

Teacher-research title: *Educating Young Children in the United States: International Teachers' Perspectives in ECE*
Teacher-investigator: Vivian A. Alipio (San Francisco State University)

Introduction:

I believe that a teacher's cultural background is as important as one's educational preparation or experience. Being a foreign teacher here in US, I needed to learn and relearn everything that should be done in the classroom. I was confounded with so many questions and confusions in my teaching practices. I had to find ways to adjust and adopt myself to my new environment. I share the view that, "successful adaptation to a new society, and to a new professional culture, in particular, is a prerequisite for maximizing one's potential in a cross-cultural setting"(VanBalkom, 1995, p.5).

The central focus of this project was to find out how foreign teachers adapt to US early childhood classroom settings. Its purpose is to describe how culture plays a factor in a foreign teachers' teaching experiences, and what adaptation process they undergo in order to adjust to their respective classrooms and in turn, establish good relationships and teaching strategies. In the process, I answered the following questions:

1. What dissonant practices do foreign teachers found between their teaching styles and the U.S. ways of teaching?
2. What challenges foreign teachers face while working in US?
3. How did they adapt themselves to their new professional culture?

Methods:

Data in this study was collected through the use of personal teacher journal, observational recording, and field notes. I also interviewed eight (8) foreign teachers whose teaching experiences here in US ranges from a year to 25 years. Two native administrators and a head teacher were also interviewed to gather their insights about working with foreign teachers.

Findings:

In the process of my study, I have found four noteworthy themes:

1. The Significance of Culture – Similarities and Differences

Interviewees shared evident similarities and differences in the teaching practices and early childhood educational system between their own culture and that of that of US ECE setting.

Common links were compared and contrasted like the teacher's treatment of children across cultures, differing customs and values, classroom organization and structures, teaching styles, parental expectations and involvement. Redirecting children and conflict-resolution were discussed in this section. It was interesting to note that almost half of the foreign teachers talked about the respect teachers received from students and parents in their cultures as compared here in their US classrooms. For them, it made disciplining easier.

Two of the foreign teachers shared that they have experienced being directly and indirectly discriminated by some parents in their classroom because of their different cultural background. Some teachers on the other hand, felt families in their schools welcomed them either because they bring in a different culture that their children can learn or that they bring in a culture that their children are familiar with prior to coming to the school.

2. Language and Communication

The use of English as a second language may contribute to a lack of precision in communication. Majority of the teachers interviewed discussed how US teachers use a lot of verbalization and rewording with children. It was mentioned and observed that verbal

Teacher-research title: *Educating Young Children in the United States: International Teachers' Perspectives in ECE*
Teacher-investigator: Vivian A. Alipio (San Francisco State University)

expression or “using of words” is very much encouraged in the classrooms that foreign teachers find difficulty adjusting to.

As a foreign teacher myself, I observed that I find it not so easy to express myself as often as I wanted to. One of the international teachers has said, “native teachers talk a lot.” On this same note, a native administrator shared her observation about foreign teachers. She said that, “I feel that foreign teachers tend to be quieter.” Another head teacher shared that though she doesn’t see language as a barrier between the teacher and children, it may be a possible source of misunderstanding among teachers and staffs.

3. Training and Mentoring

Half of the foreign teachers have shared that their transition to their new teaching environment was made easier because they had head teachers who were supportive and treated them as their equals in the classroom. Native administrators and head teachers shared that their rules and curriculum in their classroom/school is regardless of the teacher’s cultural background.

As I think about each of these themes, the most striking conclusion I came up with is how the dynamics of these factors play an important aspect in the transition of non-native teachers. It is not only essential to recognize these factors but to give them substantial consideration so that teachers coming from different countries may find their teaching set-up more friendly and adaptable. Undergoing the study made me see my situation in a more meaningful way. By going through this, I have come to accept and appreciate the tribulation that I have gone through in my own teaching experience. I found some concrete ways to improve my teaching through scaffolding from what I saw and observed in the US classroom where I worked at.

The study gave me a chance to understand my teaching practice in a different level. It made me reflect on my own cultural practice, weigh other culture’s teaching practices, particularly US, and try to distinguish which among these practices I would keep or improve. As Lisa Delpit (1995) said, “we do not really see through our eyes nor ears but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist ourselves for a moment and that’s not easy because it may mean turning yourself inside out and giving up the sense of who you are.” My overseas teaching experience has definitely given me a more pluralistic outlook. Now, I find it important to consider one’s cultural values and principles rather than just mere following the theoretically or developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Hopefully, this study will also encourage foreign teachers to be more reflective of themselves and of how much of their cultural values they can incorporate in their respective classrooms.

This study is significant to schools that hire foreign teachers, a situation not uncommon in ECE settings here in the United States. Administrators and teachers can see and understand the adjustments that teachers from abroad undergo and lead them to develop better relationships with the foreign teachers that they are working with. School administrators can gain insights on the difficulties that non-native teachers may undergo in spite of their seemingly well performance. This also hopes to open the door for administrators to provide services in support to their foreign hired teachers and staffs.

Reference:

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.

VanBalkom, W. (1995). Cross-cultural adaptation and communication training for international educators. *International Education*, 25(1), 5-14.