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IMMERSION VERSUS EXPOSURE: **AN ARGUMENT FOR STUDENT TEACHING ABROAD**

By Dr. Sherie Williams, Grand Valley State University Faculty

Does cultural competence in teachers matter? When we consider this answer we must explore the role of teachers in society. Knowing that many teachers do not understand, and in many cases appreciate, the vast cultures of the large number of students they teach, an eye on training teachers to be culturally competent must be considered. To that end, the argument for teaching Social Foundations in teacher preparation stands, since one of the major functions of teaching Social Foundations is to equip students with the notion of tolerance and acceptance. And according to (Butin, 2005), teachers cannot teach what they don't know in terms of racial and cultural differences. One method of creating this culture of understanding and acceptance is through a Social Foundations lens with a focus on immersion and teaching in a culture unlike the student teacher's own.

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Many universities struggle with the reality of preparing teachers to teach in a culturally competence manner. To that end, the Consortium of Overseas Student Teachers (COST) was born. It is currently a consortium of 15 universities nation-wide that facilitates the placement of students in numerous overseas sites. The consortium began in 1972 at the University of Alabama, who had begun placing student teachers in Mexico in the 1960s. From there, the membership expanded, resulting in the current roster of sending and receiving sites (see the sidebar). Currently, there are 35 receiving sites representing 15 countries, with an ever evolving list of participating sites. There is an average of 80 students placed each school year.

According to the COST website, "The major objective ... is to provide an opportunity for the student teacher to put into practice the knowledge and skills acquired at the home university. The uniqueness of the COST program is the setting of a foreign city, country and culture in which the student teaching experience takes place" (COST, 2010). By creating a network of receiving and sending sites, the participating universities are able to immerse students in a culture, combining teaching experience with cultural experience. This provides a true opportunity for students to understand and accept the cultural differences with first-hand experiences, thereby sponsoring cultural competence one teacher at a time.

IMMERSION VERSUS EXPOSURE

The world's demographics and cultural perspectives are changing—that fact stands undisputed. The greater challenge lies in educating a society of teachers prepared to meet the needs of children associated with this change. By 2020 it is projected 40% of all students in U.S. public schools will be of color (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 1996). However, the teachers that service these students will remain reflective of the majority culture (Villegas, 1991). This will result in teachers leading classrooms filled with students who contrast their own culture. If teachers are not trained to appreciate the cultural differences of their students, a disruptive disconnect will remain.

Pre-service teachers must be taught intercultural sensitivity to prevent promotion of unintentional biases and prejudices (VanHook, 2002).

A study examining the inclusion of study abroad in the preparation of preservice teachers conducted by Brindley, Quinn and Morton (2009) recommends "teacher educators use field experiences that remove the preservice teachers from their presumptions about teaching and take them out of their comfort zone". As discovered by Flournoy (1994) in her study of the necessary components required to teach globally competent teachers by way of study abroad:

Globally competent teachers must develop (a) sense of place and of relationships in an intensely personal way. They must learn new or alternative ways of seeing and ways of knowing. They must learn how to solve problems in a multicultural context, in a collaborative fashion, taking advantage of diversity rather than fearing it

Immersing, as opposed to simply delivering cultural information, prepares preservice teachers with a greater cultural awareness and sensitivity.

According to Cushner and Brennan (2007):

There are several compelling reasons for teacher-education programs to include field experiences in intercultural or international settings in the preservice curriculum. Schools of education today are preparing professionals to teach in a world that is much flatter, interconnected and more complex than in the past—and these professionals will serve an increasingly diverse population of learners. Therefore, graduates of education schools must be equipped to address a range of needs in their classrooms, and they must have the necessary disposition, knowledge and skill to prepare their pupils to function in a global society. In other words, they must be culturally competent.

One way to facilitate this need is by offering such programs as COST. Many educational researchers have spoken to the importance of international student-teaching and the need to encourage preservice teachers to experience such opportunities in their preparation as global citizens (Stachowski, Richardson, and Henderson, 2003; Merryfield, 1997; Blair and Jones, 1998; Cushner and Brisling, 1996). Others such as Mahan and Stachowski (1990) have statistically proven the advantage of student-teaching abroad. "Overall, the overseas participants acquired a larger number of learnings (as measured by their state competency exams) that their conventional counterparts did not" (p. 21).

To further emphasize the importance of educating students to be culturally competent, the U.S. Congress legislated 2006 as the "year to study abroad" (2005). The goal was to have 1 million U.S. students study abroad beginning in 2006 and continuing the trend for the next 10 years. Rationale for this initiative includes benefits to the U.S. in security, foreign policy and world leadership (Commission, 2005). Many universities such as those associated with the COST consortium share this emphasis for study abroad as well, with increased financial and logistical support. In conclusion, cultural competence is a priority for our society and an important personal experience for the learner.

COST SENDING SITES

- Ashland University
- Auburn University
- Berry College
- Eastern Illinois University
- Grand Valley State University
- Kent State University
- Middle Tennessee University
- Northern Kentucky University
- Ohio University
- Thomas Moore College
- University of Alabama
- University of Georgia
- University of Kentucky
- University of West Florida
- University of Wisconsin

COST RECEIVING SITES

- Australia
- Bahamas
- Canada
- Ecuador
- Costa Rica
- England
- Germany
- Greece
- Ireland
- Japan
- Mexico
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Scotland
- South Africa

A Look at the Report —

Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success

By Terry Stockton,
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The increasing attention surrounding achievement gap in U.S. schools has ignited a passionate dialogue concerning how to address obvious and significant disparities in the education system. The rhetoric speaks to fixes and solutions related to school failure. It points to super-teachers like Jaime Escalante (*Stand and Deliver*), Erin Gruwell (*Freedom Writers*), and Joe Clark (*Lean on Me*) confirming that the right teacher can impact a significant academic shift. This notion that the right schools or super-teachers can rectify the achievement gap is reinforced through the work of the recent documentary *Waiting for Superman*. David C. Berliner in his brief, *Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and Schools Success*, explores the complex and pervasive socio-cultural, biological and psychological variables underlying the achievement gap (2009). Rather than looking to villains and heroes, Berliner seeks to understand the complicated factors of poverty and how they contribute to diminished academic success. Berliner's report attempts to explore how these 'out-of school factors' (OSF) impact student performance.

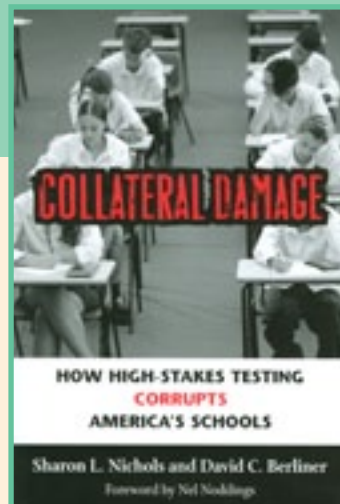
Berliner stated the "effects of OSFs on impoverished youth merit close attention for three reasons." First the evidence contradicts popular opinion that schools are failing students, instead it suggests that cognitive and behavioral inequality stems from familial and neighborhood sources. Secondly, research shows a significant correlation between poverty and academic proficiency. This indicates that "schools work less well for impoverished youth and much better for those more fortunate." Finally, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) laws and an increased political focus on accountability has shifted the cultural perspective to an output oriented examination of school performance, neglecting the inputs that significantly impact results. This lopsided attention of test scores (focused primarily on math and reading) intended to eliminate excuses for teachers and administrators for failing schools perpetuates the myth of a singularly school-oriented liability for the achievement gap. The no excuses approach is further promoted when occasionally a school overcomes the "academic detrimental inputs." Notwithstanding the extraordinary impact of these super-schools, generalizing that schools alone can overcome the significant impact of poverty ignores the extraordinary effects of out-of school factors on achievement (Berliner, 2009). Further it presumes a simplistic solution to a complex problem. Berliner suggests instead that schools that demonstrate success amidst significant obstacles be studied to learn how to promote,

replicate, and reproduce success in other schools. However, focus on success should "never be used to excuse the societal neglect of the very causes of the obstacles that extraordinary educators must overcome" (2009).

No Child Left Behind and a cultural predisposition to expect schools to address issues of achievement, expects them to address concerns largely out of their zone of influence. This unrealistic expectation promotes failure of schools at the cost of impoverished learners. Berliner asserts that any significant dialogue about the achievement gap must include a systemic examination of the factors related to poverty that contribute to it. Seven significant OSF, which are largely ignored by NCLB philosophies, have a profound influence on learners. In addition, ignoring these factors promotes an imbalanced resolution for the increasing achievement gap. Each of the OSFs discussed represents a barrier for learners and a significant impasse collectively.

OSF-1—Low Birth Weight

The first OSF, low birth weight, is strongly associated with diminished cognitive function and behavioral problems. The associated cognitive and behavioral problems are addressed in public schools where students receive specialized services to meet their considerable needs. Meeting student needs (specialized or not) represents a task all schools must address. However the concentration of low birth weight among poor and African American families in high-poverty schools increases the school's responsibilities dramatically. Berliner sites a study suggesting a 246% increase in pre-term birth to low-income and African American families (2009). This disturbing figure highlights what high-poverty schools can and are expecting in their next generation of students. With the added services such students need, schools will struggle to manage and then succeed with these students.



While this paper shows how school success is affected by outside pressures, the book *Collateral Damage* coauthored by Sharon Nichols and David Berliner, shows how the very ways we are currently measuring school success could be eroding the U. S. educational system.

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