

The Impact of Long-Term Teaching Abroad in Ecuador

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Abstract

Research has been conducted on the benefits of studying abroad and short-term teaching abroad (one year or less); however, little research has been conducted about teachers who teach abroad long-term. This study investigated the experiences of teachers who have taught abroad in Ecuador for two years or more. This study specifically examined the teachers' reasons for going to Ecuador, staying and teaching in Ecuador long-term, as well as the professional, cultural, and personal skills acquired. A qualitative approach was selected in order to understand their perceptions as educators who have made the decision to teach abroad long-term in Ecuador. The interviews incited discussion about cultural experiences and the skills and lessons learned that have impacted their professional and personal growth.

Keywords: teaching abroad, international teaching, study abroad, global educator, intercultural competence

1. Review of the Literature

1.1 Introduction

There is a comprehensive list of research and studies about the benefits of studying abroad. Studying abroad can expand students' worldviews and perspectives (McCabe, 1994), as well as increase their cultural awareness (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002) and grow their global competence (Hunter, 2004). There is also a growing number of research studies highlighting the benefits of student teaching abroad and short-term teaching abroad (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Herdoiza-Estevéz, 2011; Stachowski & Mahan, 1989; Thomas, 2006). Student teaching abroad gives teachers an increase in self-knowledge, personal confidence, professional competence, and a greater understanding of diversity (Cushner, 2007). However, most of the research has focused on the benefits and impact of studying or teaching abroad short term (one year or less). The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and examine the impact on teachers who have taught abroad in Ecuador for two years or more. This study will also investigate the teachers' reasons for going to Ecuador and staying and teaching in Ecuador long-term, as well as the professional, cultural, and personal skills acquired.

1.2 Global Competence

Numerous universities in the United States and Canada offer student teaching abroad, grounded on the philosophical ideals of diversity, pluralism, equity, and global citizenship (Herdoiza, 2011). In addressing the reality and challenges of today's global and interconnected world, the conceptual construct of global competence has emerged to synthesize the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences needed to participate in this twenty-first century environment (Hunter, 2004). Though no consensus yet exists on a comprehensive definition of global competence, the discussion has identified dimensions that contribute to it, such as the ability to work and communicate effectively in settings that cross cultural and linguistic barriers, an awareness and substantial knowledge of global issues, events, and change, adaptability to diverse cultures and circumstances, and the ability to develop social relationships and resolve conflicts (Hunter, 2004).

Placing prospective teachers in international settings helps to expand teacher preparation programs and facilitate the development of the cultural and pedagogical skills educators need to be effective in the multicultural and multilingual settings they will most likely encounter within their own schools and classrooms (DeVillar & Jiang, 2012; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, & Wang, 2009). International teaching abroad is an innovative way to prepare teachers' intercultural and global competence in ways that are not possible in domestic student teaching experiences (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Driscoll, Rowe, & Thomae, 2014). These experiences enhance global awareness or cultural understanding in a global world, the premise of which is the awareness of the individual that perspective is not universally shared, but exists in diversity and profound difference in societies around the world (Doppen, 2014).

Research has shown a correlation between experiences teaching abroad and personal and professional growth. According to Quezada (2004), students reported growth in pedagogical practices, learned to adapt their planning, became more sensitive to multicultural issues, and showed an increase in self-efficacy as they learned more about themselves. Student teaching abroad provides students opportunities to "gain self-knowledge, develop personal confidence and professional competence, as well as a greater understanding of both global and domestic diversity" (Cushner, 2007, p. 30). Cushner (2007) noted that this deep understanding is "not achieved in a cognitive-only approach to learning it develops only with attention to experience and the affective domain" (p. 35). In a study about the "Explorations on Diversity Education Program at Indiana University Southeast" (a

cultural immersion study abroad trip to Ecuador geared for pre-service and in-service teachers), Herdoiza-Estevez (2011) concluded the “affect plays a triggering role in what we define as transformative learning. This deeper learning leads to strengthening leadership and empowering individuals at personal and professional levels” (p. 46). It is clear that the research about the impact and benefits of student teaching abroad reveals the value of the experiences as a way to expand multicultural knowledge and to develop a global perspective (Cushner, 2007).

1.3 Transformative Learning Theory

This research project was based heavily on transformative learning theory, in which “learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Frames of reference are “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our ‘line of action’” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Assumptions and presuppositions frame individuals’ expectations and shape the meanings they construct from experiences (Taylor, 1998). Mezirow (1997) sees transformative learning as the essential component of adult development and education; the individual becomes “a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purpose rather than to uncritically act on those of others” (p. 11). In other words, individuals develop new meaning structures as a result of disparate experiences that lead to a reappraisal of their assumptions and presuppositions. (Mosely, Reeder, & Armstrong, 2008). The dissonance that occurs prompts the individual to engage in critical reflection of held assumptions, and it is the process of self-reflection that may lead to personal transformations (Mezirow, 1997).

Teaching in Ecuador provides an opportunity for foreign teachers to undergo substantial transformative learning.

1.4 Teaching in Ecuador

Ecuador is a small country located in northwestern South America, bordered by Colombia to the north, Peru on the east and south, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Ecuador offers geographic diversity (from the Andes mountains, the Amazon rainforest, and the coastal zone to the Galapagos Islands), historical cities, and a wealth of indigenous cultures. Ecuador also represents a growing job market for English teachers. In an internet blog (Teach English Abroad), James Soller (2014) listed five reasons to teach English in Ecuador: the people, the food, the cost of living, the English teaching jobs, and the outdoor activities. Soller (2014) stated, “While Ecuador may not hold the same international prestige of Brazil or Colombia, it demands the same respect as a place to visit, work, live, start a business or retire. It turns out that Ecuador is also a great place to teach English” (para. 1). English teaching jobs are available in the private and public sectors, universities, non-governmental organizations, and language institutes. The participants of this study have all worked as teachers in the private (international schools) sector.

2. Research Purpose

2.1 Methodology

A qualitative approach was selected in order to establish how the teachers perceive themselves as global educators and to record their reflections on the impact teaching long-term in Ecuador has had on them professionally and personally. The study’s research questions are the following:

- 1) What are the motivating factors for teachers from the United States and Canada to decide to teach long-term in Ecuador?
- 2) What ways can teaching long-term in Ecuador contribute to the development of a global educator?
- 3) For what reasons do teachers from the United States and Canada decide to continue teaching long-term in Ecuador?

In-depth individual interviews, both electronically and face-to-face, were conducted with a sample of thirteen current teachers. Criterion sampling was used to select teachers for interviews according to the following criteria: a) that they had taught in Ecuador for a period of two years or more and b) that they either hold a Master’s degree or higher or have a Bachelor’s degree with a teaching license from the United States or Canada. The sample comprised thirteen teachers (eleven females and two males). Twelve of the teachers hold Master’s degrees and one has a Bachelor’s degree. The thirteen teachers have lived and taught in Ecuador from two to thirteen years, with an average of 4.8 years.

The interviews incited discussion about cultural experiences and professional and personal growth. Questions focused on the decision to teach long-term in Ecuador and the skills and lessons learned, as well as the overall impact it has had on them. The interviews were transcribed and the data analyzed and categorized according to emergent themes. These were listed; it is worth noting that the three main themes that all of the

teachers discussed were professional/teaching growth, cultural development, and personal/lifestyle improvements.

2.2 Findings

Three key findings arose from the data analysis of the interviews with the thirteen teachers. In this section, each finding is shared with examples and quotations from the teachers who participated in this study.

Professional/teaching growth

Research has shown that teaching abroad can have significant and a long-term impact on teachers' professional skills (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Driscoll, Rowe, & Thomae, 2014; Herdoiza, 2011). By teaching abroad it can raise teachers' levels of reflection about their own teaching and give them a broader view of how to approach teaching (Driscoll, Rowe, & Thomae, 2014). Teaching abroad allows teachers to gain "an awareness of how new knowledge will guide them as teachers in the future" (Pence & Macquillivray, 2008, p.22). All of the teachers interviewed for this study reported some kind of professional or teaching growth. One teacher, Kay (from North Carolina, United States and teacher for two years in Ecuador), enthusiastically described her job satisfaction in Ecuador:

My job satisfaction has increased exponentially. I am much less stressed out. I put energy and enthusiasm into my work, but I no longer take hours of work home every night and weekend. I am financially stable for the first time since working as an educator. I paid off my student loans since working here! My students treat me with kindness and respect. My colleagues are generally reliable and enthusiastic about collaborating. I get lots of support in little ways that mean a lot, for example, transportation to and from work is provided by the school. My school cafeteria offers affordable, healthy food, and this has simplified my life. People are generally concerned about creating a positive work environment. While teaching in the United States, I rarely felt effective as an educator with my curriculum, because I had so little support. I was overworked with many extra duties, and was often teaching classes of 35-40 high risk students. At my current school in Ecuador, I have been able to deepen into my curriculum and subject matter.

Another teacher, Rachel B. (from Illinois, United States and teacher for seven years in Ecuador), spoke about her growth from being an International Baccalaureate teacher in Ecuador:

Teaching with the IB has really improved my pedagogy. I am passionate about the IB and inquiry-based/project-based, student-centered approach to the classroom. I have small classrooms, unlimited resources, and we are not inundated with testing.

Lisa (from California, United States and teacher for seven years in Ecuador) also commented on her experiences as an International Baccalaureate teacher. When asked if she considers herself a "global educator" she said:

Since I work with IB curriculum, the main idea is to promote international mindedness from a young age. My students are exposed to different languages, teachers from different cultures, and are taught daily from different points of view from different subject areas. Does it get more "global" than that?

Another teacher, Rachel D. (from Tennessee, United States and teacher in Ecuador for four years), talked about student happiness. She stated, "Working in Ecuador has shown me that in this country the student happiness is over student learning" and this has helped her grow as a teacher. Many of the teachers interviewed spoke about the close relationships in Ecuador. One teacher, Kara (from Canada and teacher in Ecuador for four years) said, "Ecuador changes you as a teacher because the way you approach students. Students require a different level of closeness than Canadian kids." Another teacher, Kaitlynn (from Canada and teacher in Ecuador for three years), declared:

It will be difficult to go back to a culture where "high fives" are hardly allowed. Everything and everyone in Ecuador is very laid back, where in Canada everything runs on a tight scheduled routine, especially in the classroom.

Another teacher, Bob (from Ohio, United States and teacher in Ecuador for three years) also reported that a big difference in teaching in Ecuador versus the United States that has helped him grow as a teacher is the relationships with the students. He said, "Here you have much more freedom to speak and interact with the students without the constant fear and problems that can arise in the United States." Another teacher, Nissa (from New Hampshire, United States and educator in Ecuador for thirteen years) spoke about this closeness as well:

The physical, social, and emotional distance between me and others has reduced significantly. After thirteen years of being in this country, I have learned both by example and out of need that it is ok to be closer to people. In teaching, this has affirmed a belief that I have carried since college- teaching is, in essence, an act of affect. It is easier for this to be central to teaching here than it would be in the United States. I am worried that these distances between people in the United States are isolating people into their own little worlds, causing long term effects on their health and happiness. My experience here in Ecuador will most definitely shape my ideas about teaching and learning, and these will travel with me wherever I go.

Cultural Development

All of the teachers interviewed commented on their cultural development as a result of living and teaching in Ecuador. Cushner (2007) claimed that “lived intercultural experience is, thus, the critical element in gaining a meaningful understanding of other cultures as well as one’s own place in an interconnected world” (p. 37). The three most reported types of cultural development were: learning to adapt, patience, and increased tolerance of differences. Learning to adapt to a new culture is critical to the success and happiness of teachers who move abroad to teach in Ecuador. Rachel D. said, “I have learned a lot of teaching skills and I’ve learned how to adapt culturally. Working in Ecuador has taught me how to roll with the punches and be more easy-going!” Kaitlynn noted, “I have definitely been able to better myself as a teacher here and open myself up more to the culture. I have learned discipline techniques, communication strategies, and overall how to run a successful classroom considering the little materials available”. Bob mentioned that the biggest skills he has learned from being in Ecuador is to “accept and adapt to the needs of the students and curriculum”, while Janine also remarked, “I can easily adapt in new cultures and respond to my students accordingly.” Along with adapting to a new culture, most teachers then discussed the importance of learning patience. All of the teachers agreed that living and working in Ecuador requires patience. Janine observed:

I’ve definitely become more patient and open-minded by teaching in Ecuador. There are various cultural differences that I have just gotten used to, some continue to frustrate me while others I have just learned to embrace. However, when I go back to the United States for vacations, I know that Ecuador is my home.

Many of the teachers spoke about how living and working in Ecuador has taught them to be more tolerant of differences. Cushner (2007) opined that as a result of teaching abroad, “students become more empathetic and begin to question their stereotypes of others as well as aspects of their own culture...” (p. 31). Nissa said:

I am much more tolerant of differences, as I have been exposed to cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

I no longer feel like my opinion is the right one, nor do I feel that I have to change others, and now I can be around people that do not share my internal set of beliefs.

Laurel (from Colorado, United States and teacher in Ecuador for four years) also commented on how the experience has made her a more tolerant person:

Living in Ecuador has changed me as a person and a teacher. Ultimately, I believe it has made me a more well-rounded, more compassionate human being. I think teaching in Ecuador has allowed me to identify with shared human experiences. I am a more understanding human being. I wouldn’t trade it for the world!

Personal/Lifestyle Improvements

In much of the research on teaching abroad, teachers reported increased self-efficacy, better interpersonal skills, and improved language skills (Herdoiza, 2011; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Pence & Macquillivray, 2008; Quezada, 2004). All of the teachers interviewed for this study reported the same. Also, many of the teachers interviewed talked about how they are less stressed living in Ecuador. The pace of life seems to be slower and as a result, the stress levels are lower. Many of the teachers also spoke about the quality of life in Ecuador and the cost of living. Kay said, “My quality of life has improved and I enjoy living and traveling in this country.” Rachel D. stated “I can live more comfortable here on my salary than in the United States. The work load is not too intense and I don’t feel much work related pressure.” While Andrea (from Maryland, United States and teacher in Ecuador for three years) answered, “I’m not sure I could have the same lifestyle that I have here back in the United States. I can afford more things here since the cost of living is lower.” Another lifestyle improvement that was common among the teachers was love. Out of the thirteen teachers interviewed, ten have found love in Ecuador (seven of them married an Ecuadorian and five of them have children). Love and family is the reason that many of the teachers moved to Ecuador and love and family is the reason that many of them stay. However, not all of the teachers moved to Ecuador for that reason and certainly do not stay in Ecuador for that reason.

Kay elaborated on her reasoning for moving to Ecuador to teach:

Conditions have become very poor for teachers in North Carolina. We are 49th in the nation for teacher pay. I had been on a wage freeze since beginning my position as an educator and continued to be frozen for five years. I am required to have a Master’s degree for my position, but was barely able to afford groceries on my pay (around \$32,000/year), let alone chip away at the student loans I was required to incur for my job. Our legislature had also cut assistant positions, removed class size limitations, and cut school budgets. I felt like I was doing the job of three positions, constantly charged with more extra duties without any support. I brought hours of work home nights and weekends, and financially struggled. The climate and students at my school suffered tremendously under these conditions, as we often taught classes of 35-40 students and had little funding to provide basic educational resources. I wanted better working conditions and support. I also had an interest in traveling and working abroad in Latin America. I was particularly interested in Ecuador due to the natural beauty, biodiversity, affordable travel opportunities, reasonable cost of living, and thriving indigenous culture.

A recent from North Carolina's education department has found that teachers leaving the profession in North Carolina is at its highest level in five years. The turnover rate for teachers is 15%, up from 11% in 2010 (Schimel, 2015). Kay was featured in a November, 2015 North Carolina newscast about teachers moving abroad to Ecuador to teach.

Go Back?

During the interviews with the teachers, they were asked if they planned to or wanted go back to the United States or Canada. The two Canadian teachers, Kaitlynn and Kara, both spoke about the lack of jobs teaching in Canada. Sagan (2013) wrote, "Newly qualified Canadian teachers frustrated with the over-saturated teaching market in many major Canadian cities are setting their sights on international schools abroad, where they say professional and personal benefits far outweigh those back home" (p. 1). Kaitlynn agreed, "I would love to continue to teach in Canada, however to land a teaching job is very tough, especially in my province." Kara also concurred, "I think I would like to go back to teach in Canada if the teaching climate in Canada permitted it. It is so hard to get full-time work."

The teachers from the United States varied in their responses if they plan to return and teach in the United States. Out of the thirteen United States teachers interviewed, only three said they plan to move back. Kay reported:

To be honest, I think that this experience has "spoiled" me and raised my expectations in ways that will make it hard for me to return to teaching environments in the U.S., where I always felt so over-worked and unsupported.

Rachel B. answered:

The idea of going back to teach in the U.S. is too stifling. I really love Ecuador and want to stay here permanently. It is truly a different climate here than teaching in the U.S. If education in the U.S. is like it is today, I will not go back. My friend who teaches sixth grade told me his students were tested 22 times last year. I just don't think I could teach in that kind of environment, especially after my experience teaching here in Ecuador.

The teacher with the most experience teaching in Ecuador (thirteen years), Nissa, replied:

I get the feeling that what I do in Ecuador causes more impact than what I could be doing in the U.S. Here I am closer to the real work. There are fewer processes in the way, and it feels like my work is important to someone else. I don't know that I could ever really make a difference there. It's like the U.S. is Walmart, and Ecuador is the corner store. Maybe this is real, or maybe this is just my perception. I stay primarily because I am happy here. This is where I have made my life. I want my kids to grow up bilingual and closer to the real world; I can't let them see the world from inside the American bubble. I think this is the only way for them to be really ready for the world that they will face.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The literature is full of assessments that document the benefits of student teaching abroad, short-term teaching abroad, and studying abroad; however, this study examined the impact of long term teaching abroad. This study provides the similar conclusion to previous research on short-term teaching abroad that teaching long term abroad has a "profound and lasting effect on teachers' sense of themselves as professionals, on their critical reflection and on their identity" (Driscoll, Rowe, & Thomae, 2014, p. 317). The results of the data analysis from this study were categorized into three emergent themes: Professional/Teaching Growth; Cultural Development; and Personal/Lifestyle Improvements. These transformative experiences affirm that teaching abroad has a significant impact on the professional and personal lives of teachers.

Teaching abroad long term can also have some implications. The teachers interviewed touched upon some of these as negatives of living and teaching in Ecuador. Some of the teachers discussed the lack of resources available as a teacher (materials, books, and copies) and some discussed the lack of adequate administrative leadership in their particular school. All of the teachers mentioned missing their family and friends in their home country. One teacher detailed her experiences with the machismo culture in Ecuador and her almost daily struggle dealing with catcalling from men on the streets. Quezada (2004) addressed three teaching abroad challenges that were similar to the challenges encountered by the teachers interviewed for this study: Adapting to the curriculum, lack of contact with peers, and language barrier. Many of the teachers interviewed talked about the government changing educational standards and curriculum, their homesickness, and the language barriers they have experienced. However, despite these challenges, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

There are certainly benefits to teaching abroad long-term. The teachers interviewed for this research all spoke of their professional growth, their cultural development, and their personal and lifestyle improvements while teaching and living in Ecuador. They were happy to discuss job satisfaction, relationships with students, and a less stressful lifestyle. Their stories about learning to adapt to a different culture and learning patience was at times humorous, but also essential experiences. Their stories of love were endearing. Most of all, their

accounts of being a teacher in Ecuador and learning about themselves were inspiring. Nissa concluded her interview with, “While living in another country can seem to be an activity that is meant to learn about others, in the end, it’s also about learning about yourself.”

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