GOING GLOBAL: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BENEFITS OF STUDY ABROAD FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

Study abroad can be a powerful, even life changing experience. Research by Michigan State University Assistant Professor Alyssa Hadley Dunn and colleagues examines the experiences of pre-service teachers who participated in two study abroad programs.

COMPARING PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EXPERIENCES

The researchers wanted to explore the ways that study abroad programs can support and enhance understandings of diversity and pedagogy at a local and global level for pre-service teachers. They compared the experiences of half of the pre-service teachers who participated in two different study abroad programs, either a 4-month student teaching placement in Sweden or a 3-week intensive intercultural course with school observations in France. Participant course documents, responses to surveys administered before and after the study abroad programs, and interview data were all analyzed to uncover student views about how their study abroad program experiences were transformative. Dunn and her colleagues found that relevant and interactive assignments, hands-on experiences, and support for personal and professional growth were critical study abroad programming elements. Moreover, they found that students in both study abroad programs had a new or enhanced interest in global issues and a more nuanced understanding of themselves as educators. The power of study abroad to create opportunities for personal and professional transformation is illustrated by this comment from a study abroad student who participated in the study:

“My quality of teaching will improve...because of every single thing I experienced. Every person I met...every place that I traveled, every moment I spent in placement...helped me better understand who I am...This improved me as a person and, thus, will transfer to my teaching.”

The student clearly sees a positive link between the study abroad experience and his future teaching.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU

The results of this study have important implications for many people within the education system. First, this research encourages district and school leaders to consider the benefits of study abroad programs for pre-service teachers when making hiring and placement decisions. The professional and personal development gains that study abroad can offer are desirable traits in future educators. Well-rounded teachers can personally connect to students and have the necessary skills and knowledge to be an effective teacher. Also, the cross-cultural skills that pre-service teachers gain from study abroad can help them make meaningful connections with an increasingly diverse student population. Second, pre-service teachers themselves should consider the personal and professional benefits of participating in a study abroad program. In addition to personal growth, students might consider the professional advantages for future job prospects of enhanced cultural competence and marketability. Finally, administrators and policy makers who make decisions about supporting study abroad programs should consider the personal and professional returns on investment in study abroad programs. Access to global study
abroad programs for pre-service teachers has personal and professional benefits not only for the participants themselves, but also for the future students that they will teach in their classrooms.

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Summary by Alisha M. B. Brown, doctoral student in educational policy

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