Fostering A Culture Of Collaboration During International Pre-Service Teacher Field Placements: The Power Of Mentor Teachers

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Abstract
    This paper reports the results of an action-research case study that investigated the data submitted over three semesters by particpating pre-service teachers in an international field experience. The investigation highlights what the the author has determined to be critical components in the implementation of Social Cohesion and effective mentoring by cooperating Austrian teachers .

Keywords: Mentors, Preservice Teacher Preparation, Social Cohesion, Study Abroad, ESL (English as a Second Language)

Introduction
        In any profession, there are a series of "firsts" that each person must partake in. For teachers, common "firsts" may be writing a lesson plan, meeting a new classroom of students or assuming the responsibility of teaching a lesson. Each experience requires the pre-service teacher to see themselves in a leadership position, moving away from the persona of a student and toward the role of practitioner. After working several years with pre-service candidates, the researcher of this paper predicts that it is likely pre-service teachers would admit their most intimidating "first" was meeting their cooperating teacher.

        A cooperating teacher is a professional educator who assumes the responsibility of allowing a pre-service teacher to participate in the daily activities of their classroom. Traditionally, cooperating teachers are assigned based on the licensure of the pre-service candidate as opposed to pairing candidates and teachers based on personalities, interests or teaching styles. Thus a cooperating teacher has considerable power in determining the tone and expectations of a pre-service teacher's field placement. According to Bryk and Schneider (2004), the social and emotional climate of classrooms and schools significantly impacts student engagement and achievement. Effective classroom field placements for pre-service teachers are designed to

foster learning communities that validate, share, and extend prior experience and knowledge (Chassels & Melville, 2009, p.735).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceptions and best practices of mentoring that pre-service teachers experienced from their cooperating teachers in Gaming, Austria. Using the framework of Social Cohesion (Heyneman, 2002) and its contributions to culturally relevant teaching in a classroom, this researcher will define examples of how Austrian cooperating teachers used mentoring to enhance their relationships with pre-service teachers and foster Social Cohesion in a classroom community.

Background of the Study

As the population of American classrooms change, so should pre-service teacher preparation programs. Many universities who depend on school partnerships find the location and population of their cooperating schools lack the diversity and ESL (English as a second Language) population needed to train pre-service teachers properly. Stewart and Kagan (2005) suggestion teacher preparation programs (1) invest in international classroom observations that foster cultural immersion for teaching candidates, (2) provide institutional partnerships between international schools, universities and schools of education focusing on an open dialog and (3) establish early childhood professional associations to foster a deeper recognition of the international dimension of content pedagogy (p.241). While Lauvas and Handal (1993) propose integration of theory and practice is more effective when there are strong links between the university and field work (as ctied by Löfmark, Morberg, Öhlund & Ilicki, 2009).

Since 2010 in Austria , the international field placement program ELISA (*English Learners in Specialized Atmosphere*) has established field placements with six schools located in the towns of Gaming and Schiebbs, Austria; placing cooperating teachers with American pre-service teachers for a sixteen week field experience. The focus of the course is to immerse pre-service teachers, who may have not experienced working with diversity and ESL students , in the planning and instruction of english lessons . During each school's designated english instruction, mentoring is provided by the Austrian cooperating teachers using a gradual release of responsiblity as the seemster progresses. Pre-service teachers are required to particpate in required readings focused on culturally relevant teaching prior to leaving for Austria and while in Austria, weekly reflections are submitted to the researcher aligned with state and professional program standards. The second components of the course are discussion board posts and a final paper on the topic of Social Cohesion. In addition, pre-service teachers studying early childhood education are invited to spend the day at the local

kindergarten in Gaming and one video conference is scheduled between the researcher and particpants, midway through the semester , to add an synchronous component to the course.

Social Cohesion

Within all school systems there is a culture reflected in the curriculum, school mission , faculty and community. According to Dr. Heyneman (2002), "School culture refers to the rituals embedded in social relationships, ceremonies and traditions that attach members to the school and its mission, and to the norms and beliefs that guide the actions of members" (p. 89). A school's culture is a significant contributing factor within   the term   Social Cohesion. Social Cohesion as stated by Dr. Heyneman (2002), is "the outcome of assimilating peoples of diverse religions, ethnicities, and social groups into a nation with a common language and values"   (p.80). The framework of Social Cohesion is divided   into four categories (1) curriculum content , (2) community perceptions of fairness to one's children, (3) procedures available for effective adjudication to members of the school community in order to achieve a consensus over what and how to teach, and (4) the school culture consistent with the curriculum expectations"   (Heyneman, 2002, p.86).

Whether in America or abroad , the success of Social Cohesion within a school community is based largely on the implementation by classroom teachers. Classroom teachers hold much power in maintaining unity and equality among all students. Teachers are engaged in the daily decisions of currciulmn instruction, they provide fair treatment and acceptance within their classroom and are the liasons between families and adminstration: furthermore, teachers are accountable for providing data that supports the success of a school's curriculum standards.

The success of Social Cohesion does not stop with the classroom teacher. In a home or host country, when the addition of a pre-service teacher to a classroom begins, the classroom (cooperating) teacher or mentor teacher shoulders much of the responsibilty in defining and acclimating the pre-service teacher to the classroom culture. These cultural identities can be defined as social contracts. Social contracts are the values and metaphyscial/ philosophical assumptions of a collective society (Pirili& Pifpirili , 2015, p.253) and the determining factor in the success of Social Cohesion within a school.

> "People are more likely to adhere to social contracts under
> certain conditions. They are more likely to adhere to contracts
> when they do not consider each other as cultural "strangers"
> that is, when they have more understanding of each other as
> people, as citizens of the same country or as citizens of a

"similar" country where it is believed that the same norms and expectations govern social contracts" (Heyneman, 2002, p. 75).

Mentor Teachers

For students entering the teaching profession, multiple classroom observations and collaboration during teacher training is an essesntial component to expose pre-service teachers to theory and practice in the classroom. The teacher who is faciltiating the classroom experience for the pre-service teacher may be referred to as the cooperating teacher, superviosr , teacher of record or school associate; however, the term mentor is not a common identifier in most educational settings. According to Gagen & Bowie (2005), skills that mentors need include communication, collaboration and evaluation, as well as problem solving and decision making skills (as cited by Ambrosetti, 2014, p.32). For the pre-service teacher, the cooperating teacher or mentor is a liaison providing insights and strategies for successful teaching, meaningful feedback and a culture of trust (Gagen & Bowie, 2005).

Mentor and mentee relationships need to begin with a foundation of communication. Pre-service teachers are not only learning the curriculum but are also expected to teach with little to no experience in the early stages of a teacher preparation program. Mentors must possess the ability to demonstrate active listening of pre-service teacher's concerns and further facilitate opportunities for reflective practice during a classroom placement. Schneider (2008) goes on to define four goals to build a successful relationship (1) mentors should focus candidates' attention to specific features of teaching and share ideas about best practice facilitate growth in student learning, (2) mentors can take an active role in guiding candidates' thinking as they plan lessons, practice teaching and reflect on their experiences. Mentors can structure planning and teaching tasks based on their candidate's learning needs and provide feedback that will encourage reflective thinking, (3) as partners in teacher education, mentors can complement and support the work of university faculty. Mentors can communicate with college faculty to refine tasks for candidates, assess candidate learning, and evaluate candidate progress, (4) as professionals, mentors can continue to refine their understanding of learning and teaching. Mentors can participate as learners as they continue (p.114).

Methodology

This qualitative case study used an action research design to investigate the successful practices of mentoring Austrian teachers to 64 American pre-service teachers, 3 males and 61 females , during three

semesters of field experience. Berg (2007) defines action research as "a method of research in which creating a positive social change is the predominant force driving the investigator and the research" (p. 224). Using Schnieder's (2008) framework of mentoring, the aim of the researcher was to use data collected from weekly reflections and end of the semester papers to define pre-service teacher's perceptions of mentoring and examples of how Austrian teachers foster Social Cohesion during a semester field experience. Descriptive pattern coding techniques (Saldana, 2009) were applied to the data.

Discussion and Findings

Prior to reading the work of Heyneman (2002), all 64 participants were not aware of the theory of Social Cohesion; however, it was expressed that after reading the work of the author they could identify examples and understood the importance in both American and Austrian classrooms. Of the four components of Social Cohesion (1)   curriculum content , (2) perceptions of fairness to one's children, (3) adjudication to members of the school community and (4) school culture consistent with the curriculum expectations; most candidates focused on perceptions of fairness to one's children when reflecting on their classroom experiences. Pre-service candiates gave multiple examples of how Austrian teachers, from kindergarten to vocational training, fostered fairness toward everyone in the classroom. Pre-service candidates cited examples of how curriculum was adapted to meet learners at their ability level noting when Austrian students fell short of the learning objective, Austrian teachers used pedagogical practices such as small group instruction, pull out , peer tutoring and extended review of materials to keep the class on task. It was often expressed by pre-service teachers that the Austrian teachers approach to students in the classroom was firm but kind. Austrian classroom teachers expected all students to come prepared, the classroom teacher was the authoritarian and mutual respect among peers was witnessed in multiple semester postings. Pre-service candidates used words such as equality and advocate when defining their experiences working with and observing teacher to student relationships among the mentor teachers.

During the beginning weeks of the ELISA program, most pre-service teachers serve as a support to the Austrian mentor teacher. Pre-service candidates may perform small group review, assist with conversational English or correct grammar on writing assignments as their first classroom duties. As the pre-service teacher transitions from assisting to teaching, it was expressed in pre-service teacher reflections that Austrian teachers made learning engaging. Most Austrian teachers used games to teach english. When a new lesson was introduced, pre-service teachers described how the

lesson would include a game or hands on acitvity as part of the formative assessment. Pre-service candidates shared when they took over the classroom instruction, usually in the third week, they strived to imitate the engaging atmosphere created by the Austrian teachers. For many pre-service candiates who chose to use worksheets as a formative assessment, they later commented in reflections that the students were not as engaged or they percieved their teaching wasn't as dynamic as their mentor teacher. Finally, pre-service candidates expressed that the practices of Social Cohesion contributed to their classroom experience by fostering a sense of community and lessened their feelings of being the minority within the majority.

The following are excerpts from pre-service teacher data which highlight perceptions of Social Cohesion in the Austrian classrooms.

Social Cohesion	End of the Semester Excerpts from Pre-Service Teachers
Curriculum Content	*I had an absolutely wonderful cooperating teacher who really strove to establish an environment conducive to learning. One of the first things that I noticed about her teaching was that she made everything fun. Whether the students were working on math, English or science, she turned everything into a game or an activity where the students genuinely wanted to learn. –A.* *One of the first things we did together as a class was participate in a traditional German folk dance. The students were very eager to share a piece of their culture with me. It was a fun icebreaker to start to get to know the students and a great introductory class to start off the school semester.-K.* *In the classroom, I was able to view this in multiple small acts that the students did. One that was evident was the need for the students to stand when the teacher walks into the room and to remain standing until she relieves them. Through this simple act, the curriculum guides the Austrian students to show respect for those in authority. –S.* *While certain daily activities vary according to season and week, the children seemed extremely well-behaved because their teachers employed a consistency of daily routines and expectations. –K.* *The school (Vocational) also fosters social growth by having the girls practice what they are taught in the classroom in the "real world." The girls go to kindergartens to practice teaching, nursing homes to practice pediatrics, and markets to sell the products they make. –M.*
Community perceptions of fairness to one's children	*The small class size, as well as the level of comfort, or familiarity, which is exhibited by both the students and the teachers provides the "trust among strangers". When students experience that they are a valuable, contributing member of a classroom, they will then easily recognize that as a citizen they are valuable member of society, and have a responsibility to make contributions in this more expansive arena.- M.* *She (Mentor teacher) did a wonderful job making sure each student had an equal opportunity to answer questions in class and also completing classroom jobs.- M.* *All students attend religious education depending of their faiths. As long as there are 5 or more children with the same faith there will be teacher available to the students for religious education classes. Religion is regards to school is not a matter to be divided over but rather all be given a chance to learn their choice of faith. –M.* *She (Austrian teacher) is a good example to her students of how a person who has authority over others should act. She is very kind, respectful, and always willing to listen to the student's opinions. She makes the classroom feel welcoming and inviting and even*

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	brings in her dog, Anya, often to help some of the shy students feel more at ease in the classroom. This shows her willingness to take care of the needs of the persons she has authority over, and she is a good witness to her students of what it means to share what you have with others. –B. *I met a student who was originally from Albania, and two students who were born in Hungary. This integration of students who are from different countries brings a different culture to the classroom. It's a unique experience to see this integration of students who are from several different countries still getting along so well. –M.* *Another way the school practices Social Cohesion is through the age in which students start learning English. All across Austria, students start learning English at the age of 7. They are then mandated to learn English until they are 14, so every Austrian is educated for at least 7 years in a foreign language –M.*
Adjudication to members of the school community	*After living most of her life in Hungary, she (student) speaks hardly any English or German at all! This is because the students are very accommodating to her and her needs and so are the teachers; despite all their differences, the student has many friends who help her out whenever she needs it! -M.* *They (Austrain students) naturally will speak in both languages during their English class which strengthens their English language skill. For example, one of the boys told me he played football and then corrected it to soccer because he knew he had to switch between languages and cultures since I was American; thus accommodating into the English culture and not forcing me to assimilate to his culture or the British English he learned. –J.* *Even though Austria is across the ocean from the United States, the schools in both places have set up "classroom governments". These microcosmic imitations of government help the students to learn how society works. By cooperating with each other and learning to trust that the other students will carry out their assigned duties, students can learn about the civic system.-M.* *Not only does the school administration agree to increase racial tolerance by inviting American students into their classrooms, but when we enter they treat us with great respect. During some of my first lessons, students would still speak in German and not make the effort to speak in English so that I could understand them. My cooperating teacher did not allow this; she forced her students to make an extra effort so that I felt welcomed by them and be an active member in the classroom.-C.*
The school culture consistant with the curriculum expectation	*As part of their curriculum, they (Austrian students) are taught about the culture and traditions of other countries, specifically in this class. Students are also given the opportunity to learn and to ask questions about the educational system and social norms of the US through their school's cooperation with American students participating in ELISA. Through this exchange the Austrian students are brought- through comparison- to a greater understanding of, appreciation for, and commitment to the educational system and social norms of their own country. This experience can also be seen to foster within the students a respect and toleration for people of a different ethnicity and culture. – M.* *The thing that I most valued about her teaching was her uncanny ability to tailor her lessons to each student and really accommodate for their multiple intelligences. The students were always moving and using hand motions to help them learn English words. She always repeated words and then had the children echo her numerous times to aid them in remembering. She would also bring in many pictures during each lesson to help the visual leaners.-A.* *They (Austrian teachers) all provided an example for how a school community should function by offering assistance with lessons and also encouraging my decision to become a teacher. The encouraging community of cooperating teachers translated into the classroom.-K.*

Table 1. Social Cohesion

Mentoring Social Cohesion

According to Raudenbush, Rowen, and Chang (1992), "a high sense of efficacy is required if teachers are to cope successfully with the

uncertainties of classroom teaching" (p. 166). The area of Methods refers to the ways the mentor can increase the competency of the apprentice. Ghefali (2004) suggests that this can be accomplished through modeling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploration. By focusing on these intiatives , the mentor can effectively advance the skill level and competency of the pre-service teacher and provide the enviroment for the pre-service teacher to gain self-efficacy.

Through weekly data collection, pre-service teachers expressed a common perception that the   Austrian teacher's appreciation for their students, as individuals, was evident in their interactions with the pre-service teachers. Pre-service candidates felt the Austrian teachers wanted to know more about them and what their expectations were for the semester. At the beginning of the course, the Austrian teachers invited their pre-service teacher to share coffee and Austrian pastries while discussing the students, the semester curriculum and answering questions the pre-service teachers had. During this initial meeting, pre-service candidates felt their mentor teacher was interested in getting to know them and encouraged pre-service teachers to feel part of the classroom. Austrian teachers were perceived as being very purposeful in their expectations. Pre-service teachers appreciated this given the unfamiliarity of the school, language, and student population. Pre-service teachers felt the Austrian teachers perceived the ELISA program as a team and wanted them to be successful in their teaching and classroom relationships with students. In Schneider's (2008) goals to build successful relationships, she suggests that mentors should focus candidates' attention to specific features and take an active role in guiding candidates' thinking as they plan lessons. Pre-service teachers explained how their Austrian mentor teachers would offer ideas but were willing to give freedom of choice in regards to the lesson planning and formative assessments.

Pre-service candidate reflection: *Today I taught a lesson in the second level English class. First, I had coffee with my cooperating teacher who has been a teacher for over fifteen years. She shared some of her experiences with me.-C*

Pre-service candidate reflection: I would, in my future classroom, like to apply the gentle yet firm way of challenging students to a higher level of excellence that my cooperating teacher demonstrated. She showed me that by making students repeat an activity, it teaches them that only their best effort will be accepted in the classroom and holds them to a higher standard of learning.-K

Pre-service candidate reflection : I am excited to collaborate with my teacher and teach the students a lesson. I have the sense that my teacher is going to allow me to do a lot of collaboration throughout the semester. I could not be more grateful for this opportunity as well as my placement. –E

Pre-service candidate reflection : After meeting with the teachers this week I am very eager about our collaboration throughout the semester. The excitement that they showed for the program was fantastic –L

During the classroom planning and instruction phase of the ELISA program, pre-service teachers felt their mentor teacher was engaged in their lessons and encouraged the Austrian students to practice their English. Pre-service teachers, in the beginning of the semester, noted that this was the first time they had experienced not being the native tongue in a classroom and they relied heavily on the mentor teacher to encourage the Austrian students to participate in the lessons. The pre-service teachers felt they left the program with a better understanding of how an ESL student would feel in an American classroom. Roose (2001) proposes teachers who choose to study abroad reflect a greater ability to take risks in the classroom. They (pre-service teachers) understand the importance of culture and its relationship to community and demonstrate a better sense of classroom discipline, shared respect with faculty, students and their families.

Pre-service candidate reflection : The change of culture is especially evident in the classroom and ranges from the mere etiquette of the school to the actual material being studied by the students. I learned respect for the Austrian schooling culture through this first experience . All of the teachers I had the pleasure of meeting with expressed pure passion about their vocation.-E

Pre-service candidate reflection : The language barrier was the hardest for me. Being the first time inside a classroom as a student teacher all I wanted to do was help, help and help. I hope that as the weeks go by that this experience will encourage me to step outside my comfort zone and allow me to grow in ways that I couldn't in a normal classroom.-M

Schneider's (2008) suggests that to be effective, mentoring must include the cooperating educational institution; thus creating an ongoing circle of planning, dialog and assessment for all program participants. Schneider proposes as partners in teacher education, mentors can support the work of university faculty through communicating and revisiting shared goals throughout the semester. The university faculty of the ELISA program support Schneider's researched opinion with ongoing communication between participating schools before, during and after each semester. In addition, university faculty travel to Austria to meet with the school administration and cooperating teachers to foster meaningful conversation with all stakeholders about the vision of the program.

Based on the outcomes of this study, this research believes that through a committed alliance between the Austrian and American educators, the ELISA program continues to be a catalyst for mentoring opportunities that build self-efficacy in pre-service teachers and facilitates authentic examples of how Social Cohesion is cultivated in international classrooms. Future research goals of this study (1) to follow education majors, upon returning from Austria, to identify examples of how pre-service teachers connect the examples of Social Cohesion in the Austrian classroom to their teaching in Amercian classrooms, (2) the researcher is looking to other international institutions to studying Social Cohesion and mentoring examples which foster best practices and pedagogical theories.

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