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A Multicultural Internship in South Texas for Minnesota Students: A Qualitative Study

by

John P. Gustafson

Moorhead State University (MSU) in Minnesota initiated an early field-based internship with the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) school district in South Texas during spring quarter 1991. The purpose of the internship was to provide an early multicultural experience that would immerse the interns in a different culture. This program was developed because most preservice and inservice teachers are monocultural and monolingual and are professionally and socially limited (Mahan, 1979). PSJA was a predominantly Mexican-American community.

The South Texas Multicultural Internship at MSU combined early field-based experiences with cultural immersion. Specifically, sophomore students volunteered to spend an entire quarter approximately eighteen hundred miles from campus in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas participating in a 125-hour multicultural internship. The internship assignment was at a grade level or subject area of the students' choice four mornings each week for nine weeks. Professors from campus taught sophomore level required courses during the afternoon. Those courses included: cultural pluralism, the multicultural internship, human growth and development, measurement and evaluation, and conversational Spanish. Internship experiences were integrated into the courses.

The students were immersed in the culture and lifestyle of the region. Zeichner (1990) reported that one of the innovations of the practicum experience was the broadening of the practicum to include the domain of the community. Students participated in the internship at the micro-level by tutoring individual students under teacher direction and forming relationships with children and teachers. They also observed the social context on a macro-level by living in the community.

Literature Review

A review of the literature indicated an increased emphasis on early field experiences ever since the National Education Association [NEA] (1982) called for field based experiences beginning with the first course in education and continuing throughout the entire program. After surveying 174 of the largest teacher education programs of public institutions, Farris, Henniger, and Bischoff (1991) concluded that 99 percent required early clinical experiences which typically ranged from 100 to 160 hours.

Early field experiences described in the literature were normally near the campus community and concurrent with methods courses. Bischoff, Farris, and Henniger (1988) compared two approaches of field-based experience, a half-day and a full-day approach. Once a week field experiences were common (DeLorenzo, 1990). One of the more intensive practicum experiences was described by Zeichner (1990) as two 100-hour experiences. Placement in diverse cultural settings was usually reserved for the student teaching experience.

Benefits of early field experiences were documented in the literature. A common theme was that practicum experiences provided a basis for discussing teaching techniques, relationships with children, and management concerns (DeLorenzo, 1990). DeLorenzo also observed that students

gained confidence in their ability to handle problems. They also understood more clearly the skills and ideas that they needed in order to teach (DeLorenzo, 1990).

Denton (1982) concluded that the early field experience provided a meaningful context for the teaching candidate in subsequent methods coursework. Denton reported that those who had participated in an early field experience analyzed interactions from the perspective of the teacher. According to Heinemann, Obi, Pagano, and Weiner (1992), early field experiences in urban schools diminished stereotypes and fear while energizing and challenging students with new insights about themselves. Theon (1987) concluded that a gain in confidence was apparent for music education majors enrolled in an eight-week early field experience.

Tarrow and Sutter (1994) discussed plans for a cultural immersion program for post-baccalaureate credential candidates in the California State University System. Candidates in that program would combine cultural and language immersion with international programming by spending a year in Mexico and two summers in California.

Two previous studies were published on MSU multicultural programs. In a study comparing MSU student teachers serving in South Texas with MSU student teachers in Minnesota, Cooper, Beare, and Thorman (1990) found that the student teachers in Texas were more comfortable discussing racial issues, encouraged a variety of viewpoints among their students, and held high expectations for students from cultural backgrounds. Aikin (1991) concluded that students in this Multicultural Internship program showed more of a shift away from stereotypical attitudes about Hispanics and Hispanic students than did their peers taking the multicultural class on campus.

Emergent Themes

Fisher (1987) proposed that human beings are essentially storytellers and all forms of human communication can be seen and understood as stories or narratives. According to Hollihan and Riley (1987) shared stories play an important role in the lives of those who tell them. Stories help individuals "capture and relate their experiences in the world" (Hollihan & Riley, 1987, p. 271).

The written responses from two groups of students, spring 1993 and spring 1994, were analyzed and emergent themes were extracted. The group consisted of fourteen interns during spring 1993 and twenty-four interns during spring 1994.

Community Formation. Through journals and group meetings, students were able to tell and share their stories. Interns frequently shared their enthusiasm, excitement, and new experiences during class. In addition to these informal sources of data, interns kept journals and wrote about their experiences at the conclusion of the internship. Interns were asked to compare the culture of the Rio Grande Valley with their own culture from Minnesota. Interns and faculty shared an important experience and developed a mutual respect for each other.

Interns developed their own sense of community by participating in this shared experience. Many did not know any of the other interns prior to this experience. Since all of the interns were enrolled in the same classes, they were encouraged to form study groups. They learned to work and live together while living in an unfamiliar cultural and geographic setting.

Since faculty members lived in the same apartment complex, had class sessions in their apartments, ate with interns on occasion, and traveled to Mexico with interns, there were many intern-faculty out-of-class interactions. Out-of-class student-faculty interaction contributed to:

student satisfaction with college, general feeling of community, personal development, and college persistence (Brown, 1992).

Cultural Awareness. Interns reported that previous beliefs about other cultures were stereotypical and contributed to misconceptions. This experience helped them to recognize individual differences among people of a minority culture. One intern wrote:

Ignorant, I was to any and all other cultures and ethnic people other than my own ... Many cultural and socioeconomic differences exist between these two cultural settings ... This cultural difference has led to my enlightenment that racism does exist ... I was a racist myself without even knowing it.

Another intern realized that high school graduation was a big event in South Texas because, "In some families, the graduating senior may be the first to graduate from high school in their family ever!" Another student contrasted the two cultures:

The people down here live a simple, sometimes tough home life, yet they have a rich knowledge of their culture and background. They really take time to know themselves and the people around them, while people of the north are more concerned with status, earning more money, getting promoted or whatever. The bottom line is we're not family or leisure oriented, we're individually oriented to our work tasks. The relaxed atmosphere here taught me to loosen up a little, to really care more about others and that in learning another culture, I have really become richer as a person myself.

Another student summarized:

I never knew much about the Mexican-American culture; but now I look at it in a different way. I have learned to appreciate it.

Career Decisions. Since these students were sophomores, their career plans were nebulous. Students who were unsure about teaching as a career made the decision during the internship. Most of them decided in the affirmative. Before leaving for home, PSJA administrators met with the interns. The key question asked by PSJA administrators was: "Would you consider student teaching here and starting your career here after student teaching?" The response was affirmative. Several talked about trying to complete their education in less time so that they could return to South Texas sooner. Some have done that and have accepted positions with PSJA school district. The general feeling was described by this student: "The things that I have seen so far only make me want to further my involvement down here in this district."

The students were inspired and could not only see that teachers could make a difference in the lives of their students, but began to envision themselves as teachers. One intern insightfully wrote:

This internship in the Rio Grande Valley has opened my eyes to a whole new world of education, what it means to be a "real" teacher, and how the similarities and differences between children of one culture to another effect [sic] their own education ... My [cooperating] teacher educates the children with her mind and her heart ... I have become a better person, more tolerant, understanding, and accepting of different cultures which has opened both my eyes and my heart.

Another student compared her internship to a tutoring assignment in the introduction to education class that she had taken previously while on campus. She said:

I think it took my experience here to sink in how much an influence geography and culture go hand in hand ... I am learning how much more respect I am receiving here from my students than I ever did when I experienced my ED200 lab [Introduction to Education]. I strongly believe that the culture down here as far as my students respect me much more, and I feel that I have made the right choice by going into the teaching profession.

Personal Growth. Another emergent theme from students' stories was a new sense of self-assurance and confidence as a result of this internship. One intern who was visited by her parents in South Texas reported that her parents could see a positive change in her as a result of the experience of living in the South Texas environment.

One of the major points of agreement among the interns was the impact of leaving all social contacts, family, and work commitments in Minnesota while forming new relationships with their peers and school personnel in South Texas. When they studied human growth and development they readily recognized their stage of development as described by Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development. Several disclosed that they sought intimacy. One articulately stated:

We chose to bond and create a mini-society complete with care, rules, guidelines for behavior, punitive measures and even love ... Through all of this intimacy, I've seen our group grow ever so close like a strong, tight-knit family.

Another student responded this way:

When discussing adult development, we talked about marriage and the journey one takes to find a partner and stay with that person through life ... I am twenty and this longing to join up with someone is starting to become an issue to me ... I must remember I'm only twenty and still exploring myself and who I am.

Conclusion

In conclusion, MSU's Multicultural Internship combined an early field experience with cultural immersion in South Texas. The benefits of the program were the formation of community among the student interns, growth in cultural awareness, furtherance of career decisions, and personal growth in self-assurance.

Fisher's (1987) narrative theory explained that storytelling among the interns aided in their understanding of the experience from a cultural, personal, and professional perspective. These shared stories extracted as emergent themes: built social support through the formation of community among the interns, enhanced cultural awareness by comparing their home culture with the host culture, facilitated decision-making about teaching as a career, and enabled personal growth through leaving all social contacts home while making new contacts in an unfamiliar environment.

Finally, Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development explained that the interns' developmental stage focused their attention on intimacy and career choices. These issues were paramount for the interns.

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