Study Abroad in Teacher Education

Laura Baecher
Hunter College, CUNY

Teachers who understand how culture shapes beliefs can apply this knowledge to foster learning about the world and appreciation for the richness of the diversity in their classrooms (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). One of the most powerful ways in which teachers and teacher educators can develop this cultural awareness is to engage in an international study abroad experience. Study abroad for teachers provides the distance often needed to better see their home contexts with more objectivity (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Kissock & Richardson, 2010) and can also fuel a desire to serve students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Pilonieta, Medina & Hathaway, 2017).

However, there have been relatively few scholarly explorations on study abroad for teachers, as the bulk of study abroad literature focuses on undergraduate student experiences rather than study abroad in professional programs. This special issue of the Global Education Review is an important contribution to both the field of teacher education and of study abroad, as the articles selected provide a grounding in key ethical, conceptual, and design considerations. The four studies chosen for this special issue provide breadth and currency for readers interested in designing, implementing, or researching study abroad for teachers.

This issue also aims to critically explore the tensions of international placements in terms of program type—positioned as service learning, educational tourism, or practicum—and whether host communities benefit. Major and Santoro (2016) assert that the power differentials and the complexities of post-colonialism must be thoughtfully and carefully addressed when teachers from “developed” nations are placed in “developing” nations. If these complexities are addressed and reflected upon, teacher candidates stand to move from compassion to a critical stance, greatly increasing pre-service teachers’ intercultural awareness, knowledge, sensitivity, and competence, as well as their ability to understand, respect, engage with, and ultimately teach diverse cultural groups.

One of the reasons that study abroad in the realm of teacher education is often overlooked—and also why it is challenging to survey—is that ongoing initiatives engaging pre- and in-service teachers are largely developed by individual faculty with personal passion for the work and building on their unique professional networks. Gray and co-researchers (2019) aptly point out that study abroad programming for teachers usually does not arise from careful institutional planning. Instead, they attribute its development to faculty who utilize personal capital and relationships to design and implement them, alongside other staff, administrators, and host educators, who they call architects, champions, and linchpins. “Architects [are] those who developed and launched the initial idea; champions, those who came alongside or joined forces to strengthen and build on first steps; and linchpins, those who do important and detailed work, often behind the scenes, to make programs work. These categories are not
mutually exclusive, and some individuals fill
more than one of these roles” (p. 461).

In the pursuit of celebrating these players
and sharing the work for others interested in
venturing into international experiences, this
special issue on study abroad in teacher
education presents impact studies of study
abroad on pre- and in-service teachers’ beliefs,
skills, knowledge, and practices before, during,
and immediately after their participation, as well
as an examination of conceptual frames for the
design and implementation of teacher study
abroad.

To begin, Morley, Braun, Rohrer, and Lamb
provide a comprehensive and critical systematic
review of the literature on study abroad in pre-
service teacher education. Through the lens of
post-colonial theory, this opening piece uses
devolution technologies to examine the sending and receiving countries of teacher
study abroad participants in the reviewed
literature. It lays the groundwork for
understanding and assessing teacher study
abroad in terms of trends that bring teachers
from the Global North to other sites in the
Global North and South, with little travel flowing
in the opposite direction. The implications of
these patterns are explored, with abundant
evidence to suggest that teacher study abroad
must make efforts to include the impact on host
communities and incorporate the voices and
experiences of host participants. It also cautions
consumers of this literature to be aware that it is
almost always the teacher educator participant
who is doing the design, analysis, and writing up
of these programs.

Against the backdrop of this wide survey of
teacher study abroad literature, Canadian
scholars Ingersoll, Sears, Hirschkorn, Chami,
and Landine provide a multiple, country-wide
examination of Canadian study abroad in
teacher education. Reminding readers of the
many affective benefits—from self-confidence to
empathy—and using the frames of neoliberal
versus affective outcomes, the authors further
advance our understanding of why teacher study
abroad is promoted and point to ways in which
institutions of teacher education could better
 collaborate and communicate to set a national
agenda for teacher learning through study
abroad that includes more support for students
and faculty. The authors also reveal the multiple
goals, benefits, and approaches various teacher
educators have employed to conceptualize their
programs and suggest that rather than preparing
teachers for careers abroad, teacher study
abroad experiences are ultimately best conceived
as supporting teachers who work in schools
becoming increasingly international. Their
distinction between cultural awareness and
critical awareness are important lenses to
evaluate the impact of teacher study abroad.

From the broad Canadian picture, we then
zoom into a consortium program described
within one large U.S. university system that has
been working in teacher study abroad for more
than 40 years. Brennan and Holliday share the
historical beginnings of their teacher study
abroad programs and how these have been
bolstered by intensive pre-trip course
experiences discussing cultural identity and
culturally responsive pedagogy as well as post-
trip reflective coursework. They align their work
with national teacher preparation standards that
make designing such initiatives clearly
associated with broader objectives in educator
preparation programs. They also offer ways to
infuse global awareness throughout a teacher
education program even without study abroad.

Rounding out our special issue, Heimer and
colleagues provide a compelling example of
teacher study abroad, which actually takes place
in participants’ home country. This unique
study abroad program places early childhood
pre-service teachers in the Anishinaabe
indigenous nation for classroom observation,
language learning, and coursework. This article makes a neat circle back to this issue’s opening study, as it illuminates the possibilities inherent in teacher study abroad that challenges notions of Global North, what it means to “travel” across cultural boundaries, and how researchers, teachers, and local host educators can engage in programmatic experiences and research that are mutually beneficial.

References


About the Author

Laura Baecher, Ed.D., is associate professor of TESOL at Hunter College, City University of New York. She has been committed to the field of English language teaching as an ESL/EFL teacher and TESOL teacher educator for over 25 years. Her research interests and publications relate to ESL teacher preparation including content-language integration, teacher leadership, the use of video for teacher learning, and practicum and supervision in teaching English learners. Dr. Baecher also develops and directs study-abroad programs for teachers as a means of developing teachers’ linguistic and professional expertise. She has served as the TESOL International’s Teacher Education Interest Section Chair and as an English Language Specialist for the US Department of State.