

A Frog in a Well Shaft: Lessons from China on Learning to Teach

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Understanding the interplay among experience, beliefs, and contexts of teaching in preservice and inservice teachers' learning to teach is crucial to improving teacher quality for diverse populations. This study examined the impact of a summer camp English teaching experience in China on the ideas and practice of two White, middle-class female teacher education students with varying backgrounds and experience. Data sources included surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. The study found that when teachers approach new experiences as learners, they are more likely to adopt constructivist pedagogy. In addition, the study found that professional experience and credentials are not necessarily good indicators of how well teachers will perform with students whose cultures are different from their own. Rather, context, personal history, identity, and the disposition to view teaching and learning as reciprocal and recursive processes are interconnected factors that significantly influence teacher development.

A frog lived happily in a well shaft. One day, a bird stopped by to drink from the well. They began to discuss what the sky looked like. The frog claimed the sky was a small blue circle. The bird corrected him and said, "No! The sky is endless and changeable! Even now there are clouds far off on the horizon you cannot even see!" The frog was insulted. "I know

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what I see with my own eyes,” he said angrily. The frog’s vision was, of course, very limited. This proverb refers to people whose worldview is restricted by what they see or think.

Chinese Proverb

The typical U.S. teacher education student is a White female. And like the frog described above, she may have a restricted worldview as a result of growing up in a fairly homogeneous environment where opportunities to interact with learners of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds were probably limited (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Thus, prospective teachers’ existing conceptions of teaching and learning may be incompatible with the characteristics and needs of the students they are going to teach, a factor that presumably contributes to the substantial and persistent low academic performance of these underserved students (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1991). Understanding teachers’ beliefs about students with diverse cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds and their learning and how these beliefs are formed and sustained is central to meeting today’s educational challenges (Kennedy, 1991).

A Chinese English immersion summer camp provided a unique opportunity to study how teachers learn to teach learners who differ ethnically, culturally, and linguistically from themselves. In the summer of 2005, the authors accompanied eight U.S. preservice and inservice teachers to a large city in Southeastern China, where they taught English to approximately two hundred Chinese students in grades K-6 enrolled in a three-week residential program.

The authors collected data from eight U.S. preservice and inservice teachers who participated. Data sources included interviews, questionnaires, daily debriefings, curriculum artifacts, and videotapes of teaching. This study presents the cases of two of the teachers, Jane Carson and Cherie King, in order to explore the following three questions which guided this research: (1) How did the setting of teaching illuminate and/or influence their conceptions of teaching, learning, and students? (2) What factors, such as preparation, professional experience, individual history, and identity influenced their conceptions? (3) What did Jane and Cherie learn about teaching diverse learners from this experience?

HOW TEACHERS LEARN TO TEACH DIVERSE LEARNERS

Many U.S. scholars assume that teachers’ beliefs about students, the nature of knowledge, learning, and teaching shape their decisions about teaching practices and their subsequent actions in the classroom (Richardson, 1996). Teachers’ existing conceptions play a critical role in influencing what and how they learn (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1998; Kennedy, 1991; Stoddart, Connell, Stofflet, & Peck, 1993).

What is to be learned may be adapted or filtered to fit teachers' pre-existing conceptions or knowledge structures. When what is to be learned does not fit into their pre-existing mental structure, conceptual disequilibrium will be created, which will lead to the change or development of their conceptual structures to accommodate the content of learning (Glaserfeld, 1995).

Constructivist theory suggests that teacher educators should focus on helping create conceptual disequilibrium by engaging teachers in examination of their own ideas in light of new ideas about teaching and learning or in a new context of teaching and learning (Kennedy, 1991; Richardson, 1997). Such strategies as self-reflection, case-based analysis, and guided observations and reflections on classroom practice in preparing teacher candidates for diverse populations follow this line of thinking (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998; Zeichner & Liston, 1987); however, these approaches seem to have very little long-term impact on preservice teachers (McDiarmid & Price, 1990; Zeichner & Hoefft, 1996). Studies with more experienced preservice and inservice teachers show that long-term impact may be possible if an immediate teaching context gives teachers an opportunity to examine their existing ideas vis-à-vis alternative ideas (Richardson, 1992, 1994). However, what is not clear is the nature, extent, and role of the teaching experiences that are important for teachers' conceptual change. Questions remain as to whether it is teachers' experiences in subject-matter content, experiences working with diverse students, relevant life experiences, or other factors that are most important for their learning to teach.

Preparing culturally responsive teachers involves selecting appropriate individuals, as well as equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to be successful and to stay in teaching (Grant & Gillette, 2006). Haberman (1996) is perhaps the most outspoken proponent of the critical importance of selecting candidates who possess attributes related to various aspects of knowledge of self, culture, context, content, and pedagogy (see also Garmon, 2004; Haberman & Post, 1998). Scholars of culturally responsive pedagogy generally agree that such attributes are important, but they argue that teacher education programs can and should teach particular knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Banks et al., 2005). Through the careful design of programs, coursework, and experiences, teacher educators can offer preservice and inservice teachers opportunities to gain self-knowledge, develop a well-grounded philosophy of education, acquire pedagogical content knowledge, understand students and their many dimensions, and connect to the world outside of school (Grant & Gillette, 2006). Culturally relevant teachers are reflective practitioners who can translate curriculum into effective lesson plans, who possess communication and collaboration skills, who can manage their classrooms for optimal student learning, and who appreciate the power of technology to enhance learning (Grant & Gillette, 2006).

Much of this knowledge base must be developed through experience. Experiential knowledge is especially important for preservice teachers who "have

lived insulated, monocultural lifestyles” (Smith, 1998, p. 91). According to Smith, a teacher education program that effectively prepares teachers to accept and respect diversity and to advocate for social justice should have a strong experiential component. Experiential learning, even of limited duration, appears to be a promising approach in facilitating enduring change in educators’ beliefs and actions. Teacher educators have tried a number of approaches beyond placement in a traditional classroom setting. For example, Brock et al. (2006) described how a month-long immersion experience in Costa Rica changed how six inservice U.S. teachers viewed themselves as literacy educators. Spalding, Savage, and Garcia (2007) analyzed the impact of an intense Holocaust study trip to Poland on preservice teachers and other education professionals. Stachowski and Mahan (1998) have long studied the effects of semester long student teaching placements in Native American communities in the Southwest. Others have had success with providing community-based experiences closer to home. For example, Adams, Bondy, and Kuhel (2005) assigned preservice teachers to tutor African American children at a community center in a public housing project. Ference and Bell (2004) arranged for preservice teachers to live with Latino families during a two-week immersion experience. Wiest (1998) found that even a one-hour experience in an unfamiliar setting coupled with critical reflection upon the experience had a significant impact on preservice teachers’ beliefs about diversity.

Cross-cultural Immersion in China

Cross-cultural immersion experiences such as those described above have been shown to make a difference in preservice teachers’ awareness of culture and beliefs about diversity. However, the limitation remains that at the end of the day or the work week, preservice teachers placed in such settings can easily “escape” to more mainstream communities, a fact that has led Moll and Arnot-Hopffer (2005) to claim that teaching has become a “commuter profession” (p. 244). By contrast, the U.S. participants in the Chinese summer camp described here had no convenient, affordable way to escape the fact that they were minorities in the dominant culture.

In the United States, even in settings in which minorities are the majority, schooling is dominated by the values of White, middle-class, “mainstream” culture. In China, the U.S. teachers for a time became members of the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority. Granted, their status as “minority” was temporary and somewhat privileged, as China has no history of discrimination against whites. But for a short time, the extended stay in China relieved the participants of their “invisible weightless knapsack[s]” of white privilege (McIntosh, 2007, p. 377), as they attempted to function in a culture to which they did not have access to the codes of power (Delpit, 1995). The U.S. teachers were precluded from making “culturally clouded” judgments about the Chinese students based on their attire, physical

appearance, or speech (e.g., dialect). Neither could they make use of information giving clues about socioeconomic status or academic potential such as those contained and easily accessed in U.S. pupils' permanent records (Delpit, 1995). Finally, the Chinese school setting was at once familiar and strange. On the one hand, it looked much like any U.S. school with classrooms furnished with desks, tables, chairs, whiteboards, and audiovisual equipment. The class size of about thirty students was comparable to the size of many classes in the U.S. But beneath this veneer of similarity lay features that seemed quite strange to the U.S. participants. For example, the Chinese students turned out not to be the "model" students many Americans envision them to be. They chatted with their peers, fiddled with their backpacks, wandered around the classroom without asking permission, and ran headlong through the corridors during passing times and recess. Unlike many U.S. school administrators who value order, predictability, and routine, the Chinese school administrators frequently changed the schedule for the day without warning and expected teachers to comply. Finally, the U.S. teachers found it challenging to work alongside a Chinese co-teacher. The Chinese teachers played a critical role as language and culture brokers, but it was difficult to negotiate roles since both U.S. and Chinese teachers are accustomed to autonomy in the classroom.

The challenges of teaching in the Chinese context were varied and complex; yet, many of the features of the Chinese context are precisely those that face novice and veteran teachers in urban classrooms in the U.S., for example, overcrowding, students who do not speak English and whose culture is not mainstream American, failures of the physical plant, and limited resources. Certainly, language differences between the U.S. teachers and the Chinese teachers and students complicated communication. While these differences were formidable, linguistic differences in U.S. classrooms increasingly confound communication as well.

Learning to teach, particularly in diverse settings with diverse students, is a difficult task and not one accomplished quickly. The process generally causes friction between both preservice and inservice teachers' preconceptions and dispositions and those required to teach diverse learners. Like the frog in a well shaft, a teacher may lack experience of worlds different from her/his own and may even be offended when his/her restricted views are pointed out. Metaphorically, the teaching experience in China gave participants a completely new view of the sky.

CONTEXTS OF THE STUDY: EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN CHINA AND ITS EFFECTS

In 1999, China adopted a plan for revitalizing education for the 21st century, a plan which has led to the rather ironic situation described by Hulbert (2007), "Even as American educators seek to emulate Asian pedagogy—a test-centered ethos and

a rigorous focus on math, science, and engineering—Chinese educators are trying to blend a Western emphasis on critical thinking, versatility, and leadership into their own traditions” (p. 2).

China’s educational reform with the redefined goal of English learning as communicative competence has made English a valuable commodity (Hu, 2005). Traditional methods of teaching English through repetition and rote memorization have not led to the fluency required for success in a global economy. Proficiency in English, as measured on national, standardized tests, is now required for access to higher levels of education and to the nation’s prestigious colleges and universities (Wang & Paine, 2003). English opens an even more coveted avenue for Chinese students’ future economic success—admission to America’s elite universities, such as Harvard and MIT (Hulbert, 2007). Thus, it is small wonder that demand for teachers who are fluent in English exceeds supply or that Chinese parents are willing to pay high prices to give their children this distinct socioeconomic edge (Hulbert, 2007; Yang, 2001).

English Immersion Summer Camp in China

As a result of high demand for students to learn to communicate in English, immersion summer camps, often staffed by native speakers of English who may or may not have any teaching background, have become quite popular. The three-week English immersion camp described here took place in a suburb of a large, metropolitan area in Southeast China. The camp was housed in a private elementary school, which charged tuition for students to enroll. Each U.S. teacher was paired with a Chinese English teacher to co-teach English to a class of 25 to 30 Chinese youngsters, grades K-6. The students had either had little systematic English instruction or had been exposed to the traditional ways of learning English in China. The Chinese English teachers, for the most part, taught English as they had learned it—through grammar-based and transmissive methods of instruction (Song, 2000). Most of the Chinese English teachers had limited proficiency in English.

While the program directors had been quite explicit in explaining to participants what living and working conditions at the school would be like, none of the participants was really prepared for the reality. The heat and humidity were oppressive. The opening of the camp was chaotic: Teaching assignments had changed; requested supplies had not been ordered; the school copiers malfunctioned. The U.S. teachers immediately found they had drastically overestimated the Chinese students’ proficiency in English and had to adjust their plans accordingly. Texts that U.S. students of similar age and grade would have breezed through were excruciatingly difficult for the Chinese students for whom every new word (e.g., cactus) seemed culture-laden.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers' Backgrounds

The authors are teacher educators at an urban public university in the Southwest United States. One of the authors is a native of mainland China who emigrated to the U.S. in order to earn a doctoral degree in education. Because of his many contacts in China and his fluency in the language, he initiated the summer camp project and negotiated the terms with the school district and personnel in China. He and the third author, who is Taiwanese-Canadian, served as project directors. The first and fourth authors, who participated in the summer camp project by teaching professional development courses for Chinese teachers, are Caucasians who have lived and traveled extensively in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Participants and Their Preparations for Teaching in China

The project directors used written applications and personal interviews to select from a pool of applicants eight individuals enrolled in or accepted into a variety of graduate-level teacher education programs. All eight were judged to be highly motivated, high-performing educators or future educators who had the personal, social, and professional skills and experiences that would enable them to adapt quickly to teaching in diverse settings, such as China.

Table 1 gives an overview of selected characteristics of all eight participants. Jane and Cherie whose cases are detailed in this study appear next to each other so that readers can easily identify their similarities and differences.

In early May, participants began meeting weekly with the project directors and their peers to plan for their summer teaching. All knew they would be teaching English language arts as well as English conversation, American culture, and one extracurricular class, such as dance or art. The participants focused the majority of their planning time on the English Language Arts component.

Because the Chinese camp organizers and the students' parents expected to observe noticeable improvements in the students' English communication skills, the project directors decided that a workshop approach that integrated reading, writing, speaking, and listening would be most appropriate for that purpose (Atwell, 1998; Calkins & Graves, 1980; Routman, 2000). The workshop model offers children opportunities to use language and literacy for real, personally meaningful purposes and to learn through active, experiential, and democratic processes (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). Direct instruction occurs as appropriate, but students spend most of their time actually reading, writing, speaking, and listening as they

TABLE 1. Overview of Eight U.S. Teachers who Taught in China

Participants	Jane	Cherie	Rose	Stu	Dawn	Mark	Linda	Irina
Demographic information	White female, age 34	White female, age 31	White female, age 27	White male, age 27	Biracial (African American/Japanese) female, age 40	White male, age 40	White female, age 27	White female, age 28
Other relevant personal information	Single	Single; mother of 1	Married to Stu	Married to Rose	Single	Married to Linda; father of 3	Married to Mark; mother of 3	Single; born and raised in Eastern Europe; multilingual
Professional status	Doctoral student in Teacher Education	Preservice teacher (completed all but 6 hours of student teaching)	Classroom teacher, enrolled in Masters program in Curriculum and Instruction/	Preservice teacher (not yet entered program)	Doctoral student in Teacher Education	Classroom teacher	Doctoral student in Teacher Education	Doctoral student in Teacher Education
Professional preparation	Elem. Credential, M.Ed. in Literacy, ESL endorsement	BA in Literature, completing M.Ed./Sec. Credential in English	Elem. Credential	BA in English, accepted into M. Ed./Sec. Credential in English	Elem. Credential, ESL Certification	Sec. Credential in Social Studies, M.Ed. in Ed. Leadership	Sec. Credential in Social Studies, M. Ed.	Elem. & EFL Credential in Eastern European country
Professional experience	7 yrs. teaching 1st grade in urban/high-risk setting, school literacy specialist	1 semester long-term sub in high school English	5 yrs. teaching, 2nd grade in private school, tutored ESL students.	No teaching experience	11 yrs teaching 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th grades. 1 semester teaching preservice teachers	7 yrs. teaching social studies in urban/high-risk settings	6 yrs. teaching social studies at 7th and 8th grade level. 1 semester teaching preservice teachers	3 yrs. EFL teaching in Eastern European country; 1 semester teaching preservice teachers in US
Cross-cultural experience	U.S. travel; trip to Europe with parents	Extensive travel in US, Europe, Latin America	2 months in Bali, Indonesia, travel to Canada	Travel to Canada, South America, Spain, Israel	Visited sister who resides in Japan	2 year mission in Spain; travel in Mexico	Mother is German; born & lived for 5 yrs. in Germany	Extensive travel in US, Europe
Grades taught in China	k-1	5-6	3-4	1-2	4-5	3-4	1-2	1-2

respond to texts and discuss their writing with peers and the teacher. Workshop then is consistent with the principles of a constructivist pedagogy, which attends to the individual student, emphasizes dialogue, introduces formal knowledge in a variety of ways, provides learning experiences that are meaningful and engaging, and helps students develop meta-awareness of their own learning processes (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Richardson, 2003). Furthermore, workshop is a recommended strategy for teaching bilingual and ELL children and adolescents (De la Luz Reyes, 1995; Hudelson, Poyner, & Wolfe, 2003). All participants received instruction in the workshop approach and collaboratively developed detailed lesson plans for implementing this strategy.

Data Sources

Data for this study came from the larger data pool that was collected from all eight participants before, during, and after the summer camp. First, each participant completed a written application and questionnaire designed to gather information about personal, educational, and professional background. Second, the authors conducted three 30-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant: at the beginning of, completion of, and approximately nine months after the China experience. The interviews were designed to help the authors understand participants' conceptual preparation for this experience, their initial and long-term reflections upon the summer camp, and their views of the impact of the experience on their personal and professional lives. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Third, the authors videotaped each participant during the reading and writing workshop block: once near the beginning and then during the last week of the camp. The videotapes were subsequently viewed and transcribed. These videos provided important sources of information about each participant's teaching practice and their interactions with students and the Chinese English teacher in the class.

Finally, the authors facilitated thirty- to forty-minute debriefing sessions daily during the camp. These discussions were intended to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their teaching. All sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. These data provided information about major concerns, accomplishments, and problems that the participants experienced. These debriefings also gave the authors insight into how the participants interacted with one another. Informal participant observations by the authors were also used at times to triangulate with formal collected data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began immediately after the authors' return to the United States. The authors met weekly to read, discuss, and identify emergent themes and patterns in the interviews, transcripts, and survey data of one participant (Strauss & Corbin,

1990). We then collaboratively developed arguments using the theme and patterns from that participant in relation to our research questions. These themes and patterns became the framework for a case. Subsequently, we reviewed all the data from another participant and used the first case as a point of reference to confirm, modify, and challenge arguments that had previously been developed with support of other kinds of data. We then rethought our arguments or interpretations to match the data for both cases. Over time, a case framework for each of the eight participants was developed. Here we share only two of those cases, which were selected based on the criteria described below.

Case Selection

The authors selected Jane and Cherie for representation here for several reasons. As White, middle-class females, both reflected the “typical” demographic profile of the U.S. teaching force. However, as Table 1 (above) shows, the two differed noticeably in academic preparation and personal and professional experience. Thus, the cases of Jane and Cherie offered the best opportunity to learn about the interplay of experience, beliefs, and contexts as they learned to teach in this setting (Stake, 1998).

JANE CARSON

At the time of the study, Jane was a single White female, age thirty-four. She had earned a bachelor’s degree in biology and completed a formal teacher education program before becoming an elementary teacher with a TESOL endorsement. She held a master’s degree in literacy and was a part-time doctoral student in the teacher education program in the COE’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Jane had substantial experience working with English language learners. For six years, she had worked as a first grade teacher of children, including English language learners, at a diverse urban elementary school. After earning her master’s degree, she became a literacy specialist working with a range of elementary students at her school. In addition, she had worked as a camp counselor and, as an adolescent, had camped and traveled in Europe with her parents. At the time of the study, she lived in an urban neighborhood with a large Hispanic population.

Reasons and Preparation for Summer Teaching

Jane cited two main reasons for going to China. First, she said, “It would be a great experience and...an inexpensive way to travel more.” Second, she viewed it as an opportunity to make international comparisons, “I thought it would be interesting to compare because I taught first grade in America for six years. I was really excited to get the same grade level.”

As Jane planned, she visualized her prospective students as “my lowest ESL kids.” She believed that choice was a hallmark of reading and writing workshop, so she gathered and brought to China a plethora of teaching materials, such as picture books and puppets, which she had used successfully in her teaching. Jane anticipated using students’ own personal stories as a springboard for developing English literacy. She described the role of teacher as a “facilitator” and stated that she was “really into constructivism and doing learning from experience.”

Teaching in the Summer Camp

Because of her experience and credentials, Jane was assigned to teach the camp’s youngest learners who ranged in age from five to seven. Initially, she was excited by the idea of teaching primary learners—the level at which she was experienced. But she was dismayed to discover how little English the students knew: “I kept trying to figure out where they were at and I am like, ‘Oh my gosh!’ because I kept going lower and lower in terms of...their lack of English knowledge.”

Jane spent the first few days of teaching duplicating and collating teaching materials and coping with the dearth of supplies but believed she would be able to teach effectively once these issues were resolved: “I am more concerned, like everybody else is, with the lack of supplies, than with students. Because I’m like, ‘Okay, what am I gonna do if I don’t have paper?’ That’s more my concern, not the students. I know I’ll be fine once I have supplies.”

However, once the supplies arrived, Jane still did not implement the workshop strategies that she had successfully used in the United States. She believed that the Chinese students didn’t know enough to “create their own things in English.” The students were slow to learn the routines that had kept her American classroom running smoothly and Jane became preoccupied with classroom management: “I have to be honest. The behavior was still a shock.... It was shocking for me to watch them when it was break time. They were frightening. They were crazy... [T]hey would run through the room during transitions.... They were like flying.”

Soon, Jane established a daily routine of whole group instruction, choral repetition, practicing physical response (e.g., “Stand up.”), and coloring during workshop time. She said she felt more comfortable with this “pattern of teaching” and realized: “[Y]ou have to keep them busy and you have to change things up every few minutes....It’s okay to let them color part of the day. I always feel bad letting them color that much but they need it...” She did use some active learning in her classroom, such as teaching her students to jump rope while chanting American rhymes and having them work with Play-Doh™. As their culminating performance, her students made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for their parents, explaining the procedures to them in English.

Working with a Chinese Colleague

Jane seemed to view her Chinese English co-teacher, Ms. Lee, as an aide. She described their relationship:

...[W]e didn't really co-teach per se. She just mainly dealt with discipline and followed my lead. I hate to say it, but I hope she learned more from me.... It was kind of a slow start for the first couple of days because we were kind of getting it together. Once I said, 'Here's what I brought from America and here is my plan,' she was right on board and supportive. She did a lot more with discipline.... After she figured out the routine, I think she got more comfortable.

When Ms. Lee offered to share her own teaching materials, Jane declined, explaining, "I actually have picture cards that I brought and I am going to use those." Jane preferred collaborating with the other American teachers and exchanging teaching ideas with them.

Reflections on the China Experience and Evidence of Impact

Looking back on her experience in China, Jane said she felt "fairly satisfied" with her work there. Even though she described herself as a "constructivist," she referred to her instruction in China as "teacher-directed":

I did a lot with oral language, but like I said, it was a lot of repeating. I don't know if that was the best for them, but I think that's how we start. With repetition and then from there we have them come up with their own ideas. I wonder if that was the best.... I felt that repeating was really boring. I feel a little bad about the repetition.

In Fall 2005, Jane became a full-time doctoral student with the goal of becoming a teacher educator. Her duties included supervising preservice teachers in the field and teaching an undergraduate course in children's literature. She didn't perceive much connection between her new role and her recent experiences in China. Had she gone back to teaching first grade and working with ESL students, she thought the China experience might have had a greater impact. She speculated that as a person she had changed "maybe a teeny bit" because of the trip. For example, she shared an office with an international graduate student whose English was not fluent: "I am more patient with him because I am more curious about his culture."

Overall, Jane felt that the greatest value of the experience for her lay in her new perspective on diversity: "Multiculturalism is so important and you don't really experience what it is like to be a minority. The minority thing is huge. My multicultural class was like, 'Okay, go do something where you will be a minority.' But that was huge in China for me. That was a big thing just being a minority and

experiencing the staring and just realizing that you are the minority.” However, she did not elaborate on how this realization manifested itself in her every day life.

CHERIE KING

At the time of the study, Cherie was a single, thirty-one-year-old, White female teacher and mother of a five-year-old. She held a bachelor’s degree in art and literature. At the time of the summer camp, she was enrolled in a graduate licensure program, seeking certification to teach high school English, and had completed almost all her course work except for student teaching. Her formal teaching experience consisted of one semester working as a long-term substitute English teacher with classes of lower-achieving students and working in an after school kindergarten program and various summer camps. Cherie had acquired substantial cross-cultural experiences through her international travel and her personal life. For example, her fiancé was African American and a Southerner, so she had already experienced negotiating cultural differences within her future family. She had traveled and studied in Europe and Latin America, learning to communicate in Italian and French.

Reasons and Preparations for Summer Teaching

Cherie’s primary reason for going to China was to “learn more about myself as an educator. . . . I think it [teaching] is a two-way street and I learn more about myself in the classroom as a teacher than any other way.” She believed that stepping outside her own culture and comfort zone would help her better understand herself as an educator and as a human being. As she said: “You don’t realize that certain things we consider to be norms are not norms everywhere else. . . . I like to be able to get out and experience things from a different perspective and I believe that makes me a little bit more critical of my own perspective.” She wanted to further develop her own worldview as well as that of her future students: “There has been a lot about teaching American students from a more global perspective. So, I wanted to have an experience with other children in an entirely different culture to bring back to my students.”

Teaching in the Summer Camp

Because of her background preparing to teach high school English, Cherie was assigned to teach in a fifth and sixth grade combination class, the highest level of the camp. Initially, Cherie was frustrated because her curricular planning had assumed too high a level of English proficiency among her students. In response, she adjusted her plans but retained the overall framework for reading and writing

workshop, while developing daily lessons based on “what I have learned in the classroom, which I never have ever done.... This [experience] has taught me to be more aware of my surroundings, about what I do, and how I communicate to children. When they are learning, ‘Why? What did I just do that they are getting it? How can I use that to do something else?’”

In the classroom, she regularly used flexible grouping to enable students who understood the lessons to help their peers who were struggling and to challenge those who understood to stretch even further. For example, she taught her students to write poetry by offering them increasingly complex poetic forms to create: “Those higher students went all out and I had time to conference with them and the lowers were still being challenged.”

Cherie strove to give students choices. For example, she offered them the option of reading and discussing an “easy,” “middle,” or “difficult” level book. Even though her co-teacher, Mr. Hao, thought the “difficult” book was too hard for the students, she persisted, encouraging them to work together and use context clues and their Chinese language to “get the idea of what the book was about.” Then she asked them to write questions about their books and discuss them in literature circles.

Cherie helped students comprehend texts by acting out scenes and drawing pictures of unfamiliar vocabulary. She challenged students to go beyond summarizing by writing their own endings for stories, and ultimately by writing their own stories. As the end of the camp approached, she focused on peer editing and mini-lessons in grammar to help students create final pieces of writing for the portfolios they would take home to their parents.

Working with a Chinese Colleague

Cherie developed a team teaching relationship with her co-teacher, Mr. Hao, during the summer camp and thought herself “really lucky” to have him in the classroom. She relied on Mr. Hao to provide culturally relevant examples that would help her students connect personally to the content of the lessons. She depended on him to help her communicate with students and manage behavior, “He is right there with me. He is on top of it. We are more like team teachers.... When they get too loud, he tells them to quiet down....” At the same time, Cherie did not hesitate to enforce her own rules or to disagree professionally with Mr. Hao.

Reflections on Chinese Experience and Evidence of Impact

In Fall 2005, Cherie completed her student teaching in an urban/suburban high school with diverse learners. She was subsequently hired there as a full-time English teacher. Cherie claimed that learning to teach in China had influenced her in several

specific ways. First, the experience in China had reinforced her idea that “teaching is give and take:” “The most important thing I learned was to be open and flexible and to keep in mind that you have just as much to learn from everybody else around you as they have to learn from you....” Second, she became aware of how culture shapes our worldviews, frequently using examples from China to illustrate to her U.S. students that “what we might misconstrue as being rude or thoughtless or weird or wrong...is all cultural conceptions.” Cherie appreciated the fact that she had not been able to fall back on taken-for-granted knowledge to make judgments about her Chinese students’ backgrounds or abilities; thus, she had had no “preconceived notions” about their potential or performance. For this reason, she referred to teaching in China as her “most pure experience.”

In China, Cherie learned to learn from her students, a practice that was more challenging to adhere to in the United States where she sometimes found herself slipping into “traditional” methods of “giving information:” “...and I have to snap out of it. I have to say, ‘Okay, listen to them, listen to where their weaknesses are, listen to what they are saying about it and figure out why.’” She referred to the summer camp experience as her “reality check.”

The China experience taught Cherie that it is possible to reach all students. She reflected:

I am more aware of different abilities and how to catch everybody in one classroom. ... I remember people saying there is no way I can catch all these 180 kids. Now I feel like it is possible. There are ways to organize your classroom that you can challenge everybody so you feel like they are really working and learning and [you are] not losing the lower level.

Furthermore, she had experienced “an epiphany” about discipline while touring Beijing in a bus with a guide who spoke only Chinese:

How we were in the back talking and not listening made me realize that all those kids that were getting in all that trouble in the classroom in China were bored and didn’t really understand. When I see kids in my class that aren’t doing what they are supposed to, [that experience] makes me think of what I am doing and...things to help them get a little more involved.

Cherie felt that the key to good teaching was making learning “personal.” Teaching, she said, “...is a lot about listening...[I]t is about paying attention to... how they learn best...[I]t is about helping them enjoy what they like to do. I think about China a lot... [When] I am beating my head against the wall, I need to stop and be retrospective and think about why this is difficult right now, why are they not behaving, what can I do?”

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

While few teachers may ever have the opportunity to teach in China, many will certainly experience the increasingly common phenomenon of teaching in a context that is changing as a result of migration, immigration, residential patterns, and redistricting. What happens to teachers when the familiar context in which they learned to teach changes? How can we identify and prepare both teachers and teacher educators who can and will adapt to changing environments? We can perhaps begin to answer these questions by addressing the questions that guided this study: (1) How did the setting illuminate and/or influence Jane's and Cherie's conceptions of teaching, learning, and students? (2) What factors in their background, such as preparation, professional experience, individual history, and identity influenced their conceptions? (3) What did Jane and Cherie learn about teaching diverse learners from this experience?

According to constructivist learning theory, the setting—teaching English in a summer camp in China—should have created a disequilibrium that would compel Jane, Cherie, and the other U.S. teachers to reconceptualize their ideas of teaching, a change that is believed to be more likely if a teacher has relevant experience as a base from which to examine the new ideas and approaches in context (Kennedy, 1991; Richardson, 1996). Jane appeared to possess the relevant experiential background that would enhance the likelihood of change. And Jane did change—but not in the direction the authors anticipated. Instead of becoming more flexible and open in her approaches to teaching, she became preoccupied with management issues and keeping students busy. It could be argued that rather than being unfaithful to the principles of constructivist teaching that Jane was simply being responsive to the needs of her students who lacked a foundation in English. Every language learner knows that some amount of repetition is necessary to gain fluency in an unfamiliar tongue. But in Jane's classroom, repetition became the dominant mode of instruction with few opportunities for children to explore learning English through centers, self-selected activities, or authentic communication. Rather than building on the students' native language strengths, she referred to herself as going “lower and lower” in an attempt to address their “lack of knowledge.” In fact, months after the trip, when one of the authors asked her if the kindergarteners could write in Chinese, Jane seemed surprised: “I never thought to have them write in Chinese.” The extended videotaping of Jane's teaching in the first week and in the final week of the camp revealed the same type of rote learning activity. This is not to say that the students were not engaged or learning in Jane's classroom. Indeed, they eagerly chorused the names of items of clothing or colors or whatever words and phrases were the focus of the daily lessons.

By contrast, Cherie resisted her first impulse to abandon her plans as too ambitious. Rather she learned to adapt them by observing what her students were able to do each day. Her use of small group, peer response, and her collaboration

with Mr. Hao allowed her to give individual attention to students who needed both support and challenge. It could be argued that implementing workshop was easier for Cherie than for Jane, since Cherie's students were more mature and already possessed some knowledge of English. But such an argument sounds suspiciously similar to the incessant "blame game" some teachers play who claim they would use innovative strategies if only their students were older or younger, or more mature or less jaded, or smarter or not so focused on grades.

What role did the setting play in such differing outcomes? It seems clear that teaching in China created disequilibrium for both Jane and Cherie, but how much disequilibrium is enough to prompt significant learning in a direction that will lead to effective teaching practices? How much is too much? Does disequilibrium created in a particular context necessarily lead to a change for the better? And is the change sustained when the context changes? (It should be noted that the authors' ability to make claims about change is limited. While the data collected during and after the China experience is quite rich, it does not include empirical evidence of what the participants' teaching looked like prior to the trip.)

Since Jane and Cherie were immersed in the same setting but responded so differently, analysis of the data led the authors back to factors in their background that might have influenced their experiences in China. We were particularly struck by the differences in Jane's and Cherie's original orientations toward participating in the summer camp. Jane's goals involved traveling and observing the differences between teaching in a U.S. and a Chinese context. Cherie's goal was to learn about herself as a person, a teacher, and a citizen of the world. Having gone with the espoused intent to learn, she did learn, and she subsequently articulated strong connections between her Chinese experience and her current teaching situation. Cherie's and Jane's conceptual orientations were not the specific ideas about teaching, learning and students that researchers have assumed are important to developing effective teaching (Thompson, 1992). Rather, they were more general orientations toward experience. Jane's orientation might be likened to that of a tourist ("It would be a great experience...and an inexpensive way to travel more.") The goal of the tourist is to observe, experience, and come back with the photos. By contrast, Cherie's orientation might be compared to that of an anthropologist ("learn more about myself" and "experience things from a different perspective"). The goal of the anthropologist is to understand "how people make meaning within their communities and how these 'webs of significance' give rise to behaviors and attitudes" (Henze & Hauser, 1999). Given today's increasingly diverse student population, teachers need to be more like anthropologists than tourists.

For Jane and Cherie, neither teaching experience nor credentials were good indicators of teaching effectiveness and may even have had a negative influence in Jane's case. Jane gave numerous indications, such as declining Ms. Lee's offers of assistance, that she saw herself as an expert—and experts have no need to learn from others. In contrast, Cherie, with little classroom experience and only basic

teacher education coursework, quickly realized that she needed to focus on students and their learning in order to implement reading and writing workshop. She and Mr. Hao collaborated, establishing routines for communicating with the students and conferring daily about planning.

Did the summer camp teaching experience help Jane and Cherie learn to teach diverse learners? Jane's insights after the experience focused primarily on her experience of being a minority who "would get stared at and touched and groped" in the grocery store, but she did not elaborate on how this experience affected her. When asked to reflect on her teaching in follow-up interviews, she consistently expressed discomfort with the amount of repetition she had used and questioned whether she had done "the right thing," but she maintained it was necessary because the students didn't "know anything." How is it possible that despite her advanced degrees, credentials, and extended experience teaching in urban schools, she essentially reverted to a focus on control, a state most commonly associated with beginning teachers? Why was Cherie, still a preservice teacher, so adept at responding to her Chinese students' needs and later so articulate at connecting her teaching in China to teaching in the U.S.?

Certainly, teacher educators need to develop criteria that help them attract, select, and retain teachers like Cherie. At the same time, we must educate the preservice teachers who are in our classrooms now, as well as those, like Jane, who are already in the profession. How can teacher education programs improve to produce more outcomes like Cherie's and minimize those like Jane's?

First, this study suggests that exploration of one's identity and experiences should continue to be an important and integral component of teacher education programs, both at the undergraduate and the graduate levels. Perhaps if Jane had had more opportunities to critically reflect on her professional and personal autobiographies, she might have arrived at a deeper self-awareness that would have helped her sustain her expressed commitment to constructivism. Because Jane earned her masters degree and is working toward a doctoral degree in our department, we feel somewhat disheartened that our instruction has had so little impact on her deeply held beliefs and attitudes. The case of Jane has reminded us that we need to integrate opportunities for educative introspection throughout preservice, inservice, and graduate programs.

Second, teacher educators can help teachers see themselves as learners by using inquiry approaches in both preservice and inservice education. We need to maximize opportunities for teachers to ask "anthropologist" questions, as Cherie did: "Why? What did I just do that they are getting it? How can I use that to do something else?" We need to minimize the tourist perspective, as portrayed by Jane: "Here's what I brought from America and here is my plan."

Third, teacher educators need to seek out ways to provide their students with disorienting experiences. Prior to the trip, Jane gave no indications that her classroom would be teacher-centered or that she would become so preoccupied

with control. How many other practicing and prospective teachers and teacher educators claim to be constructivists—but whose concepts crumble when tested in context? How can teacher educators design experiences that help teachers like Cherie and teachers like Jane learn important principles that will guide their practice long after the experience has ended? It seems that cross-cultural immersion experiences can be very valuable in this regard. Many opportunities for such experiences can be found by innovative teacher educators and may not require living outside the country for a semester or longer.

Even as an experienced and highly qualified teacher, doctoral student, and prospective teacher educator, Jane's conceptions of teaching, learning, and students had apparently not been challenged prior to her experience in China—and perhaps not even then. At the same time, teaching in China did not change Cherie as much as it provided an arena in which she was able to act on beliefs and dispositions she already held. We need to design experiences that challenge the Janes of teacher education and allow the Cheries to flourish.

This study has shown that disequilibrium is not necessarily a salubrious state and that the same setting/situation may produce very different outcomes depending on the individual who experiences it. Further research is needed to help teacher educators identify what kinds of challenges are most beneficial to which students and what strategies they can use to help teachers confront, articulate, and critically examine their beliefs. It certainly appears that one type of experience does not benefit all equally.

When beginning this study, the authors believed that, of all the participants, Jane was the best prepared to teach effectively in China. Her surprising behavior caused us to question a number of our own practices. In the future, we will pay closer attention to applicants' responses to interview questions that probe their motivations for wanting to teach in China. The time available for preparing our teachers to work in China is limited. We need to balance community-building, cultural study, and instructional planning with introspection and analysis of the teaching portrayed in our growing library of videos of teaching in China. Similarly, the time available for helping participants process the experience after they return from China is scarce, as they arrive back in time to start gearing up for a new academic year. Our vision for this program includes academic credit for a semester of preparation, the experience itself, and a structured follow-up semester of reflection upon the experience and how it connects to the U.S. classroom.

Context, personal history, identity, and disposition to view teaching and learning as reciprocal and recursive processes are interconnected factors that significantly influence teacher development. While it may not be possible to select individuals for teacher education programs based on such factors, it is feasible to offer numerous experiences that encourage them to expand their worldviews and to scaffold those experiences to result in optimal learning.

EPILOGUE

Jane applied for and was accepted into the China summer camp program again in the summer of 2007. The authors hoped to find evidence that disconfirmed our original interpretation. While all the data documenting Jane's experience have not yet been transcribed, the project directors observed the same pattern in her teaching as was reported here. Cherie has just completed her third year of teaching. She is currently experimenting with incorporating digital literacy into her high school English classes and recently wrote to one of us, "My classes just started a blogging project on our individual novels.... Some are better than others- and many of these kids...are students that usually don't get involved in class... check out [list of student names] and others. Also, [some] classes are trying a different format of independent blogs...- again, one of my students who has struggled with turning in work all year began with a compelling observation.... The forums were not as successful with the seniors, but as soon as I gave them their own blogs, they were interested." Cherie continues to learn from and listen to her students.

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