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A comparison of children's perspectives: Analyzing cultural and gender issues for preservice teachers around the world

ABSTRACT. For the past 7 years, preservice teachers in multiple countries around the world have been involved in an international internet project designed to increase their cultural competence, improve their language and technology skills, and enhance their collaboration skills for working with diverse populations. Preservice teachers' reflections are analyzed by gender, years of experience, and outcomes related to the project that will influence their experiences in the education field. Barriers to collaboration and solutions on how to overcome these barriers are presented in this article.

KEYWORDS: children, preservice teachers, gender

Introduction

The International Project (IPC) began in 2009 between pre-service elementary school teachers in three countries—the United States, Germany, and Bulgaria (Ausband & Schultheis, 2010; project website: <http://www.internationalproject-ipc.com>). During each subsequent year, Drs. Schultheis (Germany) and Ausband (USA) continued the research through collaborations with the original three countries and, due to their international contacts, were soon able to increase the number of countries involved. Currently, the project includes the United States, Germany, Bulgaria, Spain, Japan and Poland. Several collaborative trips

taken by pre-service teachers in the United States to Germany were possible due to these international collaborations and communication between the groups, although as the project has expanded, trips have become more difficult to coordinate. The basic idea of the International Project (IPC) is that pre-service teachers must demonstrate competency in social and cross-cultural skills which increases perspective building among students from different cultures. Cultural competency can be defined as “the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build on ethnic, [socio] cultural, and linguistic diversity” (Lynch & Hanson, 2004, p. 43). Cultural competence reflects pre-service teachers’ ability to assess their own culture and to value and respond to cultural differences in ways that recognize and celebrate others (Lindsey, Roberts & Campbelljones, 2005). Culture, as defined by Rueda and Stillman (2012) refers to the daily living patterns or practices that let people connect to their surrounding social and physical environment. Thus, culture consists of the shared wisdom and problem solving activities essential to survive and prosper in a given environment. The aim for developing cultural competence in pre-service teachers is that *all* teachers learn how to “teach culturally” rather than teaching “about” culture (Rueda & Stillman, 2012).

In addition to developing cultural competence, scholars in education have advocated the importance of preparing teachers to foster global perspectives in order to help students develop an understanding of their interdependence among nations, develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions to understand complex global events (Merryfield, 1997). Merryfield defined global education (GE) as the study of human beliefs and values as related to global systems, and global issues and problems. GE cultivates the understanding of cross cultural understanding as well as promotes strategies for participation and involvement in a global society (Merryfield). Merryfield’s (1997) extensive work with pre-service and in-service teachers, led to the creation of a framework for teacher education in global perspectives. The four major approaches include (1) conceptualization of global education, (2) global content including global history, systems, and issues and problems, (3) cross-cultural experiential learning, such as study tours overseas or student teaching abroad, and (4) pedagogy for global perspectives, including development of analytical, evaluative, and participatory skills.

Goals of the Project

The main goal of the IPC project was to prepare pre-service teachers of both genders to be competitive in a global environment with the advent of 21st Century Skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004). Within the framework for GE defined by Merryfield (1997), the IPC project endeavored to create an international online discussion and collaborative research projects using computer technology to develop pedagogy for global perspectives. Zong (2009) and Merryfield (2003) posit that online technologies are important tools for teacher educators who value cross-cultural experiences, skills, gender issues, and knowledge in local, national, and global contexts.

The structure of the IPC project centers on collaboration of pre-service teachers from around the world to cultivate pre-service teachers learning about different cultures and how to communicate with others of both genders who may have different perspectives about school and learning. 21st Century Skills include: learning and innovation skills (creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration) and information, media, and technology skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004). This innovative international project addresses all of these key skills and promotes a constructivist paradigm for learning. Both male and female students gain support with these skills from fellow students, their university instructor, their group instructor, and the support staff through the University of Ingolstadt-Eichstaett. Online technologies are important tools for teacher educators who value cross-cultural experiences, skills, and knowledge in local, national, and global contexts.

Research to Support Collaborative Internet Learning Projects

Telecollaboration is the use of online communication tools to connect students from different countries with varying first languages to develop collaborative projects through effective communication and intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2007). In universities throughout the United States, telecollaborative strategies are being used to successfully connect students from different countries so that they can begin to learn about different cultures and for the completion of joint projects. While telecollaboration does not take the place of study abroad programs, it

does enable students from varying cultures and of each gender the chance to work together when they otherwise might have been unable to travel due to financial constraints, family or work obligations, or other personal reasons. This technology allows students choices that they can never have in a face-to-face discussion of readings or resources (Merryfield, 2003). Online GE has been primarily studied in the area of preservice social studies education programs (Yoonjung & Minsik, 2012; Merryfield, 1997; Zong, 2009).

Tellecollaborative projects at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany have been in use for over 20 years. Different groups of students studying intercultural communication, German, or English participate in these projects of telecollaborative exchanges. O'Dowd (2007) realized three important findings were related to these internet exchanges: (1) telecollaborative activities have the potential to impact a students' intercultural development more than traditional cultural materials would; (2) telecollaboration contributes best to a student's intercultural development when it contains dialogue between students about the explicit comparison between two cultures; (3) the development of intercultural awareness is best supported when a variety of online tools are used.

The Importance of the Globalization of Teacher Education

Teachers must be able to communicate and collaborate with a variety of people from around the world of different genders and cultures. Developing multiple perspectives, intercultural competence, and respect for human rights is a key definition of international education by Roberts (2007). According to Han, Thomas & West-Olatunji (2011), an educator develops the way to teach based on how he/she was previously taught and from personal beliefs, values and knowledgebase. Teachers are influenced by their beliefs and those will inadvertently affect their teaching practices (Lake, Lin & Rice, 2008). To truly develop these skills, pre-service teachers should be offered international opportunities through coursework, resources, and field experiences that will enhance their intercultural competence. Teacher education researchers have called for the internationalization of teacher education curriculum for the past several years (Gillom, 1993; Bartell, 2003; Arnove, 2001). Textbook companies have responded by adding cultural competence activi-

ties, new resource books, and materials on international teacher education.

Teachers in different countries can learn a significant amount from studying education in other cultures. The Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development publishes a report called the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) which compares 15 year-olds on subjects such as reading, math, and science. There are 34 member countries with over 30 additional countries/specific economies participating with 510,000 students every three years. By teachers in different countries having the opportunity to discuss a variety of aspects of educational topics, the PISA test results begin to clarify the different approaches to education. Pre-service teachers who have the opportunity to discuss the differences with other pre-service teachers around the world will have an advantage of understanding as to why certain countries exceed other countries when tested on specific subjects.

Specific Topics of the International Research in the International Project (IPC)

In the past two years students involved in the International Project (IPC) conducted research on a variety of different topics including the following: (1) How do students perceive their teachers? Is it different for males and females in each country? (2) How do children perceive the school environment, school architecture, school buildings, school year, and their classrooms? Is it different for males and females in each country? (3) How do children with special needs experience school? Is it different for males and females in each country? (4) How do students experience assessment and grades? Is it different for males and females in each country? (5) How do first grade students experience the transition from kindergarten to elementary school? Is it different for males and females in each country? (6) How do students experience certain subjects in elementary school? Is it different for males and females in each country? (7) How do homework expectations differ in each country? Is it different for males and females in each country? (8) What are students' perspectives on class rules? Is it different for males and females in each country? (9) What are students' perspectives of media, computer games, and technology? Is it different for males and females in each country? (10) What do students do in their free time and what are their hobbies?

Is it different for males and females in each country? (11) What are the students' perspectives of the involvement of parents related to school affairs? Is it different for males and females in each country? and (12) What are children's plans for the future including future career plans? Is it different for males and females in each country?

These topics are designed to cultivate cross-cultural competencies and global perspectives on teaching and learning for male and female children within each country. Within each year of the project, not all 12 topics are addressed as students self-select topic areas based on their interests.

Structure of the International Project (IPC)

Preservice teachers in different countries reviewed the possible research questions and chose a group based on their interest. The instructors of the project try to balance out each group so that students from each country were represented without a large group from one country working together. Thus, students who entered the online site late had to choose their second or third choice to research.

Once each group was established, pre-service teachers worked in the online platform called mixxt.com to introduce themselves to the other group members. Each group worked on a separate discussion forum and could upload files, create Wikis and use the chatroom. The students started with basic readings in their national languages and in English which had been uploaded by the instructors. The texts focused mainly on relevant qualitative research methods that can be applied to working with children. In their forums, they discussed and compared the results and collected main aspects in a group Wiki. Students then began creating their survey by contributing to a collective Wiki which would allow additions or deletions of possible research questions related to the topic. The students also did research on the internet and in the library to find relevant studies related to their topic. The instructors were assigned to specific groups and monitored group activity with a special focus on the development of the survey in the Wiki.

When the group members and instructor completed the research method and organized the design of the collection of data, the pre-service teachers would then begin to interview and/or work with children from each country. Some interviewed individual children while

others worked with small groups of children on their survey questions. Each pre-service teacher interviewed at least five children of each gender. Some groups collaborated with school teachers and worked with school classes. The students chose different methods according to their topics. In the first step, many students decided to present stories to motivate the children to write texts or draw pictures.

When using the children's pictures, the second step of the data collection was a 10-15 minute interview with children which was recorded and transcribed. Therefore, the data was based on texts written by children or drawn pictures in combination with transcribed interviews. A few groups worked with surveys created on the Wikis which contained questions with rating scales or open questions. The students evaluated the data by finding categories on different abstraction levels or, depending on the kind of data they had collected, by statistical evaluation. The discussions and drafts were done in English. The non-native English speakers translated the stories, interview questions, and questionnaires into their language.

For the evaluation process, the students translated their results back into English to be able to discuss them in the international groups. In their groups the students compared the categories and results found in each participating country. They also compared their findings with the studies they found and read in the literature review on their topic. The next step was to prepare a common presentation in each group. Most groups agreed to create a PowerPoint of the research which led to each country having a section within the PowerPoint where the data was highlighted. Thus, comparisons between countries were easy to determine. Each group of pre-service teachers then met in their respective countries to present the data from each research question.

Evaluation of the International Project (IPC) 2014

The participating students were asked to complete an online survey during the last week of the project. The survey contained questions about personal data (gender, home country, mother tongue), international experience (travels, foreign language competence), internet experience and about the International Project (IPC): general experience, learning objectives, problems and recommendations.

A total of 49 students (10.2% male, 89.8% female) participated in the survey. 26.5% of the participating students were from Japan, 18.4% from Germany, 16.3% from Spain, 12.2% from the United States, 10.2% from Turkey, 8.2% from Poland, 4.1% from Bulgaria and 2% from Afghanistan (Poland and Bulgaria hosted students from the ERASMUS study program). 10.2% of the students had never travelled abroad; 42.9% spoke more than three or more languages, 20.4% spoke two languages and 12.2% spoke only their home language.

A total of 61.2% of the students said that they use social networks every day. Almost all of the students reported that they use the internet for researching information regularly while 20.4% stated that they read online newspapers daily, 36.7% several times a week, and 8.2% never read online newspapers. 57.1% of the IPC participants indicated they never play online games.

When evaluating the experience of working in a team, 67.4% of the students stated that their group was able to work autonomously. 83.7% were interested in their group topic and 59.1% had fun working on the project. 28.6% stated that the work was equally distributed in the group—a typical phenomenon in group work which should be taken care of in future projects. Only 32.7% of the students considered the time management in the group as appropriate and 53.1% reported that they had problems related to the communication in the group.

Regarding the coaching and support by the instructors, 63.3% of the students stated that they easily could contact the instructors and 61.2% were content with the intensity of the support. 53.1% considered it useful to have student tutors and evaluated the course instructions as sufficient. 55.1% evaluated the instructors' feedback as sufficient and helpful.

In regard of the learning objectives of the IPC project 69.4% of the participating students reported that they could improve their international experience. 67.3% reported that they learned how to organize an online collaboration. 61.7% increased their knowledge about the group topic and 61.3% learned about education and schools in other countries. Having gained benefit for the future work as a teacher was indicated by 59.2% of the students.

The majority of the students didn't report problems with teachers (67.3% no problems), with other group members (55.1% no) or the group topics (51% no). One of the main issues in the project seemed to be that students had not been sure about the work procedures due to

the constructivist and open learning setting. (63.3% partially, 12.2% a lot, 24.5% completely). Problems with the time schedule occurred for 61.2% of the students partially, 14.3% a lot and 24.5% not at all. 57.1% reported they had some difficulties in finding literature and information about their group topic, 18.4% said they had major problems and 32.7% didn't have any problems with this.

The main issues reported by the students were related to the work in the group concerning the organization and distribution of the tasks which the students had to manage autonomously in their groups, the less detailed instructions due to a more open and informal learning and teaching concept and problems with the communication in the groups due to different obligations (not all students could gain credits for the course). There were no differences indicated by gender.

Conclusions

Benefits of the International Project (IPC) for Preservice Teachers. Preservice teachers learned better technology skills, increased communication in English for non-native English speakers and communication with people from different cultures and for each gender for all participants, improved research strategies, and a greater crosscultural awareness through the perspectives of children and their experiences with school. However, these benefits were sometimes clouded by some difficulties with the international collaborations. Instructors from each country worked with groups of students to support these barriers and helped increase awareness of the benefits of the project. In addition, the asynchronous communication that online course environments support is especially important for people whose first language is not English (Hanna, 2003).

Barriers to Effective Collaboration. Preservice teachers in all countries reported difficulties in several different areas throughout their months working on the project. These barriers will be explored below with a focus on solutions to prevent the same barriers from recurring or with an attempt to determine how to best minimize these issues in the future.

Communication. English was used as the language for the project which enabled students from outside of the United States to improve their English language writing skills. However, for students from certain

countries where English is used very little, students significantly struggled to communicate in a meaningful way with their peers. Developing a research project without language proficiency can make the collaborations extremely difficult.

The American students were encouraged to support their peers with proper English modeling and to be patient while the students from other countries improved their language skills. However the American students noticed they had to adapt their vocabulary and avoid to use “slang” expressions the non native English speakers are not familiar with. Students from Japan appeared to have the most difficulty. In future semesters, all students will be supported with additional English language resources highlighting the different research areas so that communicating about the topic will be easier with key phrases and ideas provided.

Incentives. Students from the United States were involved in the project as part of a course. Thus, they earned points toward their final grade in the class based on their participation in the project and the quality of their work. Students from different countries like Japan met throughout the time period of the project to discuss challenges and to seek support from the instructors. The incentive of receiving points and support may have assisted these countries with greater motivation to be involved.

If students did not have any motivation to participate, they were unlikely to stay involved in the project. Frustration was then felt by the students who were actively involved as they believed that they were completing the majority of the work required for the project. Female students expressed deeper levels of frustration than their male counterparts. It is recommended that any country that chooses to be involved in the future creates an incentive for student participation—points toward a grade, a monetary benefit, or support with the content toward another course or degree. Motivation to work with others from different countries and both genders has simply not proven to be motivating enough as students become too busy or focused on other projects within the term.

Timelines. Determining the appropriate time to begin and end the project is a significant barrier for the success of the IPC. Each country has a different timeline for each term, but the fall term seems to be the most aligned between the countries. Thus, the project has only been launched in the fall term. However, this can still be problematic as some countries complete their term after the December holidays while others

complete their term prior to the beginning of the holidays. One solution may be to begin the project the last week of September or first week of October and then complete the project by the second week of December.

Technology skills. New technology skills are introduced in the IPC project such as the creation of Wikis and the mixed platform for teaching and learning in general. Students had different levels of success depending on how well they interacted with the technology required for the project.

Difficult Collaborations. The IPC project encountered some difficulties in terms of student confusion around course expectations. First, some students were more active than other or perceived themselves as being more active than other students. This led to frustrations expressed by some of the students. This frustration may have been partly due to the need for more structured discussion forums and outlined weekly expectations. A second challenge in the collaboration process was the time and energy spent in monitoring the correspondence and guiding students' efforts. Some student participants indicated that more instructor guidance was needed. Some instructors were overwhelmed by having too many group responsibilities. Many of these issues could be resolved with more direct facilitation by IPC instructors. The third challenge was the response time. There were lapses of days between the time the students posted messages and the time they received responses from other countries. Participants noted in their reflections that this lapse of response time was frustrating because it hinders meaningful exchanges of ideas. These issues have been expressed by other online global learning projects (Zong, 2009).

Future Directions for Research on the Project. The authors are seeking additional opportunities to further strengthen the internationalization of teacher education on their campuses by expanding the project. Currently, the project is conducted each fall due to the different timelines of the university terms in each country. The authors are developing a similar shortened project to enable their students who enroll in summer session courses to participate. In addition, connections with professors from more countries are being explored so that new cultures can be introduced to the preservice teachers. Another goal is to increase the number of students from each country that is currently participating.

Conclusion. While there are many barriers to conducting an international project, the benefits exist that continue to reinforce the importance of involving students in crosscultural exchanges. Online technolo-

gies provide opportunities for teachers to experience a more global community than is possible face to face. Since many students are unable to afford international travel and due to the fact that students enrolled in education programs are typically not involved in study abroad programs. Offering international internet exchanges gives preservice teachers opportunities to experience different cultures and, thus, increase their awareness and understanding of different groups of people as well as increasing critical multicultural and global understanding among preservice teachers.

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