Cross Cultural Learning Experiences Among Graduate Students in the US and France:
A Case Study

Pavan John Antony, Adelphi University, United States
Jessica E. Lament, INSHEA, France

Abstract
A total of 27 graduate students enrolled in a teacher preparatory program at a higher education institution in France were paired with 37 graduate students in the United States. All the students in the US, who are finishing their Masters degree in teaching, met online with the French students during the course of the semester. Students from both countries interviewed one another regarding the education system, education system, inclusion of individuals with disabilities and culture of both parties. The class discussions and analysis of written student responses led by lead professors in France and the US reveal several benefits to cross cultural dialogues among graduate students in higher education. Students shared their experiences meeting a foreigner for the first time, identifying differences in cultures, and education systems as unique. The benefit of cross-cultural exchanges was reinforced as students shaped their thinking around ideas of inclusion and accessibility.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural, Exchange, International, Accessibility

Introduction

The significance of cross-cultural exchange can best be examined through the work of John Dewey. His theory of reflective practice, which includes an experience, reflection, and action upon that experience, is transformative in how we perceive ourselves and others (Dewey, 1933). We use this lens through which to study cross-cultural exchange and look at how reflective practice can enhance our work and in this instance with our students - their teaching practice. An anticipated outcome of cross-cultural exchange through reflective practice is an increase in cross-cultural awareness. The fundamental requirement of which is the ability to be open to new ideas and have the capacity to change such ideas when necessary (Williams & Best, 2014). Though the goal is to increase this awareness and influence students thinking, simply participating in an exchange or a study abroad program does not guarantee multicultural competency for all participants (Phillion, Malewski, Rodriguez, Shirley, Kulago, & Bulington, 2008.

Today higher education institutions across the globe are introducing different teaching techniques to prepare high quality teachers to help students in the classroom. In the United States scholars continue to highlight the need for preparing culturally responsive teachers to work with children and families from culturally diverse backgrounds. Scholars have come up with different strategies to help future teachers gain cultural competence and confidence while working with all children. Mushell and Roberts (2011) used bibliotherapy to foster critical literacy, coupled with a two-year fieldwork experience to foster cultural responsiveness. They did recognize that their approach did not guarantee that white teacher candidates will develop cultural awareness and sensitivity, but findings from their study suggested transformations in teacher candidates. Hawley and Irvine (2011) examined class-based instruction to foster culturally responsive instructional practice. Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2006) worked with 25 pre-service teachers to determine the impact of a multicultural course on their dispositions for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Antony and Vaughn-Shavuo (2020) developed a new Tri-fold Multicultural (TFM) model to prepare culturally responsive teachers in the US. This model was developed after these researchers found attitudinal changes among teacher candidates.

While these kinds of models help students in higher education gain deeper understanding regarding cultures, practices or traditions outside their routine, study abroad programs have also played an important role in transforming student thought processes. Research has shown that study abroad experiences can help participants gain new perspectives about the world (Walters, Garii & Walters, 2009). It also provides an opportunity to be creative and use different strategies to engage with cld learners through lessons learned in a foreign land. The lead author of this article who has led several study abroad programs has observed students showing more willingness to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse learners in classrooms and accept differences among diverse learners after participating in study abroad programs. Scholars have also recorded that it promotes deeper understanding of the role of culture and language in teaching and learning (Quezada & Alfaro, 2007). Willingness. Study abroad programs also allow participants to self learn why people sometimes do things differently and creates an opportunity to live and learn outside the daily comfort zone in a foregin land. Meredith (2010) shares how students participating in study abroad programs learn cultural and linguistic differences among others . There is also evidence that many of these students have greater commitment to social justice (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Lindsey, 2005), enhance professional identity (Gilin & Young, 2009; Lindsey, 2005) and has long lasting effects on teachers personal lives and their teaching Willard-Holt (2001).

Cultural Landscape: US and France

Today, public school classrooms in the US have become more diverse than ever before; it is predicted that Whites will be a minority in the US by 2060 (US Census Bureau). This change in the cultural landscape will significantly affect schools across the country. The importance of increased cultural awareness is clear when we look at data about the changing demographics in classrooms around the world.

For those in teacher preparation programs it is imperative that they examine their own cultural awareness and develop a deeper understanding of how that influences their decisions, policies, and practices. As we look at the United States and its changing school culture, data shows an increase in the US foreign born (Hilburn, 2014) as well as an increase in immigrant students in schools (Hilburn, 2014). School enrollments are higher in 2022, as compared to data from 2011, for students who are Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and whose primary language may not be English (National Center for Education Statistics). The impact that this has on the classroom is significant. The majority of teachers are monolingual and lack knowledge of cultures that are not their own (Pinar, 2006; Wiggins, et al., 2007) and therefore lack the knowledge required to work with culturally diverse learners (Leaks & Stonehill, 2008) (Sleeter, 2008). The effect that this lack of knowledge has on a diverse student population is far-reaching and detrimental to student success. It is also important to acknowledge that countries like the US are built by immigrants and today more and more people immigrate to the country in large numbers due to various reasons ranging from fleeing from war torn regions to seeking a better life in the West.

In France, 10% of the population is foreign born (Boubtane, 2022) and its home to Europe's largest number of international students, many of whom stay on to work in France (Boubtane, 2022). Though more specific information about the racial or ethnic make-up of those groups is impossible to find out as France doesn't collect data by race or ethnicity (Hochschild and Cropper, 2014; LaBrecht 2021). When examining the impact that this has in education and teaching practice, France's republican values focus on providing a universal, secular school experience to provide all students with equal opportunity. The emphasis is placed on unity and assimilation into French society through the acquisition of "French" identity (Schor, 2001; Akkari, 2022). There have been continued debates within France around its perceived 'indifference to difference' and how to address students' unique cultural backgrounds in their school experiences (Akkari, 2022).

Research has shown confusing, problematic, or uncomfortable experiences by teachers' when working with students from different cultural backgrounds (Chan, Lam, & Covault, 2009; Roshan, 2005; Yeh, et al., 2005). Therefore supporting teachers to examine their own cultural awareness is an important part of developing cross-cultural awareness and was one of the aims of our project. It was with these theories in mind that we launched our project of cross-cultural exchange between a group of students in the US and a group of students in France.

Current Partnership, Data Collection and Analysis

The lead author of this research has led a group of 22 students on a study abroad program to Paris in 2015. However the current pandemic has put a pause on the program.

As we face this international crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been reported that 90 percent of students across the globe are at home due to schools closing their

campuses (UNESCO, 2020). Thus both scholars, Antony and Lament, came up with the idea of piloting a project, pairing students in the US and France for an online meeting experience.

Data was collected using the interviews, class discussions and review of the literature. Interviews were conducted by the US and French students. The interviews were transcribed word to word and checked with students for accuracy. Transcribed interviews were any analyzed using Cross case analysis (Patton, 1990). Themes emerged from coding categories during the cross case analysis.

27 graduate students from higher education institutes in France and the United States, who are all currently taking courses on inclusive education, met online as part of a virtual exchange about their distinct cultures. The French graduate students are part of a specialized program for professionals to become accessibility advisors, program directors, and educators in programs to support people with disabilities. The American graduate students were all taking a course on Managing Inclusive environments as part of their general teacher training program. The students were required to meet online via Zoom at least two times to present themselves and their experiences to each other and then to exchange more deeply on questions around inclusion in their cultures, societies, and schools. All the students used the same questions (developed with the help of Antony and Lament) prior to the exchange to facilitate the dialogue and seek out similarities and differences between France and the US.

The questions around inclusion in their cultures, societies, and schools that students were required to answer were:
1. What is the current situation in your country regarding inclusion and special education?
2. What is the current situation in your exchange partner's country?
3. What are the challenges in your system? In the other system?
4. What are the similarities and differences between the cultures? About the education systems?
5. What did you learn from your exchange?
6. How will you use what you learned in your future profession?

They were also asked to be ready to identify areas in which they had learned something new to them as well as how this would impact the work that they complete in the future. As students shared their experiences both verbally in class discussions, as well as through written paper detailing their experiences, common themes emerged around initial interaction and cross-cultural exchange, language challenges, and accessibility.

Findings

For all the American students, it was their first time interacting with students outside of their own culture and for 34 students they met a French native for the first time. The French group was made up of Francophone students from France, Haiti, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Martinique, so for them it was their first experience interacting with a student outside of their native language. The discussions were held in English as part of the French student's English coursework, and allowed both student groups to discuss their cultures and experiences. Initially students shared trepidation about meeting a foreign student, 25 participants who were graduate students from the US shared that they had an initial fear of meeting a strange foreign student via zoom. Though following the exchange, 27 students mentioned their interest to travel to France after this experience.

As such a second theme emerged, one by which this was a two-way learning experience regarding language, culture, and education systems. As seen in the American group, students increased their confidence to meet and discuss with a non native speaker. While the French group had "double punishment", as it was described by one student, to both speak in English (one content area) while discussing disability (a second content area). 14 French participants addressed their apprehension about the language and discussed how concerned they were to speak clearly and comfortably in English. 10 found the exchange to be pleasant and rewarding despite the language barrier whereas two students stated that it was too difficult for them to effectively communicate. 8 French students were able to self evaluate their level of English at a higher than anticipated level as compared to before the exchange.

Another theme that emerged was the lack of prior knowledge regarding the education system and services for people with disabilities in countries of their counterpart. Participants highlighted that despite laws protecting people with disabilities in both countries, the lack of accessibility for individuals with disabilites and prejudices around people with disabilities still leads to exclusion and discrimination. 11 students from the US shared accessibility as a concern in the US whereas all the students from France shared accessibility as a concern for individuals with disabilities in their country. One of the limitations of this case study was that participants from France were all teachers (or equally qualified professionals working with people with disabilities) while participants from the US were in their teacher preparatory programs. This difference in training was most evident in the discussion around the nuances and intricacies of disability law and accessibility.

Limitations

The limitations of this case study were around the limited time for interviews and the fact that all interviews were virtual. In-person interactions are critical for cross-cultural exchange though participants found zoom to be an intimate, yet accessible way to "travel" to meet someone else. To further the work done in this project, facilitating in-person visits for both students and faculty from both institutions through a study abroad program, faculty exchange, or research opportunities would be a powerful way to continue to exchange and build cross-cultural awareness.

Conclusion

This case study examines the outcomes of a cross-cultural exchange between students from the US and France. Given the vastly different demographic and ideological make-up of the two countries, students revealed themes around language, culture, and education systems. Students identified preconceived ideas that they held and asked questions of each other's experiences. Dewey's theory on reflective practice illustrated how we can process an experience through reflection. The student's own reflections on their virtual exchange identified areas in which they had grown in their own cross-cultural awareness, which is fundamental to a teacher's skill set in diverse classroom settings. To develop this project further, it would be interesting to measure how students put their new understandings into action in future work.

References

Antony, P.J. & Vaughn-Shavuo, F. (2020).Tracking attitudinal changes among teacher candidates in support of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. *Current Studies in Comparative Education, Science and Technology.* 7(1). 10-26.

Akkari, A., Radhouane, M. (2022). Intercultural Education in France. In: Intercultural Approaches to Education. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70825-2_9

Boubtane, E. (2022, May 5). France reckons with immigration amid reality of rising far right. migrationpolicy.org. Retrieved June 16, 2022, from https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/france-immigration-rising-far-right#:~:text=Between%202000%20and%202018%2C%20an,one%2Dquarter%20of%20all%20immigrants.

Chan, K. C., Lam, S.-F., & Covault, J. (2009). White American pre-service teachers' judgments of Anglo and Hispanic student behaviors. Intercultural Education. 20(1), 61-70.

Cho, G., & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, D. (2006). Is ignorance bliss? Pre-service teachers' attitudes toward multicultural education. *The High School Journal, 89(*2), 24-28. DOI?

Cordero, A., & Rodriguez, L. N. (2009). Fostering cross-cultural learning and advocacy for social justice through an iimmersion experience in Puerto Rico. Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 29, 134–152.

Dewey. J (1933). How we think : a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process. Amherst: MA. Prometheus.

Gilin, B., & Young, T. (2009). Educational benefits of international experiential learning in an MSW program. International Social Work, 52, 36–47.

Hilburn, J. h. (2014). Challenges Facing Immigrant Students Beyond the Linguistic Domain in a New Gateway State. Urban Review, 46(4), 654-680.

Hochschild, J. L., & Cropper, P. (2010). Immigration regimes and schooling regimes: Which countries promote successful immigrant incorporation? Theory and Research in Education, 8(1), 21–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509356342

LaBreck, A. (2021, February 1). Color-blind: Examining France's approach to race policy. Harvard International Review. Retrieved June 16, 2022.

Lindsey, E. W. (2005). Study abroad and values development in social work students. Journal of Social Work Education, 41, 229–249.

Meredith, R. A. (2010). Acquiring Cultural Perceptions during Study Abroad: The Influence of Youthful Associates. *Hispania*, *93*(4), 686-702.

Muschell, L. H., & Roberts, H. M. (2011). Bridging the cultural gap: one teacher education program's response to preparing culturally responsive teachers. *Childhood Education, 87*(5), 337-340.

Patton, M. Q.(1990). Qualitative Evaluation and research methods. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Quezada, R. L., & Alfaro, C. (2007). Biliteracy Teachers' Self-Reflections of Their Accounts while Student Teaching Abroad: Speaking from "the Other Side." Teacher Education Quarterly, 34(1), 95–113

Roshan, D. (2005, August 12). Engaging with Islam's disaffected youth. Times Educational Supplement, p. 14

Schor, N. (2001). The Crisis of French Universalism. Yale French Studies, 100, 43–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090581

United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-tps16.html

Walters, L. M., Garii, B., & Walters, T. (2009). Learning Globally, Teaching Locally: Incorporating International Exchange and Intercultural Learning into Pre-Service Teacher Training. Intercultural Education, 20.

Williams, K. and G. Best (2014). Short Study trips Abroad: Internationalizing Business Curricula. Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism, 4(3): 240-325.

Willard-Holt, C. (2001). The impact of a short-term international experience for preservice teachers. Teaching & Teacher Education, 17(4), 505-517.

Yeh, C. J., Ma, P.-W., Madan-Bahel, A., Hunter, C. D., Jung, S., Kim, A. B., et al. (2005). The cultural negotiations of Korean immigrant youth. Journal of Counseling and Development, 83(2), 172-182.

Yeh, C. J., Ma, P., & Madan-Bahel, A. (2005). The Cultural Negotiations of Korean Immigrant Youth. Journal Of Counseling & Development, 83(2), 172-182.