words, phrases, paragraphs, or large selections of text were coded into one or multiple codes. We sought to refine the themes and categories during reiterative readings of selected data sets within codes. We also sought to identify and clarify the relationships between categories and subcategories. Adjustments to codes and coding categories and organization were made as we searched for internal homogeneity (data that fit together as a whole) and external heterogeneity (categories as distinct from each other) of data. The process of reiterative and comparative readings of data allowed the coding scheme to be refined, challenged, modified, and expanded as the research questions were illuminated.

Within the selective phase of analysis, the analysis began to respond directly to the research questions. To answer the first research question, the larger chronological coding provided a structure through which to explore Ana's evolving intercultural development over the course of the study. This analysis and the categorical coding scheme that developed was informed by the literature related to intercultural development, specifically the DMIS. This was corroborated by an

analysis of the IDI data. The coding scheme began to synthesize around theoretical themes, such as the following: Culture as a Construct, Cultural Self-Awareness, and Perspective Consciousness. This analysis provided a complex and chronological picture of Ana's intercultural development as it evolved over the course of the experience and was informed by theory. Concurrently, our analysis sought to identify larger themes related to aspects of the study abroad experience that were influencing her intercultural development. These included, for example: Immersion at North, Miscommunication With Teachers/Students, Comparing North to Home, Catherine's Seminar. This analysis provided a conceptual map of the aspects of the experience that were influencing Ana's development and were further categorized into those aspects of the program that challenged and supported her growth. Formal write-up of the case study began during the later part of this third phase of coding.

This article reports findings related to Ana's intercultural development during her study abroad semester in London. The analysis of the data, including interview, participant observation, and IDI results, allowed the researchers to develop a complex portrait of the participant's evolving intercultural perspective, addressing the first research question, and uncovered aspects of her study abroad program that challenged and supported her development, addressing the second research question. Erickson (1984) reminds us that the goal in such qualitative research is not generalizability but an in-depth understanding of a particular instance of a case to deepen our understanding of complex social phenomena. These findings are offered with the conviction that carefully considering one person's unique experiences can inform our understanding of the dynamic and complex process of intercultural development during study abroad.

## Findings

This study reveals that Ana's participation in the London program influenced her intercultural development, supporting previous research on the benefits of such experiences. Prior to her study abroad experience, Ana was aware of and interested in learning about other cultures, but her understanding of culture as a construct was undeveloped, and she tended to seek individual and psychological explanations for differences among people. Over the course of this study, Ana became more interculturally sensitive. By the end of the study, Ana was developing richer and more complex cultural constructs, exploring her own cultural identity, accepting and recognizing fundamental cultural differences in herself and others, and actively seeking out intercultural experiences as an avenue to continue her intercultural development.

The extensive qualitative data gathered provided evidence of the changes in Ana's worldview. The qualitative data were supported by the administration of the IDI (Hammer et al., 2003). Using Bennett's (1993) DMIS and the IDI as a

framework to interpret Ana's intercultural development, we found that over the course of the study Ana resolved many of the developmental tasks characteristic of people with a Minimization of Difference mindset and was facing the challenges that are characteristic of the Acceptance of Difference stage of the DMIS. At the end of the study, Ana's worldview was in transition from an ethnocentric to a more ethnorelative approach to cultural difference.

The findings reported here focus on the second phase of this research study, the semester-long study abroad experience in London. Two themes emerged from this study that illuminate aspects of Ana's study abroad experience that were vital to her intercultural development. Ana's study abroad program provided her with appropriate intercultural challenges and adequate support for cultural reflection crucial to her intercultural development.

### *The Challenge of Study Abroad: Being the Cultural Other Within International Internships*

Ana went to London in the fall semester of her final year in an integrated bachelor's/master's teacher education program at the university. Together with nine other students, she spent the semester working in an inner-city, state-run secondary school in London, North School, which had a large population of immigrant students. In the evenings, Ana took courses through her university. One of these courses was a seminar run by Catherine, who was British and head of a primary school in the city. The immersion experience in North School and the relationship she formed with Catherine proved to be significant to Ana's intercultural development during the semester.

At North School, Ana discovered that, indeed, there are cultural differences between the USA and the United Kingdom. These cultural differences caused anxiety, miscommunication, and misunderstanding, and often led to humorous and embarrassing gaffes and interesting cultural discoveries. Though superficially resembling schools in the United States, North School proved to be very "foreign" to Ana, and she experienced cultural differences that she could not understand and against which she reacted strongly. In particular, Ana had trouble understanding the differences she encountered in the way the British teachers and students understood their relationships and communicated with one another. The communication style of many U.K. teachers was more direct, loud, and curt in tone than what Ana was used to in the United States: a tone she referred to as "mean." Early in her experience, she discussed this often:

Well I can't imagine anyone thinking that it would be ok to yell, like just to full out, outright yell, at kids in the U.S. I think that . . . I would probably be asked to leave. That would not be OK. . . . Not that you can't be strict or have certain expectations from the kids, but

I feel in America you are suppose to go about that in a different way. It's a little bit trickier, you need to . . . walk a fine line between . . . having this, a good relationship with the kids, a good rapport, being able to have certain expectation[s], the kids meet them, but still be able to talk to the kids on a more personal level. Rather than . . . having the kids be afraid of you. Like that would be my worst nightmare, having an entire class of students who were petrified of me and doing things out of fear.

Ana's first reaction upon entering North was to judge the differences she experienced as "wrong" and the teachers as "bad teachers"—clearly an ethnocentric reaction to the experience of a very different cultural context and the different communication and management style of the teachers. Ana interpreted the teacher behavior she witnessed as a sign of the teachers' incompetence and inability to control or care for the students. Her visceral reaction to this direct way of speaking never eased; three months into her experience, she commented, "I am getting used to it, it is becoming more normal, but I am still shocked by it. I still don't like it."

Over time, she began to understand that at first she was reacting in a very ethnocentric and judgmental way. At the end of her visit, she reflected on the way she had first reacted to the teachers at North School:

Like all the teachers here are just crazy, they don't know what they are doing, they are awful teachers. . . . And that's not the case. And I think I had a bit of that when I first came here. Like, what's the matter with these people? They must have had awful teacher preparation programs. . . . I am sure that is what we sounded like when we first talked to you. . . . I was very judgmental of how the teachers were teaching.

With guidance from Catherine, as will be discussed shortly, Ana came to understand that she had been perceiving and negatively judging what she witnessed at North and the student-teacher relationships through her own cultural filters:

Without even realizing it, we had been trained in that American way of being, as a teacher . . . this is how you behave, this is what you do. And it [the style of teaching at North] just went against everything that we had, not explicitly been told, but the way we had been treated as kids, the way our parents treated us, the way teachers treated us, the way we taught.

Ana came to see that though she did not have to agree with what she came to define as the "British way with kids," it was a culture difference in adult-child relationships that she was witnessing, not incompetent teaching:

Still I think that certain things should be changed here, but I don't know that will happen or if that is just me being American and being here. . . . So you need a bit more understanding and compassion for these teachers and not being so, not being so critical . . . yeah, because the way that America does it isn't necessarily better. Who am I to say they are an awful teacher?

Importantly, her growth over the semester indicates that she was beginning to question the validity of her own cultural values within this different cultural context. This represents a large shift in her thinking; before going to London, Ana had never acknowledged that perhaps her own lens should not be used as the default by which others are judged.

A crucial aspect of Ana's immersion experience at North School was her experience as a cultural outsider. Clearly not a member of the dominant culture in the United Kingdom and not understanding many of the hidden meanings of the world around her, Ana was in the position of being marginal to a mainstream culture for the first time in her life. When asked what had been crucial to her learning in London, she stated clearly, "I want to say that it was being in London and being that other, that different person." Interestingly, Ana did not like the label of cultural outsider when I asked her about it. She did not want to be seen as different; she wanted to fit in, and her desire to do so was her motivation for facing this challenge and engaging in cultural learning.

In Ana's study abroad experience, her internship in a foreign school, what Catherine called an "out of culture" teaching experience, proved the catalyst for her intercultural development. At North School, Ana was immersed within a different dominant cultural context where she was the cultural outsider, and she had to confront the reality of fundamental cultural differences. Her intercultural challenge at North was to figure out how to work within a school culture context that she did not understand and within which she often felt uncomfortable and conflicted. To figure out North School, she turned to Catherine for support and guidance.

### *Support for Growth Within Study Abroad: The Role of the Intercultural Guide*

To learn to work and function at North School, Ana needed to attend to the cultural differences and become conscious of culture in new and transformed ways. Facing such intercultural challenges inherent in international immersion experiences, however, requires a level of cultural reflection that does not come naturally, particularly to those with an ethnocentric worldview. Ana received support for serious cultural reflection during her evening seminar with Catherine.

In London, Catherine played the role of cultural translator for Ana. The first challenge for Ana was to notice and identify the differences she was experiencing as cultural, a step vital to the development of cultural consciousness. In

her first weeks at North, Ana could not avoid the differences she was experiencing, but she could not name them either. She needed someone to help her see these differences as cultural and to dig deeply underneath what felt like surface level differences to uncover the often hidden and covert aspects of a culture. During class, in personal conversations, and in her dialogic journal, Ana felt comfortable talking to Catherine about cultural differences, including her perceptions and misperceptions and the cultural dissonance she was feeling. Ana described how Catherine's translations helped:

I think that it was huge . . . to solidify those experiences that may have just slipped aside: "Oh, that was weird," or "I just don't get it," or "We're not fitting in." She was the one who really helped us work that into something that could be meaningful to us.

Because Ana saw Catherine as a highly respected teacher, she accepted Catherine's cultural explanations of the many differences she was seeing at North. Furthermore, what Catherine said made sense to Ana in her work at North and her life in London: The translations helped her understand what she was seeing in her placements and in her life in London. With Catherine's help, Ana sought to understand what she was witnessing at North through an exploration of how a society's understandings about childhood, adult-child relationships, and philosophies of education can influence teacher-student relations, a topic that Catherine took up within the context of her course.

Importantly, within their discussions of culture and cultural differences, Catherine did not minimize the cultural differences or seek to ease Ana's discomfort by focusing on similarities. Rather, Catherine very honestly and forthrightly made the exploration of culture difference a legitimate and safe topic for discussion and provided the British perspective on what Ana was experiencing. Translating each other's culture and reflecting more deeply about the subjective aspects of culture became the focus of their work in seminar. This exploration of cultural perspective and the cultural translation that Catherine provided played a vital role in Ana's intercultural development.

More than just a cultural translator, however, Catherine also played the role of an intercultural development guide for Ana. In the seminar she taught and through her written comments to Ana within their dialogic journal, Catherine modeled the analytic tools necessary for cultural reflection: comparative and contextual thinking. Central to this process, Catherine supported Ana's continued exploration of the cultural dimensions of her experience through a focus on cultural contrasts. Catherine continually modeled for Ana a way to try to understand the "British perspective" by exploring how her own culture—"being American"—was influencing the way she was interpreting her experiences at North School.

Ana felt that Catherine was teaching her how to be culturally reflective and that this type of reflection was crucial

to her success at North. As Ana sought to understand her experiences at North, Catherine repeatedly pointed out to Ana that she was unconsciously comparing North School to American schools and that she was using her cultural perspective to make sense of and judge what she was seeing. Catherine asked Ana to try to withhold this type of judgment. Ana explained how Catherine modeled this type of reflection:

Just the way that she is getting us to look at things. Had us stop, take a step back from things, don't look at things as we would if we were in America, as if they were teaching in an American school, because the teacher is not teaching in an American school, the teacher is not teaching American children. The teacher's in a British school, teaching British children, in an inner city.

By contrasting different cultural perspectives, Ana was beginning to consider the influence that cultural context has on a person's understandings. In the process of trying to understand the perspectives of her "hosts" at North School, Ana also had to begin to reflect on her own implicit cultural perceptions.

Importantly, the type of cultural reflection that Ana was doing in Catherine's class was not merely an exercise undertaken during class time; it was a necessity for making sense of her intercultural experiences at North. Ana explained to me,

I feel like her ultimate objective for the entire class, her one objective would be to get us to just look critically at schools, at why we do things the way that we're doing. And that's what I am pulling out of her class. I think it's so important. And it's not that I've not been taught that before, [but] it is the first time it has been useful for me, that I have been able to put it into play in the school and I've really enjoyed it.

She had been taught about and asked to engage in reflective thinking in domestic placements, but she had never really seen the need for it in those placements. In London, Ana's ability to work successfully at North, to understand and fit into the culture at the school, made this type of cultural reflection necessary; it was not just an assignment for class.

In the evening seminar, Catherine was helping Ana use her experiences at North School to become conscious of culture. Ana felt that she needed to engage in this cultural reflection to function within this different cultural context. Catherine was skilled at being an intercultural guide and translator and was able to address Ana's intercultural needs and facilitate her cultural reflection and intercultural development. The intercultural challenge of immersion experience, coupled with the modeling and supporting for critical cultural reflection, should be the cornerstone of study abroad design.



## Discussion

This study of Ana's study abroad experience points to the potential of study abroad programs to influence preservice teachers' intercultural development. This study draws attention to the interplay between the intercultural challenges and support for cultural reflection necessary for intercultural development within the study abroad program. A consideration of these findings suggests implications for teacher education programs seeking to use international experiences to influence preservice teachers' development of a more ethnorelative worldview.

### Need for Immersion Experiences

The significance of Ana's immersion experience at North School highlights the importance of such experiences in study abroad programs that seek to influence students' intercultural development, a finding supported by previous research (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Stachowski, 1994; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). Engle and Engle (2003) suggest that in study abroad programs where the goal is intercultural development, as was the case in Ana's program, significant and structured immersion within a foreign cultural context must be an intentional part of the program's design. They propose that immersion can take place through direct enrollment in universities, home-stay living situations, community-based service learning projects, and internship opportunities. Regardless of the design used, immersion implies that students are put in situations where they have to learn to function within a different cultural context and among members of the host culture who perceive them as cultural others.

The power of these international immersion experiences is in their ability to create cultural dissonance for students (Taylor, 1994). Colloquially called *culture shock*, people experience cultural dissonance as they seek to operate within a foreign cultural context that has a "rule book of meaning" different from that of their own culture (Barnlund, 1998, p. 3). Theorists propose that the experience of cultural dissonance has the potential to rouse a person's cultural consciousness and increase intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1998, 2004; Hall, 1998; Taylor, 1994). Ana experienced cultural dissonance during her immersion in the cultural context at North School, where her own culturally based assumptions about teaching and learning did not adequately explain what she was experiencing within the foreign school context. Having to learn how to interpret and negotiate working within this experience, she became more culturally conscious and sensitive to fundamental cultural differences. Ana's story highlights the role immersion experiences can play in the process of intercultural development.

Teacher education programs that seek to influence a student's intercultural development need to provide significant intercultural immersion experiences. Full immersion in a

culturally different context, where the student becomes a cultural outsider, creates the conditions of cultural dissonance that can be the catalyst for transformative intercultural growth within study abroad. Teacher education study abroad programs should not try to alleviate students' experience of culture shock; rather, they need to leverage the intercultural challenges inherent in these experiences and provide support for students as they struggle to make sense out of what they are experiencing.

### Being the Cultural Outsider

An important aspect of Ana's immersion experience was her feelings of being the cultural outsider at North School. Bennett (1993) suggests that engagement with cultural difference on the "other's home turf," where one becomes the cultural other, may be an essential element in the process of developing intercultural sensitivity. The literature on multicultural teacher education has also identified the experience of being the "other" as a critical component of cross-cultural field placements, both domestic and international (Casale-Giannola, 2005; Fahim, 2002; Gomez, 1996; Noel, 1995; Paccione, 2000; Stachowski & Brantmeier, 2002). Gomez (1996) writes about the need for such cross-cultural placements in teacher education:

Among the most promising practices for challenging and changing preservice teachers' perspectives was their placements in situations where they became the "Other" and were simultaneously engaged in seminars or other ongoing conversations guiding their self-inquiry and reflections. (p. 124)

Concurring, Noel (1995) argues that cross-cultural experiences must provide opportunities for preservice teachers to be "confronted with an outsider perspective" (p. 270).

As important as this feeling of being the cultural other is to intercultural development, it can be challenging to achieve within domestic cross-cultural placements for students who are White European Americans; the hegemony of the dominant culture makes such experiences of being the cultural other elusive for these students. This was true for Ana. Whereas in the past Ana had had relationships with friends and coworkers who were culturally different from herself, these relationships had always taken place within her dominant cultural context of the United States. In such settings, the people might have been culturally different, but the context was one she implicitly understood. In her previous domestic placements within urban schools in the United States, Ana had not been treated like a cultural outsider; in these schools, the students were the ones who were the cultural others. Ana pointed this out to me when she compared her internship in London to her domestic placements, where she recalled that in U.S. schools, "I don't feel the differences." At North School, Ana did not just observe cultural difference, she felt culturally different.

Ana's international immersion experience provided her with the opportunity to step outside of her dominant cultural context and have the experience of being a cultural outsider for the first time in her life. It is the feeling of not fitting into the dominant culture that creates the need for preservice teachers to examine and consider the ways culture influences school contexts and interpersonal relationships. For preservice teachers who are members of the dominant White, middle-class culture in the United States, international experiences may provide the experience of being the cultural outsider in a way not possible within most domestic placements.

### Challenges for Study Abroad Programs in English-Speaking Countries

The importance of immersion and the feeling of being a cultural outsider have on intercultural development necessitates that we carefully design such experiences for preservice teachers. Many teacher education study abroad programs take place in English-speaking countries, allowing preservice teachers to work quickly, easily, and independently with students and take on the responsibilities of a teacher. Ana's program took place in London, where she did not face a significant language barrier, and she was able to begin working as an assistant teacher as soon as she began her internship at North School. Whereas facility with the language is one of the benefits of placing students in internships in English-speaking countries, there can be challenges for these study abroad programs that need to be explicitly attended to as placements are developed.

The concern with study abroad programs in English-speaking countries is that the ease of immersion facilitated by a shared language might let students avoid the cultural dissonance and feelings of being a cultural other that is so vital to intercultural growth (Edwards, 2000). Edwards (2000) cautions U.S. students who study abroad in Britain:

We always understand what is *said* in our transatlantic dialogues, and this effectively masks the fact that we are frequently wrong about what is *meant*. (p. 91, italics in original)

In such study abroad experiences, the mutually comprehensible language can allow students to function at a base level of competence without confronting substantive cultural differences.

Teacher education study abroad programs that take place in English-speaking countries, then, must be carefully designed. Study abroad programs cannot assume that merely sending students to live and work in another culture will necessarily lead to intercultural development. These programs must intentionally create opportunities for students to experience cultural dissonance during their immersion experiences.

Furthermore, these immersion experiences need to be coupled with coursework that makes explicit the study of culture and provide support for the critical cultural reflection necessary in the process of intercultural development.

### Intercultural Guide and Cultural Reflection

Immersion experiences alone are not sufficient to move students' intercultural development forward; cultural reflection is essential to the process. It cannot be assumed, however, that students will be able to engage in such reflection on their own. Study abroad students need a cultural translator and intercultural guide to provide support for their intercultural growth. Catherine played this role for Ana.

Previous research on preservice teachers' experiences during cross-cultural placements has shown that cultural translation can be provided through host country friendships (Stachowski, 1994; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). It may be unreasonable, however, to expect that students will develop such close relationships in a semester-long study abroad program. Furthermore, discussions regarding cultural differences that are vital to cultural translation are not always easy to have and may not happen among friends or acquaintances, where a minimization of differences supports the development of a relationship. Supporting intercultural growth requires intercultural knowledge and skills that most laypeople may not possess. The importance of the role of cultural translator in intercultural development mandates that it not be left to chance. This study suggests that the role of cultural translator and intercultural guide needs to be built into a study abroad experience and should be played by someone who is trained in providing support for intercultural development.

Ana's intercultural development during her study abroad experience highlights the need for programs to create supportive environments that foster critical cultural reflective thinking. Research demonstrates the vital role that cultural reflection plays in learning from cross-cultural experiences, both domestically and internationally (Bradfield-Kreider, 1999; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2003; Spindler & Spindler, 1994; Tang & Choi, 2004). Within her relationship with Ana, Catherine was able to create the conditions that King (2000) has identified as necessary for supporting reflective thinking. King explains that such an environment must have an "underlying respect for students regardless of their level of intellectual development" and an acknowledgement that "the journey is each *student's* journey and that the teacher's role as guide is to choose responses that are adapted to the student's needs." King continues, "Through respectful but challenging interactions like these, interactions that take account of students' epistemological assumptions, teachers can promote reflective thinking" (p. 25).

Such an environment must attend to students' affective, social, and cognitive needs and create a safe space where students can share what are often difficult and confusing

thoughts and feelings and take risks as they seek to understand cultural contexts. Parks Daloz (2000) states that such classrooms are

characterized by the establishment of a climate of safety in which people feel free to speak their truth, where blaming and judging are minimal, where full participation is encouraged, where a premium is placed on mutual understanding, but also where evidence and arguments may be assessed objectively and assumptions surfaced openly. (p. 114)

Berger (2004) describes such teachers as the guides who help students as they approach the “growing edge” of their knowledge and awareness. She suggests that these teachers must help students find and recognize their edge, be good company at the edge, and help to build firm ground in a new place of understanding. The role Catherine played in Ana’s development underscores the importance of having an experienced intercultural guide to support critical cultural reflection, calibrated to the students’ intercultural readiness, as students face the intercultural challenges of their immersion experience.

## Conclusion

This study of one young woman’s intercultural development during a teacher education study abroad experience began with the conviction that preservice teachers need to become more mindful of culture and cultural difference. The study highlights how teacher education study abroad programs can be transformative for preservice teachers, leading them on a path toward an ethno-relative worldview and culturally responsive approaches to teaching. The five-year integrated bachelor’s/master’s program that Ana was enrolled in is uncommon among teacher education programs, providing the time necessary within a teacher’s preservice education to spend a semester overseas. There are, however, examples of successful study abroad programs within four-year teacher education programs (Cushner & Mahon, 2002). Teacher educators must find ways to integrate study abroad programs and other cross-cultural experiences into teacher preparation programs.

Ana’s experiences highlight that immersion experiences within a different cultural context, such as in a foreign school, can provide significant intercultural challenges for preservice teachers. This experience of being the cultural outsider in the immersion experience moved her intercultural development forward in ways that may not be possible within domestic placements. Within the experience, a cultural translator and intercultural guide was needed to create a safe space for Ana to engage in the critical cultural reflection necessary for the development of cultural consciousness. Teacher educators can learn from Ana’s experiences as they seek to

design study abroad programs that address preservice teachers’ intercultural development. Theories of intercultural development should inform this design, providing insight into the power of intercultural experiences in the development of intercultural sensitivity and an ethno-relative worldview. Teacher education study abroad programs can be powerful vehicles in teacher educators’ efforts to prepare preservice teachers for work with culturally diverse students, providing a unique opportunity for them to learn how to “mind the culture gap” that can exist in school contexts.

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