

IMPACTS OF A STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM IN NORTHWEST CHINA ON TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Yuliang Liu, Ph. D.

Professor Instructional Technology, Department of Educational Leadership, Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville, Edwardsville, Illinois 62026, USA

E-mail: yliu@siue.edu

Craig Miner, Ph.D.

Professor

Special Education, Department of Teaching and Learning, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville,
Edwardsville, Illinois 62026, USA

E-mail: cminer@siue.edu

Abstract: The study was designed to investigate how a study abroad program with an experiential learning experience in China affected teacher education students in the U. S. in May 2016. The study used the exploratory mixed methods design to collect data. A group of 16 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in study abroad. Student performance was assessed based on (a) participation, journals, reflection papers, and electronic portfolios as well as (b) the diversity standard of the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards in the U.S. Results indicated all participants enjoyed the program and benefited professionally from it in a variety of aspects such as their increased understandings of culture and diversity, the similarities and differences between the Chinese and the American educational systems, as well as teacher's identity and professionalism. International implications resulted from the study findings.

Keywords: China, experiential learning, special and general education, K-12, study abroad,

Introduction

Research context

Study abroad programs in the U.S. are not new. Today, diversity education, cultural awareness, and internationalization have become an integral part of college and university programs and curriculum (King & Young, 1994). Just as Lumby and Foskett (2016) point out, internationalization has become a significant issue in higher education, driven by both business objectives and educational philosophy. Early in 1959, Leonard conducted a dissertation study about the selected general outcomes of a foreign travel study program of American college students. Leonard concluded that "Without exception, the students gained in their general knowledge of current affairs, important persons, and the problems of the area visited. These gains were not the result of formal classroom work" (p. 1644). According to Mukherjee (2012), the Higher Education Act of 1965 for the first time gave discretionary authority to colleges and universities to use federal financial aid to support student study abroad. Since then, U.S. study abroad has evolved significantly. According to the Lincoln Commission (2005), the U.S. proposed sending about one million students abroad each year to promote educational and cultural exchange for intercultural understanding, peace and global citizenship (p. iv). The Lincoln Commission further stated that "What nations don't know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent" (p. i).

Literature review

Study abroad programs have demonstrated a variety of profound benefits for students. Praetzel and Curcio (1996) pointed out that "study abroad fosters improved understanding of foreign cultures, people, and institutions, develops more open mindedness and tolerance, instills greater confidence, and promotes faster maturation" (p. 177-178). Additionally, Peden (2001) described five major benefits that college students receive from study abroad programs: (1) academic credit, (2) language credit, (3) practical experience, (4) résumé building, and (5) an experience of a lifetime. The major benefits based on recent literature in study abroad are reviewed and summarized as follows.

1. Impact on globalization

Recent research has indicated that study abroad programs have impacted students' ideas related to globalization. Egron-Polak, Hudson, and Gacel-Avila (2010) reported that over 90% of participants in study abroad programs agreed that the internationalization programs result in significant benefits, including the broader international outlook of faculty and students and an enhanced quality of academic work. Douglas and Jones-Ridders (2001) later conducted a preliminary study of the relationship between study abroad programs and the programs' location and student worldmindedness or globalization. They found that (1) students with study abroad experiences have a stronger sense of worldmindedness than their counterparts without such experiences and (2)

the extent of the cultural differences between a student's point of origin and host site significantly affects his/her sense of worldmindedness.

2. Impact on personal development

Recent research has indicated that study abroad programs have impacted students' ideas related to personal development. Brindley, Quinn, and Morton's (2009) review of student teachers from an international internship identified a growing sense of professionalism and understanding of cultural differences. Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) conducted a large impact study of short-term abroad programs based on data collected over a two-year period from over 2,300 students. They concluded that short-term study abroad programs are "worthwhile educational endeavors that have significant self-perceived impacts on students' intellectual and personal lives" (p. 174). In addition, Dolby (2004) studied the relationship between study abroad and national identity among a group of American college students. Dolby found that study abroad provides participants with the possibility of encountering both the world and oneself—particularly one's national identity—in a context that may stimulate new inquiries and formulations of that self. Further, Dolby concluded that "the perspectives that students bring back with them are part of public discourse in the United States and have implications for the future of American democracy, the public good, and the constant renegotiation of the material and imaginative space that is America" (p. 173).

In addition, Cushner and Mahon (2002) studied the nature of the international student teaching experience and its impact on the professional and personal development of 50 new teachers. Participants reported how such an experience affected them personally as well as professionally. These impacts included their beliefs about self and others as reflected via increased cultural awareness and improved self-efficacy, as well as professional development related to globalmindedness.

3. Impact on career choice and professionalism

Recent research has indicated that study abroad programs have impacted students' ideas related to career choice and professionalism. Norris and Gillespie (2009) conducted a survey study based on data collected by the Institute for the International Education of Students. The data involved 17,000 participants of its programs between 1950 and 1999. They found that the study abroad program can help participants further reflect on their own academic study and has significantly impacted the majority of participants' future career choices, specifically related to global aspects. Such results were also supported by later researchers. Franklin (2010) found that "study abroad has significant long-lasting career impact and professional applicability. Results demonstrate that a majority of study abroad alumni in the sample gravitate toward a line of work with an international or multicultural dimension" (p. 186).

4. Impact on the understanding and practices of teacher education students

The impact is especially true for teacher education majors. Recent research has indicated that study abroad programs have impacted teacher education students' ideas related to teaching. Just as Batey and Lupi (2012) point out, "More than ever, there is the need for pre-service teachers to have significant cross-cultural experiences that enable them to teach with, work with, and continue to learn from people different from themselves" (p. 42). Sandgren, Elig, Hovde, Krejci, and Rice (1999) surveyed and interviewed a group of college faculty with short-term study abroad faculty leading experience to locations worldwide. They found that short-term study abroad experiences have a positive influence on "globalizing" pre-service teacher participants' teaching.

Based on Marx and Moss (2011), student participation in a teacher education study abroad program had positive influences on students' intercultural development in terms of culture and languages. Mahan and Stachowski (1994) described that pre-service teachers who chose to participate in an international teaching experience were more likely to reflect on themselves both professionally and personally than their peers who remained in the home student teaching placement. This result was supported by other researchers, such as Cushner (2007). According to Cushner, pre-service teachers thought that study abroad programs could offer a broader view of teaching than that in the home student teaching placement. Clement and Outlaw (2002) point out another major benefit of participating in a student teaching placement abroad: the program can offer pre-service teachers the opportunity to contrast and compare their classroom teaching experiences abroad with their experience in the U.S. In addition, Lupi, Batey, and Turner (2012) examined a group of 56 pre-service teachers during a three-week international internship in UK. They found that American students not only "reported differences in almost every aspect of their involvement in the British schools" (p. 492), but also "were able to articulate the deeper meaning of an international internship" (p. 493).

Based on the above literature, study abroad programs have reported a variety of impacts related to students both personally and professionally. It is clear that the personal and professional benefits of study abroad programs on participants are profound and lifelong in a variety of aspects. But as Hackney, Boggs, and Borozan (2012) suggest, the predicting student participation in study abroad programs is a complicated process that is affected by various internal and external factors including personal, situational, and program features.

Purpose of the Study

As mentioned previously, there is not much research that specifically focuses on the impact of study abroad on teacher education. This study was to investigate how a study abroad program with an experiential learning experience in China affected teacher education students in a variety of ways. The authors' university currently has about 1200 educational students enrolled in nine undergraduate programs. Students in all of these undergraduate programs have not been exposed to any study abroad programs in China due to the university's past academic focus and availability of funding in travel study. This study was selected to be funded by the Excellence in Undergraduate Education (EUE) program from the Provost Office in the authors' institution in 2015. This funded project has created a new, unique opportunity for general and special education, psychology, and learning, culture, and society majors at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Specifically, this program offered a choice for education students to enroll in any of these existing special topics courses: Health Education, Curriculum & Instruction, Special Education, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Educational Psychology, Foundations, & Research.

Research Questions

The major research question was: How did the study abroad program impact pre-service teachers' understandings of (a) culture and diversity in terms of social and cultural factors influencing teaching and learning in special and general education at elementary and secondary schools in Lanzhou, China, (b) the major similarities and differences between the Chinese and the American elementary and secondary educational systems, and (c) teacher identity and professionalism?

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a mid-size midwest public university in the U.S. in fall 2015 and spring 2016. Initially, 24 students aging from 21 to 46 years old applied for the program, but only 16 students were selected to participate based on the predetermined screening criteria. Those criteria included students' motivational levels, GPA, academic backgrounds, professional goals, and related travel experiences. Two faculty members led the program in May 2016. The first faculty, a native Chinese speaker, received his PhD in educational psychology in the United States about 20 years ago. The second faculty is a Caucasian faculty specializing in special education. Therefore, both faculty have adequately complementary expertise to lead this group.

Of the 16 students, there were 2 males (1 Caucasian and 1 African American) and 14 females (12 Caucasians and 2 African Americans), 13 undergraduates, and 3 graduate students. Their majors were as follows: 8 juniors and seniors in special education, 3 in early childhood education, 2 in secondary education, 1 in physical education, 1 in psychology, and 1 in learning, culture, and society. Two of them (one male and one female) were vegetarian. There were students, including the 3 graduate students, enrolled in 6 credit hours while 9 students enrolled in 3 credit hours. None of the 16 students had visited China previously; a majority of them had no previous international travel experience. The gender representation in this program was consistent with findings from other recent national studies. That is, a majority of the participants were Caucasian females (Hoffa, 2007; Lincoln Commission, 2005; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2003; Stroud, 2010).

Research design

This project used the exploratory mixed methods design to collect data due to the nature of the study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). Specifically, first, qualitative data were collected first from participants' field notes and journals and was more heavily weighted than quantitative data in the analysis. Second, the quantitative was collected online via Blackboard twice: as a pretest before flight departure in the beginning of May and as a posttest after the return to the U. S. at the end of May 2016.

Procedure and data collection

This study was approved by the IRB at the authors' institution. The faculty leaders offered several lecture/orientation sessions in the U.S. before the trip. They included: (a) introduction to special, general, and higher education in China and the U.S., (b) overview of cultural factors influencing education in China, and (c) political and social factors influencing education in China.

The study had field visits in Lanzhou and Beijing, China in May 2016. During these visits, participants experienced Chinese culture and toured two universities and eight elementary and secondary schools. In Lanzhou and Beijing, China, the faculty leaders offered daily organizational morning debriefings and reflections from the previous day activities. These helped the group instill a sense of class discipline and provided opportunities for discussing important daily problems and issues.

The group spent 10 days in Lanzhou, northwest China. The group visited Northwest Normal University (NWNNU) and its affiliated elementary, middle, and high schools, three private special education schools, one public middle school, and one public school for Tibetans only (grades 7-12). NWNNU faculty members in China gave 2 focused speeches to the group about the special, general, and higher educational systems and culture in northwest China. In addition, the group visited Labuleng Lamasery (an ancient Tibetan Temple and University) and toured Lanzhou city. In Beijing, the group spent two days on university tour and cultural visits including Beijing University of Technology, the Great Wall, Ming Tombs, Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, and Tiananmen Square.

The group were required to write the daily journal reflections focusing on expressing personal perspectives on the events occurring and/or discussing questions related to the field trip of the day. Most students worked hard to write the required journals every day, especially in the evening. Such journals not only helped students collect data for a variety of course projects and provided an avenue to explore the cultural significance of the events and/or field trips, but also helped them to reflect on their visits to educational establishments, what they learnt and how it made them re-evaluate their own practice in the US.

The quantitative data were collected using an online survey based on one of the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (<http://www.isbe.net/rules/archive/pdfs/24ark.pdf>) to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The standard assessed is a required one about diversity: "The competent teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners". The survey had six items to be assessed against the 6 Knowledge Indicators related to the diversity standard using a 5-point Likert scale; "1" was the lowest rating and "5" was the highest. The surveys were completed by students using the online Blackboard and were used to measure any attitude changes between the pretest before the trip and the posttest after the return to the U.S.

Students' performance assessments were based on several components. They included: (a) participation in lecture/orientation sessions held in both the U.S. and China, (b) daily morning debriefings in Lanzhou and Beijing, (c) daily journal reflections, (d) participation in field visits, and (e) reflection papers about important personal observations and reflections about education in China along with examples and literatures to support reflections by comparing and contrasting China with the U.S.

Results and Discussion

Overall, several major themes emerged from the results of qualitative data and they were also supported by the quantitative data. The findings of the study indicate that the study abroad program made an important impact on students' understandings of culture and diversity, the similarities and differences between the Chinese and the American educational systems, as well as teacher's identity and professionalism. Specific student increased understandings of these issues are reported below. Those included culture, career and professional goals, interaction and socialization, similarities and differences in elementary and secondary education between China and the U.S., how the U.S. should learn from China, special education in China, overall personal development, lifetime learning, and diversity. While some results are consistent with recent findings in the literature, others have added new and unique perspectives in the literature related to teacher education.

I. Understandings of Culture and Diversity

Impact on cultural understanding

Students' personal reflections in the study consistently indicated the study abroad program made a significant impact on their understandings of the Chinese culture, family, and educational system. This is consistent with findings from other recent studies (e. g., Lincoln Commission, 2005; Praetzel & Curcio, 1996). Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand much about the Chinese culture, family, and educational system. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings in the literature. They found that they have learned some unique aspects related to the Chinese culture, family, and educational system. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, most Chinese

people are the most warm and welcoming group of people they have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Anywhere they went, they felt comfortable, happy, and welcome. In China, generally, people are excited and openly curious to other people, including foreigners. In contrast, the American people are cautious to new people, as well as are courteous and polite but will keep a safe distance. Family is probably the number one priority for the culture and that is making school a very close second. This showed that family is very important, but education is right behind it. The Chinese people are extremely obedient and respect their elders and teachers, way more than they have experienced in America.

Impact on interaction and socialization

Some participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their interaction and socialization styles, which will affect their teaching styles in classroom. Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand how the study abroad program can impact their interaction and socialization styles in education. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools, universities, and Labuleng Lamasery in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with. This is consistent with findings from other recent studies (e. g. Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009).

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings about the religions of Buddhism and Taoism in the literature. They found that the experience they had at the Lamasery would profoundly change their impression with life and their positions in it. Further, that experience also gave them a little more reflection on how they treat and interact with each other not only in life, but in the opportunities they provide for those they deem less fortunate than them.

Impact on diversity understanding

In addition to the above qualitative comments, the quantitative data related to diversity from the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards were analyzed using SPSS Version 23. Tables 1 and 2 below indicate that the results of the paired sample *t* test in diversity items at pretest and posttest indicated that there were statistically significant mean differences in the two diversity items regarding (a) second language strategies and (b) cultural perspectives and biases. Specifically, the quantitative scores in those two items were significantly higher at posttest than those at pretest. Additionally, since the sample size was small, a nonparametric statistical procedure, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (Siegel & Castellan, 1988) was calculated. Table 3 below indicates that the results of parametric paired sample *t* test and the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test were consistent. Therefore, the students’ qualitative comments mentioned previously also supported the quantitative results in the study.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Diversity Items at Pretest and Posttest

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	1exceptionality in learning	4.06	16	1.06	.26
	2exceptionality in learning	4.3	16	.87	.22
Pair 2	1second language strategies	3.38	16	1.31	.33
	2second language strategies	4.44	16	.89	.22
Pair 3	1impact of individual experiences	4.88	16	.34	.09
	2impact of individual experiences	4.94	16	.25	.06
Pair 4	1differences in approaches to learning	4.56	16	.63	.16
	2differences in approaches to learning	4.75	16	.44	.12
Pair 5	1impact of cultural and community diversity	4.50	16	.52	.13
	2impact of cultural and community diversity	4.69	16	.478	.12
Pair 6	1cultural perspectives and biases	4.38	16	.719	.18
	2cultural perspectives and biases	4.98	16	.25	.06

Table 2
Results of Paired *t* Test in Diversity Items at Pretest and Posttest

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	1exceptionality in learning - 2exceptionality in learning	-.25	1.57	.39	-1.09	.59	-.64	15	.53
Pair 2	1second language strategies - 2second language strategies	-1.06	1.77	.44	-2.01	-.12	-2.40	15	.03*
Pair 3	1impact of individual experiences - 2impact of individual experiences	-.06	.44	.11	-.29	.17	-.57	15	.58
Pair 4	1differences in approaches to learning - 2differences in approaches to learning	-.18	.66	.16	-.53	.16	-1.15	15	.27
Pair 5	1impact of cultural and community diversity - 2impact of cultural and community diversity	-.19	.83	.21	-.63	.26	-.89	15	.38
Pair 6	1cultural perspectives and biases - 2cultural perspectives and biases	-.56	.81	.20	-.99	-.13	-2.76	15	.01**

* $< .05$; ** $< .01$

Table 3

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks		
2exceptionality in learning - 1exceptionality in learning	Negative Ranks	4 ^a	6.50	26.00		
	Positive Ranks	7 ^b	5.71	40.00		
	Ties	5 ^c				
	Total	16				
2second language strategies - 1second language strategies	Negative Ranks	2 ^d	7.25	14.50		
	Positive Ranks	11 ^e	6.95	76.50		
	Ties	3 ^f				
	Total	16				
2impact of individual experiences - 1impact of individual experiences	Negative Ranks	1 ^g	2.00	2.00		
	Positive Ranks	2 ^h	2.00	4.00		
	Ties	13 ⁱ				
	Total	16				
2differences in approaches to learning - 1differences in approaches to learning	Negative Ranks	2 ^j	4.00	8.00		
	Positive Ranks	5 ^k	4.00	20.00		
	Ties	9 ^l				
	Total	16				
2impact of cultural and community diversity - 1impact of cultural and community diversity	Negative Ranks	4 ^m	6.00	24.00		
	Positive Ranks	7 ⁿ	6.00	42.00		
	Ties	5 ^o				
	Total	16				
2cultural perspectives and biases - 1cultural perspectives and biases	Negative Ranks	1 ^p	4.00	4.00		
	Positive Ranks	8 ^q	5.13	41.00		
	Ties	7 ^r				
	Total	16				
Test Statistics^a						
	2 exceptionality in learning - 1exceptionality in learning	2 second language strategies - 1second language strategies	2 impact of individual experiences - 1impact of individual experiences	2 differences in approaches to learning - 1differences in approaches to learning	2 impact of cultural and community diversity - 1impact of cultural and community diversity	2 cultural perspectives and biases - 1cultural perspectives and biases
Z	-.642 ^b	-2.207 ^b	-.577 ^b	-1.134 ^b	-.905 ^b	-2.310 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-	.521	.027*	.564	.257	.366	.021*

tailed)						
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a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test; b. Based on negative ranks; * < .05

II. *The Similarities and Differences between the Chinese and the American Educational Systems Impact on understanding similarities and differences in elementary and secondary education between China and the U.S.*

Some participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their understanding of similarities and differences in elementary and secondary education between both countries. This is consistent with findings from other recent studies (e. g., Batey & Lupi, 2012; Cushner, 2007; Marx & Moss, 2011). Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand how the study abroad program can help them understand similarities and differences in elementary and secondary education between both countries. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings in the literature. They found that they noticed a few major differences in the American and Chinese education systems. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, China has different policies and practices for education majors and teaching experiences as well as high stakes testing. China has some of the highest test scores in the entire world. America doesn't even come close to China. But why are schools in China excelling at a more rapid rate than in the United States? The Chinese attitude toward education is different. For example, the Chinese value education much more than the U. S. In addition, some students found that respect was one of the first things they noticed when we visited the many general education schools in China. Losing respect or showing disrespect is seen as a dishonor to themselves, family, friends, or to the Chinese culture. The Chinese students are respectful to their teachers and behavior management and punishment procedures are pretty much non-existent. They think this is due to the parental involvement and respect that is taught in the Chinese culture.

Meantime, some students' observations have led them to believe that the systems are very similar in both countries. For example, instruction is very similar. In addition, every school they visited, including both universities they stayed at, was big on extra-curricular activities like sports and several types of out-of-the-ordinary clubs. One middle school even offered Tai Chi as an elective. One of the high schools even had study abroad opportunities, which was unexpected. This could help to shed an important light on the expectations of the US students.

Impact on understanding of special education in China

Some participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their understanding of how special education is operated in China. Before the study abroad trip, although about half of the group has interest in special education, most students did not understand how special education is operated in China. This is another unique result not widely reported in the literature. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings in the literature. They found that special education was a little different from the U. S. in spite of the same goal of making a difference in the student's life. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, special education schools are separate than general education schools in China and they have a different curriculum than students in general education. But in the U.S., we value inclusion in our schools.

Impact on how the U.S. should learn from China

Some participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their understanding of how the U.S. should learn from China in elementary and secondary education. This is a unique result not widely reported in the literature. Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand why the U.S. should learn from China. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings in the literature. They found that the United States could really benefit from China's system in the following ways as well. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, the American students would really benefit from learning other languages and cultures from an early age as the Chinese do. The more you know about other cultures the more holistic a society can be. In addition, the U. S. students should

be required to learn a second language starting in kindergarten. Whether it be Spanish, French, or any other language, students should be required to learn another language. Starting a second language in high school is not beneficial. Additionally, the U.S. government could provide assistance when it comes to prioritizing schools in the budget. Both countries have great school systems in spite of different political contexts but they could also really learn and grow from each other.

III. Teacher's Identity and Professionalism Impacts on teaching career and professional goals

Some participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their career choices in education. This is consistent with findings from other recent studies (e. g., Franklin, 2010; Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand how the study abroad program can impact their career choices in education. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and readings in the literature. They found that the trip has really opened their eyes to a whole new world of education and culture about career goals. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, one student mentioned that the trip would have chosen her educational field differently and would go into special education. That student contacted some really amazing special education teachers and students in the region and really saw what a real difference special education can make on a special needs students in the U.S. and China. In addition, one student mentioned that she is an elementary education major but she has been considering endorsing in special education because of the opportunity experienced in China.

Impact on overall personal development

A majority of the participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their overall personal development, which positively affected their teaching styles in the classroom. This is consistent with findings from other recent studies (e. g., Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Dolby, 2004). Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand how and whether the study abroad program impacted their overall personal developments. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings in the literature. They found that the trip to China was definitely one of the best experiences they have ever had. However, the findings here have all been mediated through the 'lens' of the researchers. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, first, this journey of self-exploration and education through the culture of Northwest China has turned into beautiful memories and they would hold them in a special place in their hearts forever. Second, some students realized how many preconceived notions they had about China and how much that can hinder a person who is trying to learn about the culture with an open mind. They were thankful for the experience and had a much better understanding of the two countries. Third, this was a great opportunity to not only open their eyes and soften their hearts, but to be able to empower cultural understanding, broaden their educational knowledge, and change the lives of others (as well as their own) and that is invaluable. Finally, some reflected that they enjoy diversity and meeting people. They are looking forward to continuing their journey toward learning Mandarin in order to understand the Chinese culture well.

Impact on lifetime learning

Many participants indicated that the study abroad program impacted their understanding of lifetime learning. This is consistent with findings from other recent studies (e. g., Peden, 2001; Praetzel & Curcio, 1996). Before the study abroad trip, most students did not understand how the study abroad program can impact their lifetime learning. During the trip, students learned a lot about those issues based on the daily field visits, observations in schools and universities in China, as well as communications with the persons they met and talked with.

After the trip, students reflected in connecting study abroad experiences and related readings in the literature. They found that this experience was truly the trip of a lifetime. Specifically, their reflections included, but were not limited to the following. For example, they loved meeting new people and exploring such a wonderful culture. The schools, teachers, and students were so welcoming that it made the trip even better. Being able to see schools from a different culture gave them ideas for their future classrooms and also gave them ideas to share with their classmates. Some are even already planning a next trip to China. In addition, some even expressed that they could not wait to take their experiences and knowledge of education in another culture and incorporate that

into their future general education classrooms. They were also excited about how beneficial experiencing another culture and education could be to a future teacher's classroom and teaching style.

Conclusion

There is not much research that specifically focuses on the impact of study abroad on teacher education. This program provided a much-needed, relevant, and meaningful contribution to teacher education students' global and international perspectives. As seen from the previous section, the research question has been answered. In other words, the study abroad program to northwest China in 2016 made significant impacts on students' understanding of culture and diversity, the similarities and differences between the Chinese and the American educational systems, as well as teacher identity and professionalism. First, the students' qualitative comments indicate that there were several clear themes and patterns consistent with the quantitative results described previously. Second, the results from the quantitative data indicated that the study abroad program has greatly enhanced students' understandings of culture and diversity issues related to the second language strategies, cultural perspectives, and biases in educational settings.

As indicated above, the major findings about students' increased understandings resulting from the study abroad include: impact on students' culture, career, and professional goals; impact on students' understanding of interaction and socialization; impact on understanding of similarities and differences in elementary and secondary education between China and the U.S.; impact on understanding of how the U.S. should learn from China; impact on understanding of special education in China; impact on students' overall personal development; impact on understanding of lifetime learning; as well as impact on understanding of diversity in elementary and secondary education. In all, as mentioned previously, some of the findings have added to the current literature while the others have supported the current literature in the field.

Limitations of the Study

However, similar to any other programs, this study abroad program is not perfect, especially since it was the first time the program was offered to education majors. There were issues that could be improved with more care and planning in the future. For instance, initially, we planned to provide opportunities for students to teach mini-lessons to students in China; however, that could not be accommodated, just as one student mentioned "I was disappointed that we didn't get to teach mini-lessons to the students, because of time constraints. I was really looking forward to being able to connect on a deeper level with these students..." In addition, the group was mixed with both undergraduate and graduate students. It was very challenging to accommodate both subgroups in many aspects such as differing academic disciplines and standards due to their maturity levels and educational objectives. Meantime, one undergraduate student unknowingly lost her U.S. passport upon arrival in Lanzhou in the first night. Therefore, more care such as security precautions should be given to students throughout the trip, from initial departure to the return to the U.S.

International Implications

This study has significant and international practical and theoretical implications for teacher education in the future. As discussed previously, theoretically, this study has not only supported the recent literature, but also enriched the literature by adding new contributions to the literature. Practically, this study has also exhibited a few implications below.

First, for students who have never travelled abroad, the faculty lead should provide more and detailed guides about how to prepare for smooth international travels abroad in the future. This is especially important for any faculty leading international study abroad programs. By addressing the above mentioned limitations, it is expected that the study abroad program will enable students to gain more fruitful and enjoyable experiences.

Second, the impact on students in this study has gradually been exhibited in many ways compared to their peers. Findings indicated there was a shift in our student teachers' identity and professionalism following their study abroad. Many of them shared their study abroad experiences and persuaded their peers to participate in the study abroad programs if available. They mentioned how they will teach differently in the future based on their study abroad experiences. They also highlighted their study abroad experiences on their resumes when they were looking for jobs. Their study abroad experiences have given them a privilege and positive results in seeking jobs in both general and special education areas. Some students even expressed interest in seeking teacher education jobs in China.

Third, teachers with study abroad experience will potentially understand the diverse student needs better and teach them more effectively than those without. Recently, informal conversations with those in the study have

indicated that those students are more confident and prepared when meeting and teaching the minority groups in their student placement.

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