



Intercultural exchange among global teachers: The case of the teaching excellence and achievement study abroad program

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the impact of a six-week, US-based study abroad program on the intercultural competence of 22 secondary teachers from Colombia, El Salvador, Ghana, India, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Thailand, and Ukraine. Based on the results of surveys and interviews, the program enhanced teachers' intercultural sensitivity and awareness, knowledge of other countries and cultures, and teaching skills and professional development in a structured cross-cultural setting. Intercultural activities, coursework, clinical experiences, and exposure to diverse students, classrooms, families, and cultures were helpful experiences for participating teachers. This study offers practice and policy implications in terms of intercultural competence, teacher education, and cross-cultural program development.

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1. Introduction and Purpose of Study

In an age of global interdependence, cross-cultural development and intercultural acumen are critical to economics, politics, and education. An intercultural perspective is a necessary component to achieve the goals of mutual understanding and pluralistic civil society (Hicks, 2003; Pike, 2000). More than ever, private foundations and public agencies understand the value of promoting global perspectives; they are willing to direct resources toward programs that foster such ideals. This study describes one such program, the 'Teaching Excellence and Achievement' (TEA) Program,¹ which fosters intercultural understanding among global teachers.²

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¹ TEA is co-sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the US Department of State and IREX. The ECA fosters mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries around the world. ECA does this through a wide range of international exchanges as authorized by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961, as amended. ECA works in close cooperation with US Embassies overseas to promote personal, professional, and institutional ties between private citizens and organizations in the United States and abroad. For further information, see <http://exchanges.state.gov>. IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs designed to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development. Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of \$60 million and a staff of 500 professionals worldwide. IREX and its partner, IREX Europe, deliver cross-cultural programs and consulting expertise in more than 100 countries. See <http://www.irex.org>.

² Although the program was funded, there was no funding for the research conducted in this study.

The TEA Program is a six-week study abroad program serving a cohort of experienced middle- and high-school teachers from around the world, hosted at selected universities in the United States and other countries.³ This program strives to help participating teachers, or 'Fellows,' develop expertise in their teaching subject areas, enhance their teaching skills, and increase their knowledge of the host country, as well as other cultures. While individually designed and implemented by each host university, all TEA Programs have three main components in common: (1) university coursework in teaching methodologies, lesson planning, teaching processes and strategies, and educational technology; (2) a clinical experience in local middle- and/or high-schools; and (3) cultural and civic activities, including four days to independently explore their host country, the US. Intercultural exchanges that occurred during the Fellows' stay at University X (the host institution studied here) included interactions with US instructors; work with US secondary school-level partner teachers and students; living with roommates from other countries; engagement with American 'Friendship Families' (community members who volunteered to introduce the Fellows to their daily routines and special events); and participation in team-building activities with one another.

Using the intercultural experiences of University X's TEA Fellows, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) *How does the TEA Program foster an intercultural perspective among its participating international teachers?* (2) *How do intercultural experiences provide professional development opportunities for international teachers?*

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adapted for this study is the 'Intercultural Contact Hypothesis', a term developed by the authors based on Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis (or Intergroup Contact Theory). Allport's theory was selected as the basis of this framework for several reasons. First, the Intergroup Contact Theory is considered the most influential theory of prejudice reduction (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998). As one of the most referenced intergroup theories, it has been described as providing one of the best ways to improve relations among groups experiencing negative stereotyping or possible conflict (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005; Wright, 2009). Second, longitudinal, experimental, correlational, and meta-analytic studies have been conducted over time showing significant results supporting Allport's theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). There is evidence that contact contributes meaningfully to the reduction of prejudice, particularly when contact situations are structured. In their meta-analysis of 515 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that intergroup contact produced positive outcomes, but there was a larger effect under managed contact (certain conditions described below). Third, many of the competing theories are extensions of Allport's work. While some of the competing theories did provide additional perspectives, they were still not suitable for our current study of TEA teachers. For example, cross-group friendship theory (Pettigrew, 1998) pertained to developing friendships under specific conditions. Parasocial contact theory (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005) incorporates mass media as a form of contact. Both theories are well-cited, but they did not support the goals or align with the characteristics of the TEA program.

According to Allport's hypothesis, if certain conditions are present, interpersonal contact can be an effective way to reduce prejudice and promote an understanding and even appreciation of different viewpoints (Allport, 1954; Whitley & Kite, 2010). Allport argued that prejudice and discrimination stem from overgeneralizations; through 'properly managed' interpersonal contact, an individual can realize the fallacies of his or her overgeneralized 'mental models' (Senge, 1990). Managed contact must involve four conditions to some degree (Allport, 1954): (1) *Equal status*—Equal engagement in the relationship; (2) *Mutual cooperation*—Working together toward common goals without competition; (3) *Common goals*—Working together on a task as a common goal; and (4) *Social and institutional authorities*—Supportive authorities that help manage contact. For example, cooperative learning has been found to be positive when these conditions are present. The "jigsaw classroom" is one such technique that puts students into small groups, where each student is given a key piece of information to be shared within their groups. Under the guidance of the teacher and group work, the jigsaw technique has been found to be highly effective at promoting shared learning and positive interracial contact (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997). Sports activities, classroom projects, or other structured settings, activities, and programs are other examples of managed settings.

Our Intercultural Contact Hypothesis extends Allport's theory to situations involving people from different cultural origins. It holds that '*managed*' intercultural exposure promotes cross-cultural development and intercultural acumen, which in turn foster intercultural tolerance and a pluralistic worldview. We consider intercultural contact to play a key role in supporting positive relationships among teachers from different cultural origins. Yet while our study of the TEA Program represents a new application of Allport's theory, the program itself aligns well with the conditions of managed contact. All teachers as "Fellows" of the program (equal status) work and learn together to achieve their shared professional development goals through their teams, projects, and courses (intergroup cooperation, common goals) under the management and guidelines of the TEA program, staff and instructors (social and institutional authorities). While contact alone is helpful, these managed settings provide the additional support needed for positive cross-cultural experiences.

³ The Fall 2011 TEA Program involved approximately 88 Fellows and four host universities, with approximately 22 Fellows at each host university. Participating Fellows were selected through a competitive process coordinated by the US Department of State (and its embassies) and IREX. The Fellows hailed from Europe, South and Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Near East and the Western Hemisphere. Host universities were selected through a competitive process overseen by IREX.

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