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## Cross-Cultural Field Placements: Student Teachers Learning From Schools *and* Communities

THE STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE is typically characterized by a collaboration of school and university—cooperating teacher and university supervisor—to prepare novice educators for the instructional, managerial, and disciplinary demands of classroom teaching. Less often are individuals and groups *outside* of the immediate school environment perceived as active and important contributors to learning outcomes and professional development for student teachers. However, an increasing number of teacher educators are addressing the role of the community in providing student teachers with information and insights that will enhance the classroom experience in vital ways.

For example, DeAcosta (1994) asserts that student teachers must spend time in the local community, “outside school doors” (p. 9), in order to understand and appreciate how various community organizations and agencies serve the families of the children in their elementary and secondary classrooms. Describing community involvement as “complementary to teaching” (p. 2), Clayton (1995) suggests that a synergistic relationship exists between these two areas of student teacher experience.

Further, as student teachers enter classrooms in which the pupils’ cultural makeup differs from their own, community involvement assumes even

greater meaning. According to Zeichner and Hoeft (1996), “Completing . . . student teaching in schools serving pupils with cultural backgrounds different from that of prospective teachers is, to many educators, an inadequate preparation for cross-cultural teaching unless these experiences extend out into the community” (p. 534). This observation echoes Clayton’s (1995) concern over “how well teachers can cope” (p. 2) in cross-cultural classrooms without the knowledge that comes from community involvement. Similarly, through his extensive work with American Indian education, Gilliland (1995) concludes, “Even though you may be an expert teacher, failure to learn the local culture can doom you to failure in the Indian community” (p. 18). Gilliland adds that community involvement is essential, representing a “path to mutual understanding” (p. 20).

Given the documentation that most students entering teacher education programs are from non-minority backgrounds, possess a narrow cultural worldview, and have had limited exposure to cultural diversity (Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Zimpher, 1989), a growing sense of urgency characterizes the preparation of this relatively homogeneous group of future educators who will be facing increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. Steps must be taken to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes necessary to work effectively with children and their

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families from diverse backgrounds (Morris, Taylor, Knight, & Wasson, 1996).

This article presents a pair of cultural immersion projects in which student teaching and community involvement interact synergistically. Several important learning outcomes of these immersion projects are identified, as reported by participants. The article then pinpoints ways in which traditional student teaching assignments can incorporate many of the design principles that characterize cultural learning and preparation for diversity.

### **The Cultural Immersion Projects**

The Cultural Immersion Projects at Indiana University-Bloomington came into existence in the early 1970s as optional supplements to conventional student teaching. Today, two specific projects serve approximately 100-125 elementary, secondary, and all-grades student teachers annually. The American Indian Reservation Project prepares and places student teachers for 17-week teaching assignments in Bureau of Indian Affairs, contract/grant, and public schools across the Navajo Nation, and the Overseas Project prepares and places student teachers for 8-week assignments in national schools of England, Wales, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, India, Australia, and New Zealand, following the successful completion of 10-16 weeks of student teaching in Indiana. Both projects have always featured cultural and community involvement as integral components throughout the experience.

During the academic year prior to student teaching, participants in the Cultural Immersion Projects are required to undergo extensive preparation (including seminars, readings, workshops, sessions with consultants from the host cultural groups) for the cultural values, beliefs, lifestyles, and educational practices in the placement sites for which they have applied. These requirements not only familiarize the student teachers with the schools and cultures in which they will be expected to operate, but they also serve as an effective self-screening device in that applicants whose primary motivation may be to play "tourist" are discouraged by the intensive preparatory work. The preparatory phase receives ongoing review and evaluation by the project director and staff, and feedback from project participants is utilized in

revising assignments to better fit the students' preparatory needs.

While at their reservation or overseas sites, participants are required to engage fully in all teacher-related functions of the school; form friendships with members of the host cultural group in the school and community and become involved in their activities; plan and perform at least one service learning project in the local community; and submit reflective reports identifying local attitudes, cultural values, important issues, and personal and professional learning outcomes and insights.

In the Reservation Project, participants live in the placement school's dormitory, providing academic tutoring, companionship, role modeling, and "life enhancement" activities for the young Navajo dorm residents, and they assist in the preparation and serving of breakfast and dinner in the adjacent cafeteria. In the Overseas Project, participants live with host families in the community and become an integral part of family life. Such dormitory, cafeteria, and home stay experiences enable the student teachers to interact closely with people at the grassroots level in a wide range of activities—from the ordinary tasks of daily life to special events and traditional ceremonies—and thus learn firsthand about the people and communities from which their school pupils emerge.

Contact is maintained with the Cultural Projects office throughout the on-site experience by telephone and correspondence. Staff members write detailed feedback letters to participants upon receiving their assignments and reports, and calls are placed when concerns arise or points require clarification. In the Overseas Project, a supervisory trip is made to at least one of the host nations each academic year; however, time factors and budget constraints prohibit every participant in every country from being visited. Still, these students will have received close and thorough supervision from project staff during the Indiana phase of the student teaching experience.

In the Reservation Project, a site visit is made to each participant at the beginning of the semester, and midway through a staff member returns to "troubleshoot" with those student teachers who need the extra support and to conduct a day-long seminar for the entire group at a central location.

All participants know that the office is a phone call away, should questions or problems arise.

The two projects are designed in such a way that emphasis is placed on *both* classroom teaching and community involvement experiences. Project participants cannot “just student teach” but also must immerse themselves into the lives and cultures of the people with whom they live and work. Consequently, members of the placement community, along with educators and supervisors in the placement school, become vital contributors to learning on many levels. Some of these learning outcomes and their sources are examined in the following sections.

### **Learning Outcomes in Placements**

In a comprehensive study of learning outcomes in the Cultural Projects, Mahan and Stachowski (1993-94) surveyed 109 student teachers in schools and communities on American Indian reservations (n = 46) and in overseas nations (n = 63). At the conclusion of their experiences in these culturally different environments, the student teachers were asked to reflect upon, identify, and record “new learnings” they judged to be “very important.” The student teachers grouped their learnings within the categories of classroom teaching strategies, curriculum content/selection/usage, fact acquisition, human interrelationships, self-discoveries, world human life/global issues, aesthetic knowledge/appreciation, and miscellaneous. They further identified the main source for each learning from a listing of 17 possibilities that were clustered into five major groups: community people, school professionals, school pupils, physical things, and listening/reading/reflecting.

Interesting trends emerged from these data. For both Reservation and Overseas Project participants, community people emerged as frequent and important sources of learning (44.8% and 34.4%, respectively). Given that community involvement, reflection over that involvement, and consequent community learning are requirements of the Cultural Immersion Projects, the contributions of community people to student teacher learning outcomes are expected. For reservation participants, these people usually included the American Indian dorm staff—cooks, supervisors, maintenance workers,

custodial personnel—and their extended families, and for overseas participants, these people typically were the host family and their relatives and neighbors. In both projects, parents of the school pupils; employees in trading posts and shops; the sheep herder or farmer down the road; and people at nearby community centers, senior citizen centers, and churches, all became important sources of learning outcomes for the student teachers required to make new friends, socialize, help with daily tasks of life, and learn more about the cultures in which they had chosen to teach and live for several weeks.

In the Reservation Project, many student teachers discovered that their new friendships often led to opportunities few non-Indians are ever granted. For example, Phillip, an elementary major, commented:

The experiences I have had with my Navajo friends are incredible. Not many people I know have been to a peyote meeting, fire dance, squaw dance, yeibichai, or lightening ceremony.

Ed, a student teacher in English, expressed great enthusiasm for the ongoing exchange of cultural information through shared daily life experiences with the Navajos in his school, dorm, and community:

Cultural immersion rocks the free world! Living, breathing, eating, and laughing with Navajos opened up tremendous avenues of cross-cultural understanding. I had a chance to learn a lot about the Navajo world, and people here learned more about the Anglo ways. Whether we like certain aspects of one another's culture is irrelevant. Cultural immersion allows one to realize that people are the way they are for valid reasons, no judgment attached.

Similarly, Bruce, who student taught in a primary school in rural Wales, echoed Ed's appreciation for the broadened perspectives that result from becoming a part of a community that is culturally different from one's own, and the consequent impact on one's life and career:

Being able to live and teach with members of a community that is in another country is just the beginning to developing a truly global view. This experience will have a positive and dramatic effect on my entire life, and since I am going to teach, it will also affect others. People here have taught me so much about culture, history, foreign governments and policies, and life in general.

Overseas Project participants cited school professionals as learning sources far more often than did Reservation Project participants (38.6% and 21.8%, respectively). In overseas classrooms, the curriculum and teaching methods often differ vastly from familiar U.S. content, materials, and pedagogy, and student teachers therefore may rely heavily on their assigned classroom teachers and other school personnel for necessary information in these areas. Further, the overseas head teachers may be more inclined to structure observing and teaching experiences for the student teachers and maintain ongoing dialogue with them to ensure they are sufficiently well-informed to carry out their responsibilities effectively and successfully. In reservation schools, on the other hand, high "teacher turnover" and cultural adaptation problems exacerbated by geographical isolation and government funding peculiarities probably diminish the aid and instruction student teachers normally receive from their supervising classroom teachers.

Working side-by-side with educators in Australia, for example, gave Mary Jo new insights into schooling and her role as a future high school teacher:

I never realized how narrow-minded I had become about education. I always assumed that all schools had to run in a similar fashion. Now, I have many new ideas and different opinions on education. I said just the other day that I cannot imagine stopping my preservice training after student teaching in Indiana. I have learned so much more in these past two months than I ever could have in a lifetime.

Reservation Project participants credited as many important learning outcomes to school pupils (21.8%) as they did school professionals, and far more often than did Overseas Project participants (10.9%). This trend is probably a function of living in the dormitories, as the student teachers had ongoing contact with these pupils outside of school by supervising after-school and weekend activities, by providing tutoring sessions for individuals who needed extra help with schoolwork, and by being a friend and role model to youngsters whose families lived at a distance on the reservation.

Additionally, the children and youth encountered by Reservation Project participants were probably more "culturally different" than the pupils with whom Overseas Project participants interacted, in

terms of lifestyles, economics, beliefs, and values. Perhaps the Reservation Project student teachers discovered they had much to learn from these young people, given the rare opportunity to view life through their eyes and experiences. For example, Keith's experiences with a Navajo boy in his elementary classroom and in the dorm resulted in the following poem which poignantly conveys his emotion and insight:

You sent me a letter  
"Will you be my friend?"  
Will I?  
In the eyes of an eight year old  
friends come and go  
But you stood by me today  
the only one in my corner  
Is it because I stood in yours?  
"I don't really want to die," you wrote  
But I look in your eyes  
and see the tears spill down  
that hole in your inside.  
Your mom ditched you,  
dad is gone  
Years of rejection  
heaped on your tiny shoulders.  
Yet you stand strong  
and poetic words spring from your mind  
You still feel your feelings  
and drown in them.  
Yet you ask a white man  
almost three times your age:  
"Will you be my friend?"  
I would be honored to.

Thus, the findings of this study (Mahan & Stachowski, 1993-94) indicate that important student teacher learning outcomes can come from a variety of sources—both the traditional and time-proven "educator" sources within the school, *and* those people in the broader community who generally receive little or no recognition in the literature on student teaching. Further, the contributions of community people are often deemed just as or even more significant than those learning outcomes gained through the classroom component of the total student teaching experience.

A comparison of the sources of learning outcomes reported by Overseas Project participants to those reported by "conventional," in-state student teachers reveals another interesting trend and striking difference (Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Stachowski & Mahan, 1995). Student teachers in the Overseas Project credited community people as sources of important learning outcomes much more

often than did the conventional student teachers (34.4% and 8.9%, respectively). Given that the academic and cultural expectations of the Overseas Project require that participants develop relationships with host families and other members of the placement community, it is no wonder, then, that the student teachers rate their host families and other community people as such significant sources of information as these individuals become a focal part of the student teachers' daily experience.

Involvement of this nature 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. Conventional student teachers, however, are less likely to gain these important insights about the community surrounding their school because such requirements and expectations are generally not incorporated into their field experience assignments.

### Service Learning Experiences

Both programs require that participants complete at least one service learning project in the local placement community as a means of getting out of the school environment and into the broader community of which the school and its pupils are a part. Parameters for this assignment include the following: (a) The student teachers should arrange and complete their service learning activities *off* the school grounds, (b) they should plan and complete the activities with supporting American Indian or host nation citizens and/or agencies that are part of the placement community, and (c) they should adhere to the "three R's" of service learning. The latter specify that chosen activities should represent *realistic* tasks that serve the community, the activities should include a strong *reflective* component whereby the participants extend the learning derived from the experience, and the activities should be based on the premise of *reciprocal exchange* between equals. The student teachers are further required to submit a written report providing documentation of the activity from conception to conclusion (Stachowski, 1996).

Reservation and Overseas Project participants have completed a great variety of service learning projects in their placement communities, working closely with Navajo and overseas community mem-

bers of all ages and from all walks of life. For example, in the Reservation Project, student teachers have helped to herd sheep and cattle; assisted with food preparation at tribal fairs, ceremonies, and powwows; labored in community beautification projects such as cleanups of lakes and roadsides; and assisted at rug auctions. In the Overseas Project, student teachers have helped out in nursing homes and in the delivery of meals to the homebound; served as leaders for Girl Guides and scout troops; provided adult literacy instruction; and assisted on village planning committees and at national wildlife parks.

Performing service learning projects in reservation and overseas communities reaps rewards for all individuals involved, but for the student teachers in particular, a special set of outcomes is achieved. Stachowski and Visconti (in press) found that upon reflection, student teachers identified the following benefits accrued as a result of their service learning activities: a greater understanding and appreciation for the nature of other people's lives, a greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, a sense of belonging within their host communities, a positive attitude toward volunteering in the future, an opportunity to learn things that cannot be learned in a classroom, and a commitment to make service learning a part of the curriculum in their future elementary and secondary classrooms.

To illustrate, Stephanie, an elementary student teacher in New Zealand, marveled at all she learned while assisting with a sporting competition for boys and girls:

I had the opportunity to meet some new people in the community and relate with many parents from my school, work with children in a social atmosphere, and observe parents interacting with their children. In my role as a student teacher, I would have been unable to achieve all of these goals. In planning and carrying out this service learning project, I experienced more than I could in a week on the school grounds.

Similarly, Kellard, a secondary student teacher in Ireland, explained that through his service learning project of working on a farm in County Limerick, he was able to shed his "outsider" status:

I was privileged to work within a community not as some daring do-gooder, but as a member of that community. This allowed me to experience rather than

just watch how the people of Ireland live, work, and enjoy their lives.

Ed, a Reservation Project participant who possesses considerable musical talent, performed with Navajo musicians, members of Artists of Indian America, in a community concert in his placement school's gym. Ed's Australian didgeradoo complemented the guitar and traditional flutes, and the blend of instruments, rhythms, and dynamics captivated the audience. Ed reflected on the experience:

In the human universe there are emotions that transcend notions of skin color, cultural upbringing, and racial stereotypes. We all admire mystic canyons carved in space and time, patterns in the sand, and the universal language, music. It is so easy to make hasty generalizations along race or musical genre. It is much more difficult and much more the truth to take each person, each moment, as they come, stripped of all embedded generalities. This is the challenge of a lifetime that I make to myself.

### **Community and Pupil Self-Esteem**

Finally, Stachowski (1997) recently documented efforts of Reservation Project student teachers to bring elements of the reservation community into their elementary and secondary classrooms. Forty-three (43) reservation participants were asked to identify ways in which they had strived to promote the self-esteem of the pupils in their classrooms, recognizing that American Indian youth represent one group frequently described as lacking in self-esteem (Gilliland, 1995), perhaps in part because underlying cultural values are overlooked or ignored by many non-Indian educators (Hornett, 1990; Rhodes, 1994).

Of the total 304 different efforts to promote self-esteem that these student teachers reported, over one-fourth (26%) pertained to using culturally relevant teaching units, materials, and resources. Within this category, the student teachers had planned lessons in which their pupils interviewed grandparents and other community elders, and these people were brought into the classroom to serve as learning resources for the pupils and student teachers alike.

Further, local Navajo artists, historians, and others were invited to the classrooms to talk about their work and share their experiences. Thus, the student teachers recognized that the surrounding

community is an invaluable source of important learning outcomes, and their efforts to include community members in classroom activities reflected their interest in and respect for their pupils' cultural background.

Taken together, the findings that have emerged over the years in the American Indian Reservation Project and the Overseas Project suggest that community involvement and student teaching can and should go hand-in-hand, that the synergistic relationship to which Clayton (1995) refers does indeed exist. Further, the learning outcomes that result from ongoing community involvement are highly valued by the student teachers, not only for the cultural knowledge and insight gained and the special friendships fostered but also for the direct application such learning outcomes have to classroom teaching itself. As Michelle wrote at the conclusion of her Reservation Project experience, "I'm taking away a knowledge I could never have gotten out of *any* book."

### **Implications for Student Teaching**

Of course, not all student teachers can be assigned to schools on American Indian reservations, in foreign nations, and in other "culturally different" placement sites. Cost and placement logistics prohibit many teacher education majors from experiencing schooling and life in such diverse settings. However, every student teaching assignment *can* be regarded as a cultural immersion experience marked by ongoing community involvement, whether placement is on a reservation, adjacent to campus, overseas, or in one's hometown. All schools—urban, rural, small town, or suburban—operate within a culture possessing accepted values, beliefs, and behaviors that influence the schooling pupils receive. Not always are those cultures studied and understood, but financially feasible steps to do so can be designed.

Further, all schools exist within a community where school, people, and events interact continuously. Student teachers must be encouraged, indeed required, to leave their classrooms and explore those people, objects, and events in the communities of which their schools and pupils are a part. Thus, a restructuring of student teaching assignments to include the contributions of community

people would reflect that these individuals have important insights, values, and aspirations to share with the teachers who will be serving the community's youth (Mahan, 1994; Mahan & Stachowski, 1993-94). In fact, in a recent study of the structure and outcomes of the American Indian Reservation Project, Zeichner and Melnick (1996) conclude:

Given the scope of the task before us today in preparing teachers to teach many students who have backgrounds and life experiences different from their own, it seems important for the teacher education community to further explore ways to make community experiences an integral part of the preparation of all teachers. (p. 193)

What requirements could be woven into the design of any student teaching assignment to promote cultural learning and preparation for diversity while developing the bond between school and community? American Indian principals and social/economic leaders, foreign school administrators and civic spokespersons, socially sensitive teachers, and teacher education theorists, interviewed at work and at conferences over the past 20 years by the authors, suggest the following ways to strengthen the bond between schools of education, public schools, and communities.

- Student teachers—either individually or in small groups of two to four—could be required to plan and perform at least one service learning project in the placement community during the course of the student teaching assignment. By adhering to the “three R’s” of realistic, reflective, and reciprocal exchange, student teachers will work alongside of community members toward shared goals and gain insight into community concerns that could not be achieved in the classroom alone.

- Student teachers could be required to identify, visit, and describe community libraries, museums, historical displays, historical celebrations and reenactments, and other places and events that reveal something of the community's history, evolution, and culture.

- Student teachers could be expected to complete structured interviews of community people—parents, local government figures, shopkeepers, farmers—to gain an understanding of how these individuals think about school, good teachers, what children should learn, the future, important community issues, and other relevant topics.

- Student teachers could become involved with local minority advocacy groups serving Hispanics, African Americans, and other ethnic/cultural minority populations living in the placement community. By becoming familiar with the groups' missions and by assisting in their advocacy work, student teachers will better understand the backgrounds and cultures of the minority youth who are in their classrooms.

- Student teachers could be expected to precede the student teaching assignment with some kind of community agency placement to gain familiarity with local human conditions, needs, and services, and to better understand the environments from which the community's school-aged children come.

- Future student teachers, while enrolled in methods or early experience classes, could listen to or view educational radio or television programs and research books and articles on the local community. Just as many businesses study a community in great depth before opening a shop there, so too should student teachers study their placement community before and while attempting to meet its educational needs.

- Student teachers could be required to write about these various community-based activities and reflect upon the specific learning outcomes achieved and the related insights gained. Further, student teachers could describe ways in which they have applied this information to the school experience itself, whether in terms of their interactions with the parents of their pupils, their use of instructional materials and resources, their selection of curriculum content, their own continued professional development, or other relevant dimensions of the student teaching assignment.

## **Conclusion**

Student teaching has the potential to be much more than just a school-based experience with the classroom teachers and university supervisors having the greatest—if not the only—influence on what student teachers learn. If teacher educators do indeed agree that cultural learning and preparation for diversity are valued outcomes of a teacher preparation program, steps must be taken to ensure that such components are incorporated into the program



design. One step involves the necessary and possible allocation of more teacher education funds to realize those cultural and community-based experiences. If they are indeed a priority, they can be created.

It makes sense for the kinds of experiences described above to be required in courses immediately preceding student teaching and during the student teaching assignment that spans several weeks in the same placement community. We must expand our thinking about student teaching to include immersion into the local community and culture while *at the same time* honing those instructional, managerial, and disciplinary skills that all good teachers need. The outcome will be more culturally sensitive and better informed educators who see their elementary and secondary pupils, as well as themselves, in the broader sense as members of the community in which their school is located.

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