Crossing Educational Borders: The Impact of International Experiences on Teachers

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Abstract

Schools serve as a site for the development of complex social, cultural, and linguistic identities; the permeability of borders is not only evident in students, but also in teachers. As an effort to promote the learning of various world languages, the visiting teacher program offered by The Nebraska Department of Education has intentionally crossed borders and brought several teachers from China, Spain, Mexico, and elsewhere to Nebraska to the United States. These teachers not only diversify these American schools, but also try to teach students the linguistic and cultural skills needed to be successful in an interconnected world. This paper describes the visiting teacher program offered by The Nebraska Department of Education and focuses on the perspectives of the administrators involved in bringing Spanish language teachers from Spain and Mexico to meet the needs of Nebraska schools. Specifically, this paper explores the factors that have motivated the creation of the program and the benefits that the department expects teachers and their respective countries to gain from their experience teaching in the US. The implications of this study suggest how the concepts of border crossing and immigration can influence the promotion of a cosmopolitan education in state policies and programs with emphasis on the roles and experiences of the teacher.

Keywords: visiting teacher program, Spanish language education, immigrant teachers
Introduction

As American schools become increasingly diverse, they serve as a site for the development of complex social, cultural and linguistic identities. Migration and globalization factors have played a predominant role in bringing students together from around the world. The permeability of borders, however, is not only evident in students, but also in teachers. The United States currently hosts more than 20,000 visiting educators from different countries in its academic institutions. These educators are in the U.S. to fulfill many different job positions and contribute and participate in the rich cultural complexity of American schools. The international teaching experience becomes not only an opportunity to gain professional experience, but to do so through a comparative lens. Every day these international teachers negotiate the process of adjusting and performing in a new culture while juxtaposing it against their home culture. This professional encounter is unique and impacts not only the teachers’ experience in the United States, but also the school, community and the educational process in general.

As an effort to promote the learning of various world languages, the visiting teacher program, offered by The Nebraska Department of Education, has intentionally crossed borders and brought several teachers from China, Spain, Mexico, and elsewhere to Nebraska. These teachers not only diversify these American schools, but also try to teach students the linguistic and cultural skills needed to be successful in an interconnected world. A closer look at this program will reveal how the comparative and international context of the visiting teachers program has impacted local education.

Nebraska

An increasingly globalized world requires professionals to develop intercultural competence; that is, the ability to understand another country or cultural meanings and value system (Byram et.al., 2001). Today, schools are characterized by diverse students from a plethora of backgrounds who are typically taught by mono-cultural teachers, who typically do not share the same conceptual framework of culture as their students (Planel, 2008). Nebraska schools are no different. Different parts of the state of Nebraska are home to students of many different racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic. The most current data shows that the Hispanic student population in Nebraska continues to increase and substantially impact specific areas of the state. Hamann (2011) demonstrates that throughout the state of Nebraska there are four school districts that are majority Hispanic, eleven school districts with more than a third Hispanic population and twenty school districts with more than one fifth Hispanic population. The vast majority of teachers in Nebraska identify racially as White (NCES, 2011). In fact, only one Hispanic majority school district in the state reported slightly more than five percent of its teachers as being of Hispanic descent (Hamann, 2011). These demographics provide the foundation for intriguing studies concerning schooling, culture and language.

Amidst this increasingly diverse background, the Nebraska Department of Education has established the Visiting Teachers Program, that seeks to not only provide international teachers with comparative teaching experience in the United States, but also to give students in Nebraska a chance to learn a world language from a native speaker. For many districts with a significant Spanish speaking community, this program has brought in native Spanish speaking teachers from Spain and, most recently, Mexico. These teachers often teach Spanish to all students, but are increasingly being placed in newly developed dual-language immersion programs throughout the state, to teach other subjects as well.

The Call for International Teachers in Nebraska

During the late 1990’s, the Nebraska Department of Education faced a dilemma: there were not enough Spanish language teachers to fill the available teaching positions statewide. In efforts to promote a globalized vision of foreign language acquisition, that included the opportunity for students to be
exposed to the cultural components of the Spanish language, the director of World Language Education, a component of the Nebraska Department of Education, began looking outside of typical recruiting strategies to find Spanish language teachers. While attending the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACFTL) national convention, she was introduced to the possibility of forming official partnerships with countries overseas to temporarily bring foreign teachers to the United States to teach world languages (or presumably any subject area). Soon after this convention, the director of World Language Education worked with the Nebraska State Department of Education and the Spanish Ministry of Education to create an official Memorandum of Understanding, that outlined the terms of agreement between the two countries, for bringing Spanish teachers to work in Nebraska schools.

**Research Methodology**

After determining the precise case for this study, the methodologies employed stemmed to address the central research question, “what impact do international experiences have on a teacher’s professional identity?” To explore the answer to this question, data was collected through multiple sources that included interviews, direct observations and the review of pertinent documents. A total of three participants were: 1) the director of World Language Education at the Nebraska Department of Education; 2) the education advisor of the Spanish Institute; and 3) a professor of foreign language education, who works with the Nebraska Department of Education to conduct professional development training with the visiting teachers. The interview questions focused on the administration and organization of the program and their perspectives on its impact on the teachers involved. Supplemental documents were collected from the different interviewees as well as the Nebraska Department of Education’s website and the Spanish Institute website.

**Findings**

**The Nebraska Department of Education’s Visiting Teachers Program**

Stated previously, the Nebraska Department of Education’s visiting teacher program was established in 1999 as a way to fulfill the statewide need for Spanish teachers. The director of World Language Education, a component of the Nebraska Department of Education, was the primary initiator in establishing the first Memorandum of Understanding with the Spanish Ministry of Education, but worked alongside a college professor of Foreign Language Education to align the details and implementation of the program, with the mission and vision of the World Language Education department. This mission was founded in the beliefs that:

- A K-12 articulated foreign language program should be available to all students.
- All students can learn and experience success in a foreign language.
- Second language acquisition provides the vision and skills necessary to be a global citizen.
- The primary goal of foreign language education should be real-life communication
- Foreign language is a part of the core curriculum
- Foreign language education develops critical-thinking skills
- Assessments must reflect proficiency and communication as expressed in state and national standards/frameworks.

Bringing in teachers from different countries to teach world languages, such as Spanish, clearly aligned with the vision of the Nebraska World Language Education department that desired to not only teach students a foreign language, but also to expose them to the culture in which the language is imbedded. Together, the director and professor traveled to Spain to interview and hire the first visiting teachers and collaborated by working with the teachers throughout the school year ever since.

The primary role of the World Language
director, the professor and the Nebraska Spanish Institute director, is to serve as a support system for the visiting teachers while they are in the United States and work to not impose on the daily function of the individual schools in which the teachers work. Both the World Language Education director and the Spanish Institute director listen to the teachers’ needs and intervene in the schools only when needed. They focus on creating professional development programs that address the teachers’ needs and provide them ongoing support to be successful in the individual schools in which they work. The professor has collaborated on numerous occasions with both directors to construct meaningful professional development sessions throughout the year.

During interviews with each of these administrators, to learn not only about the logistic of the program, but also about their perspectives concerning how an international teaching experience impacts a teacher’s professional identity. Three different themes concerning the impact of teaching in Nebraska on the teachers’ professional identities were identified as: 1) authentic language learning; 2) mutual exposure to new cultures; and 3) the acquisition of new pedagogies.

Authentic Language Learning

The primary reason that all of the administrators gave for bringing visiting teachers to Nebraska schools was the importance of promoting an authentic language learning experience for both the students, who will receive foreign language instruction from the visiting teacher, and the teacher, who will have the opportunity to be immersed in an English speaking culture and practice speaking with native speakers. Both the Nebraska Department of Education and the Spanish Ministry of Education’s mission statements include a clause about the promotion of a quality form of foreign language instruction that includes real-life communication opportunities (Nebraska Department of Education, 1996; Ministerio de Educación, 2011). The fact that the visiting teachers program was established on the premise of bringing Spanish teachers to Nebraska, to fill the vacancies throughout the states, is evidence of this notion being the main motivation behind the program.

Mutual Exposure to New Cultures

Coupled with the value of language authenticity, mutual cultural exposure was another theme that was noted as critical in the motivation behind the visiting teacher program, and in the teachers’ experiences while teaching in Nebraska. Both of the directors from the Nebraska Department of Education and the Spanish Ministry of Education talked about these experiences being a “win-win” for both countries, in the sense that the Spanish teachers have the opportunity to interact and to learn about American culture in Nebraska. The Nebraska students, schools, and communities have the opportunity to be exposed to and learn about the Spanish culture from the visiting teacher as well. The belief that international exchanges promote cultural understanding can be seen in both departments’ mission statements. However, during my discussion with these administrators, I found that they each had a different manner of expressing what this cultural exchange actually looked like once the teachers were in Nebraska. A closer look at each interviewee’s perspective will shed light on how the notion of cultural exposure and exchange fits into the program’s structure.

The World Language Education director spoke of the importance of recognizing the teacher exchange experience as being something more than just language acquisition. It is, instead, the opportunity to use language in a meaningful way in conjunction with the culture in which it is imbedded. From a pedagogical perspective, this was very clear during our discussion and will be discussed in the next section. However, when asked to expand upon how the students and teachers are mutually exposed to the different cultures, the director gave classroom-confined examples that did not seem to go beyond the cultural exchanges that could happen in a lesson, such as participating in a lesson about holidays celebrated in foreign countries.

The Spanish Institute director approached the
topic of cultural exposure in a more explicit manner. She discussed the mutual benefits for the teachers and students in each country and also talked about how the Spanish teachers would take this cultural and linguistic knowledge with them to Spain. When asked to elaborate on these ideas of cultural exposure, the director focused on the teacher’s broader cultural experience that extends beyond what they teach their students about Spain in their classrooms. Instead, she focused on some of the feelings that they may experience while living and working in the United States for the first time, such as negotiating cultural differences in the community, and at the specific school. She stated, “Here everyone smiles and nobody says a bad word or loses their temper, in Spain we are completely different and that’s hard at the beginning because you’re not used to it.” Some of the school culture differences alluded to include different work hours, grading and evaluation practices, and the incorporation of group work. The Spanish Institute director’s comments connected the general experience of negotiating being immersed in a new culture to the teachers’ development as a teacher. The cultural exchange experience happens while the teacher is working in a new environment; for the teachers, the exchange is lived. It is constant and influences everything they do, from establishing relationships with colleagues to teaching the Spanish language in their classroom.

The professor suggested that the experience that visiting teachers undergo while negotiating their professional identity in a foreign context could be parallel to the process of cultural adjustment and integration. Cultural adjustment theories, such as Trifonovitch (1973), propose that people tend to go through different stages when living in a new culture: excitement, hostility/judgment, integration, and feeling at “home”. Once a person arrives at this stage, she may start to look more critically at her native culture. The professor suggested that teachers might undergo the same process in regards to their teaching practice. Although they might first feel hostile or hesitant towards the new teaching culture, by going through the process of living and working abroad, they eventually will get to the level where they can critique aspects of the teaching culture in their home country as well as recognize and understand the benefits that an international teaching experience has had on their craft.

**Acquisition of New Teaching Pedagogies**

The acquisition of new teaching pedagogies and practices was something that all three interviewees were able to articulate clearly as a major change that visiting teachers undergo during their time in the United States. The administrators stated that teachers acquire skills that promote engaging culture-based language learning and collaborative learning as well as classroom management techniques that correspond with a more student-centered pedagogical approach to teaching.

According to the administrators interviewed, providing the visiting teachers with professional development opportunities, to develop pedagogical skills, that focus on integrating authentic language learning with collaboration in the classroom will provide them with the skills to meet both the Nebraska Department of Education’s and the Spanish Ministry of Education’s mission for the visiting teacher exchange program and to provide a quality form of foreign language instruction that includes real-life communication opportunities and cultural exposure. In this aspect, the teachers also have the opportunity to grow professionally and acquire new teaching skills that they most likely would not have been exposed to in their home countries. These professional training opportunities are directly correlated with the teachers’ development of a professional identity: as a teacher changes practices and techniques based on what is learned in a new environment, her perspective on what it means to be a professional teacher will most likely change.

**Conclusions**

The initial interviews with the administrators responsible for the Nebraska Department of Education’s Visiting Teacher Program have shown that the main intentions of the program are to bring foreign
teachers to teach different world languages and expose students to authentic linguistic traits. Mutual cultural exchanges between two different countries, the United States and Spain in this case, is a supplemental benefit of this program. It is a reality that the visiting teachers continuously face and is something that can be integrated into the classroom curriculum in many ways. Teacher professional development, and therefore the development of a professional identity, is mainly viewed from a pedagogical perspective. It is clear that teachers’ teaching practices change while they are working in Nebraska.

Once a more complete picture of this particular case is painted, more insight will be gained as to how the concepts of border crossing and immigration can influence the promotion of a cosmopolitan education, in state policies and programs with emphasis on the roles and experiences of the teacher, specifically in areas with large Hispanic student populations. Further investigation is needed to understand the sociolinguistic experience of teachers from Spain who are working with Hispanic students whose lineage tends to stem from Latin America. It is also necessary to note that while a new teacher-exchange program has been established with Mexico, there are very few teachers involved, and once here, they do not yet have the same kind of support that the visiting Spanish teachers do from the Spanish Institute. Further research needs to be done to explore the cultural dynamics that are presently in these schools and how they are affecting the international teachers involved.

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