

The Belize Project: A Host School Perspective

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Abstract:

While the research literature is replete with studies on student perspectives and their development of cross-cultural sensitivity, research on the perspectives of educators who host international preservice teachers is woefully lacking. This study seeks to fill that gap by assessing the experiences of 15 educators at an elementary host school in Belize. It draws on their experiences with hosting the Belize Project, a week-long international field experience. Our findings lead to two major conclusions. Culture and completing a field experience in a classroom in another country are two closely intertwined and difficult to disentangle experiences. It is a reciprocal process in which both participating partners, the teacher candidates and host school community, reap the benefits of both a cultural and educational exchange. Not only does it benefit the student teachers, it also contributes to the professional development of the host school community and its educators. Despite the short length of the project, the mentor teachers and administrators unanimously agreed that its benefits clearly outweigh its challenges.

Key words: teacher education, global competence, study abroad, field experience

Introduction

While the research literature is replete with studies on student perspectives and their development of cross-cultural sensitivity (Shaklee & Baily, 2012; VandeBerg, Phoebe, & Lou, 2012) research on the perspectives of educators who host international preservice teachers is woefully lacking. This study seeks to fill that gap by assessing the experiences of 15 educators at an elementary host school in Belize. It draws on their experiences with hosting the Belize Project,

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<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

a week-long international field experience program offered at Ohio University, an American university in the mid-West. Conducted in March 2018 during its third iteration, the findings in this study are based on interviews with 13 of the 16 teachers and the two administrators at an elementary Roman Catholic, state-sponsored school with 540 students in the Corozal district in northern Belize.

The major objective of the Belize Project is for American early field teacher candidates to develop a global-minded perspective by teaching in a classroom in another country. As such, the teacher candidates who participated in this ongoing project were required to develop a curriculum unit to be implemented, and possibly revised, in collaboration with the mentor teacher while in Belize. In addition, their experience in Belize included exploring the local community, taking a day trip to Corozal Town and visiting the Mayan ruins at Lamanai.

Literature Review

In our ever globalizing world, teachers are faced with the challenge of preparing their students to thrive in a global community and become globally competent themselves (Stewart, 2013). A student's capacity to develop a global perspective in an academic setting relies heavily on the ability of the teacher to provide a learning environment that cultivates global-mindedness (Colville-Hall & Adamowicz-Hariasz, 2010; Merryfield, Tin-Yau Lo, & Po, 2008). Teachers have the responsibility to educate students to "have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to live and work in a global society" (McGaha & Linder, 2014, p. 305). Teaching abroad allows preservice teachers to learn new ideas and skills in the area of culture and develop global competence. According to the Asia Society (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2010) global learning includes examining global issues, recognizing different perspectives, communicating ideas across cultures and taking action. Likewise, Madrid Akpovo and Nganga (2018) argue that international field experience programs provide preservice teachers with opportunities to develop a critical consciousness grounded in cultural relativism through dialogue. They note that American preservice teachers, because they come from wealthier regions of the world which constitute a small percentage of the world population, have developed a minority world perspective on what constitutes developmentally appropriate teaching. In their research in Nepal and Kenya, they found that while the American preservice teachers were often troubled by a lack of teacher-centered play and an authoritarian approach to teaching, letting children play independently is regarded as being responsible, nurturing and caring.

According to the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE, 2019), a nonprofit study abroad and intercultural exchange organization, teaching abroad brings people from different

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cultures together to learn from one another and make positive connections by becoming part of a community through daily interactions with people in and out of the classroom. An integral aspect of international field experience programs, immersive experiential learning seeks to move preservice teachers beyond tourism (Cushner, 2018, Pasquarelli, 2018; Quezada, 2004). O'Connell (2018) argues that students "should avoid places full of tourists" as tourist traps, "unlike places of genuine cultural significance, tend to contribute to the Disneyfication of a culture" (p. 230). Going abroad should be "more than a surface experience, more than a holiday" (p. 235) but rather an opportunity to grow by being exposed to new people, places and culture, and to return home "with a new appreciation of the diversity of our world" that "demonstrates honor and respects and brings more understanding in this world" (pp. 222-223).

While the research literature on the specific international perspectives of educators at institutions that host American preservice teachers is largely non-existing, some of the research on mentoring and intercultural competence can serve to identify aspects of the benefits and challenges of hosting international preservice teachers. Located in the United Kingdom, Durham University (2019) lists eight reasons why mentoring benefits mentors. It provides an opportunity to reflect on one's practice, enhances job satisfaction, leads to new personal relationships, enhances peer recognition, uses one's experience to benefit a new person, widens one's understanding of the institutions involved in the program, allows one to practice interpersonal skills and provides the personal satisfaction of supporting someone else. Reflecting upon creating and sustaining relationships with domestic "cooperating teachers," Kerr and Norris (2008) argue that the benefits of hosting a preservice teacher includes "understanding group dynamics, more opportunities to problem solve, potential for increase in self-understanding, developing interdependence skills, gaining multiple points of view, seeing life through others' eyes, expanding one's worldview, and rethinking previously held beliefs" (p. 77).

Echoing some of the same reasons, in their study of the Franco-American Teachers-in-Training Institute (FITITI), a still ongoing three-week seminar followed by a nine-week internship in an area school offered by the University of Akron, Ohio for French teachers, Colville-Hall and Adamowiz (2010) include, amongst other, cross-cultural experience, citizenship diplomacy and professional growth as its goals. The program exposes teachers from France, "themselves the products of a strongly hierarchical society and trained to become distant authority figures in the classroom," to new instructional student-centered approaches to instruction" and allows them become "part of the school community" (pp. 53-54).

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In a study, conducted in India, Rekah and Ganesh (2012) found that after a year of mentoring children from underprivileged backgrounds, their mentors found the experience enhanced their interpersonal, leadership and communication skills, including their self-confidence and self-awareness. In another study specifically focused on teachers' perceptions of their mentoring role in three different domestic clinical settings, including early field experiences, Gut, Beam, Henning, Cochran and Knight (2014) found that the development of the relationship between a mentor and mentee was contingent upon their personalities, interpersonal skills and professional background. Specific to early field experiences they found that since early field preservice teachers spend a limited amount of time in their classrooms, mentor teachers tended to view them as "temporary and often silent occupants of their classroom" (p. 254). Hence, they tended to focus on encouraging the preservice teachers' professionalism and helping them confirm education as their chosen career path. They also found that if mentors had a prior positive mentoring experience, they expected another positive experience, while if they had had a prior negative mentoring experience, they expected another negative experience (p. 257). Finally, they also found that mentor teachers would limit their early field student teachers to "one-on-one tutoring, working with small groups of students, or assisting with whole class instruction" (p. 258).

Research has shown that culturally diverse students have a deeper trust in teachers who themselves are culturally sensitive and competent. Teaching abroad helps teacher candidates to be better able to relate to students of cultures different than their own. Experiencing a different culture where the first language is not English makes preservice teachers more sensitive to the cultural underpinning of language used by students from different cultures, a disposition they need to serve an ever more diverse domestic student population (Quezada, 2005; Malewski, Sharma & Philion, 2012, Williams, 2017).

While intercultural experiences may sometimes reinforce negative stereotypes (Egekvist, Lyngdorf, & Du, 2017), they provide a unique opportunity to not only increase awareness of one's own values (Doppen & Shahri, 2018) but also share one's perspective as a visitor with the hosting institution (Gorsuch, 1988). Reflecting upon hosting domestic as well international student teachers, McPherson (2005), a dance instructor, argued that hosting student teachers involves "an investment of time and energy" that benefits not only the students but the mentor teacher as well. She learned that there "always is more than one way of approaching a particular topic," that "students react differently to different teachers," that international students teach

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“invaluable lessons about the world,” and that it brings the “joy of camaraderie” by sharing delightful as well as disappointing experiences (pp. 105-106).

Methodology

This study was conducted during the third year of the Belize Project. Its purpose was to assess the experiences of teachers and administrators and to determine the teachers’ and administrators’ assessment of the project and what they thought could be done to improve it. Research suggests that a qualitative method is especially appropriate when studying a contemporary phenomenon to describe the meaning of a lived experience from the perspective a group of individuals (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002).

Participants. The findings in this study are based on 15 interviews with 13 of the 16 teachers and the school’s two administrators at San Benito, a pseudonym. San Benito is an elementary Roman Catholic, state-sponsored school with 540 students in a small village in the Corozal district in northern Belize near the Mexican border. To protect their identity, all participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1. Participants

Teachers	Standard	Age	2016	2017	2018
Darcy	Pre-K	3-4		X	X
Rafael	Infant	5-6		X	X
Angélica	Infant	5-6	X	X	X
Maribel	1	6-7	X	X	X
Clara	1	6-7	X	X	X
Alejandro	2	7-8			X
Juanita	2	7-8			X
Zenoemi	3	8-9	X	X	X
Linda	3	8-9	X	X	X
Guillermo	4	8-9	X	X	X
Andrés	6	10-11	X		
	5	9-10		X	
	4	8-9			X
Antonio	5-6	9-11	X	X	X
Mónica	Special Education	3-14		X	X
Julian	Principal	3-14	X	X	X
Elsa	Vice Principal	3-14	X	X	X

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Nine of the 13 teachers were female, while four were male. The students they taught ranged from three-year-olds to fourteen-year-olds. Two teachers participated in the Belize Project for this first time, three did so for the second time, while eight teachers did so for the third time since the project first began in 2016. The two administrators were a married couple and had a prominent presence at the school.

The district's economy continues to predominantly depend on the sugar industry although more recently tourism had become more significant as well. While English is the language of instruction at San Benito the region is largely populated by Maya-Mestizo people whose primary spoken language is Spanish.

Interview. The purpose of the interviews was to assess the teachers' and administrators' perspective on whether the teacher candidates demonstrated increased cultural sensitivity during instruction (see Appendix: Interview Protocol). Specifically, they were asked whether the teacher candidates added value to their school and were sensitive to the students' background. The questionnaire also included questions intended to identify the most gratifying as well as most challenging experiences they had with the teacher candidates. Finally, they were asked to identify the strengths of the Belize Project and whether they had any suggestions for improvement. In concluding the interview, they were asked to rate the Belize Project on a Likert scale. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Limitations. One limitation of our findings may be that Laura conducted the interviews and that the mentor teachers may have sought to please her. Furthermore, being welcoming to visitors is a distinct feature of Belizean culture. Another limitation may have been that the interviews were conducted during the field experience itself in Belize and that the mentor teachers may not have had sufficient time for reflection. Finally, Corozal is distinctly rural and hence differs significantly from Belize's urban centers. Its rurality may have been a factor in the interview responses as well.

Data Analysis. Data sources for this study consisted of the 15 interviews. To analyze the interview transcriptions, we chose to use Dana and Silva's (2003) four steps for inquiry. First, we separately read each interview transcription to form a detailed *description*. We then met to compare our descriptions and begin the *sense-making* process to develop our categories. Next, we undertook an *interpretation* of our descriptions to organize our categories in themes. Throughout the sense making and interpretation stages of our analysis, we used the constant comparative method to determine common themes (Merriam, 2016). Finally, we developed a consensus on the *implications* of this study for future practice and research.

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Findings

Our data analysis suggests two major themes. The first theme focuses on the cultural exchange aspect of the Belize Project in the areas of language, classroom management, and adding value. The second theme focuses on whether the teachers and administrators at San Benito would welcome continuing the project and their assessment of its strengths and weaknesses.

Culture

The teachers at San Benito indicated that one week was too short for a full immersive cultural experience. While according to Alejandro, Belize itself “is full of different culture practices,” Linda argued that “[t]eaching in one culture and in another culture is different.” Yet, all mentor teachers strongly agreed that the teacher candidates became increasingly sensitive to cultural differences between Belize and the United States.

Language. While the mentor teachers made references to other aspects of Belizean culture, such as food and traditional dances, they most notably commented on issues related to language as most students in the Corozal district speak Spanish at home even though instruction is in English. Initially, the students at San Benito struggled with getting used to American English and often had difficulty with the teacher candidates’ American accent and pronunciation of words, or when they simply spoke too fast. As Linda stated,

I think that’s a little problem. Culture coming again. You know, Belize is Spanish speaking, especially in the North. The accent of your language might be a little bit fast for them. One, [our students] are barely adapting to the English language. And then, here you come, another one, they’re trying to get into the language. And the way you speak – the way the teacher speaks may be a little fast for them. ... A lot of them speak Spanish at home, and that’s a very big problem, even in our school when we try to teach them in English, have them speak in English, it’s a little bit difficult for them.

Although one teacher candidate had difficulty overcoming the language barrier and tended to focus her interactions on a student who spoke English well, according to Clara, by the end of the week, classroom instruction greatly improved as the teacher candidates had “gained the hearts of our students.” As Alejandro commented as well,

The children’s original tongue is Spanish, and I think that is one of the things that the [university] students grow a little bit in that. They learned a lot of things different that we have in Belize, not in Ohio.

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Classroom Management. The mentor teachers also commented on different approaches to classroom management. Since their students are more “used to an authoritative voice,” according to Linda, they found that sometimes it was difficult to “control” them because the teacher candidates were so “kind and sweet to them.” The teacher candidates, as Guillermo noted, engaged in novel approaches such as “play[ing] along with the children” during break time, or as Alejandro noted, “sit[ting] on the ground” with them. He stated,

In working and playing with them, we don’t have those values, maybe we can start to develop those. Friendship, cooperation. I see how they show cooperation to teachers after we made class last year, how they cooperate working among the children and learn also. Sharing, there was a lot of sharing, so there was a lot they contribute to our school.

Adding Value. The teachers and administrators unanimously believed that the teacher candidates added value to their school. “For some reason,” Darcy commented, “whenever we have the presence of a new teacher in the classroom, the children are always attentive. Any advice given by that new person will always be kept as part of the children’s memory and their behavior will improve.” While, according to Elsa, the children “became very interactive and they practiced the English language,” Linda argued that the “students feel happy whenever people come to visit them, especially people from another culture.” She added,

And they practice it, not only in the classroom, but outside, so these are some things or values they left the students. But not just the students, personally as well, because it was a joy listening to someone who is not from Belize and come in now and tell us and speak to us about this. I embrace that, something unique from them, and we tried to develop it as well.

Elisa as well, among others, liked that the teacher candidates emphasized values such as “friendship, cooperation, respect, love, unity, care, [and] sharing.” They liked that the teacher candidates introduced “new ideas, methods and strategies.”

The mentor teachers agreed that the teacher candidates were respectful, well prepared, and professional. They commented that the teacher candidates were open to feedback and responded positively to suggestions for improvement by making changes or adding to the curriculum. At times, the mentor teachers thought it was actually their students who lacked respect. As Alejandro suggested,

I think that maybe the children might be a little disrespectful to them, telling them how beautiful they are. We don't use those at school. We ask them to respect that. They, in their part, at no time have we heard that they have been disrespectful to no one. On the contrary, we have heard that the children, the students are a little bit disrespectful.

Project Assessment

As part of the interview, the mentor teachers were asked whether they would welcome the student teachers back to their school as well as to rate the project. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive.

Welcome. The teachers unanimously would welcome the teacher candidates back into their classroom. Guillermo liked that the project “takes us away from the routine and acts as a refresher for both the students and the teacher.” Zenoemi liked the “interchange of teaching strategies,” while Mónica liked the “exchange of ideas of our different cultures.” In a representative response, Darcy, opined that “[the] experience that people bring and the experience that people take is what makes us develop more professionally, and I think that in this case, I gain from [the teacher candidate] and she gained from our school.” Antonio thought “the collaboration is helpful because Belize teachers can see other ways of teaching.” Carlos liked that “[t]hey bring along with them a more student-centered approach to teaching,” while Juanita humbly suggested “that what we can give to them is little compared to what they can give to us.” Suggesting that “some of us are old in these things,” Alejandro liked that the teacher candidates brought a “new way of strategies and methods.” He was “surprised that we have not been using those” and that their presence “serves as a refresher course to see how they are bringing these new ideas.”

Others, such as Mónica and Elisa, argued that the teacher candidates inspired the students with “the passion that they have for the students and for the teaching profession.” Some of the mentor teachers argued that the teacher candidates continued to have an impact even after they had left. According to Alejandro,

The challenging part comes now because the children are expecting us to have activities similar to those that [the teacher candidates] bring. Then we find that a lot of those techniques and methods that you know, that is the most challenging part is at the end, after you leave.

While acknowledging that “in your developed country, sometimes there are things that are easy to do but here you really need to find your resources,” Darcy learned that sometimes afterwards his students nonetheless tell him, “But, Sir, she [did] it different.”

Rating. While two interviewees did not respond, one teacher ranked the Belize Project as satisfactory, two as above average, and eight as excellent. In summary, they argued that although there was room for more prior communication and planning as well as, especially, for more time in Belize, the major strength of the project was the “exposure for both candidates and the children to learn about other cultures and to build relationships,” and learning from each other. Angélica even suggested a study on how the teacher candidates might feel about their experience in Belize “maybe after being in a real class for more than five years.”

The principal and vice-principal both agreed with the mentor teachers’ assessment. Julian, the principal, thought “this program is excellent – new ideas, new teaching strategies, methods, great interaction with the Ohio University students, teacher with students, Belizean students and administrators.” He thought that, “[t]he greatest strength of the program is building relationships among teachers” and especially appreciated the complete lesson plans the student teachers shared and left for the teachers at the school to use as a reference. Elsa, the vice-principal agreed that San Benito’s “administrators and teachers welcome new ideas, strategies, methods of teaching, and also improved new relationship with other countries.” She especially believed that “the program has been effective since Belizean teachers and American teachers work together for the benefit of our students.”

Conclusion

Our findings lead to two major conclusions. Culture and completing a field experience in a classroom in another country are two closely intertwined and difficult to disentangle experiences. It is a reciprocal process in which both participating partners, the teacher candidates and host school community, reap the benefits of both a cultural and educational exchange. Not only does it benefit the student teachers, it also contributes to the professional development of the host school community and its educators.

Despite the short length of the project, the mentor teachers and administrators unanimously agreed that its benefits clearly outweigh its challenges. While true cultural immersion may well require an extended stay “beyond tourism” (Cushner, 2018), our findings suggest that a short-stay program, nonetheless, adds significant value for all.

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Implications

Our findings suggest several implications for future practice and research. A first significant implication is that international field experience programs are worth their while when well-coordinated between the sending and receiving institution. As such clear lines of communication are essential to align expectations with regard to successes and challenges.

While past research has been narrowly focused on the learning experiences of teacher candidates, future research should notably examine to what extent the background of the mentor teachers, in addition to that of the teacher candidates, has implications for the cultural exchange experience. Factors, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin, socioeconomic background, geography, are all integral to the cultural exchange experience and their impact should be further examined. Replicating this study to re-search whether our findings are valid will offer additional insights. Finally, research to compare similar international field experience programs, notably in different international contexts and long-term for ongoing programs, will further add to the research base.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Did the OU teacher candidate grow in his/her knowledge of cultural practice? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Over the course of the week, did the OU teacher candidate show growth in his/her knowledge of student instruction? Please explain.
3. What challenges did you observe the OU teacher candidate handle well? What areas of the experience did the candidate not handle well?
4. Did the OU teacher candidate plan for and successfully navigate language barriers?
5. Did the OU teacher candidate teaching present content age appropriately? Please explain.
6. Did the OU teacher candidate differentiate for student needs and, if so, how did he/she do so?
7. Was the OU teacher candidate sensitive to your classroom schedule? If so, how? If not, why not? Did the candidate work with you in planning daily classroom schedules and activities? Please explain.
8. Did the OU teacher candidate grow in his/her ability to be flexible and change the needs of the classroom throughout the week?
9. Did the OU teacher candidate assess his or her students? If so, how? Please describe. If not, why not?
10. Did the OU student add value to your school? If so, how did he/she contribute to your school, your students?
11. Did the OU teacher candidate accept constructive feedback from the supervising San Benito teacher? And how did he/she respond?
12. Was the OU teacher candidate respectful toward the San Benito teacher? Please explain.
13. If you were asked again to host another or multiple OU students would you welcome them into your classroom? If so, why? If not, why not?
14. What did you find the most gratifying about having the OU students at your school?
15. What did you find the most challenging about having the OU students at your school?
16. Do you think the OU program has been effective? Is so, how and why? And if not, why not?

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17. Did you feel included in the program? What do you like about it? And how can it be improved?
18. Was the OU teacher candidate professional and appropriate while working with students?
19. Did OU teacher candidate prioritize motivation and classroom community?
20. Was the OU teacher candidate sensitive to student background, individual interests, language and cognitive skills?
21. Did the OU teacher candidate prioritize student relationships and work to develop a caring connection?
22. Overall, on a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the program? Please explain. (Scale: 1. Excellent, 2. Above Average, 3. Satisfactory, 4. Below Average, 5. Poor)
23. What are the program's strengths?
24. In what areas can the program be improved?

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