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Curry in Cambridge: The first year

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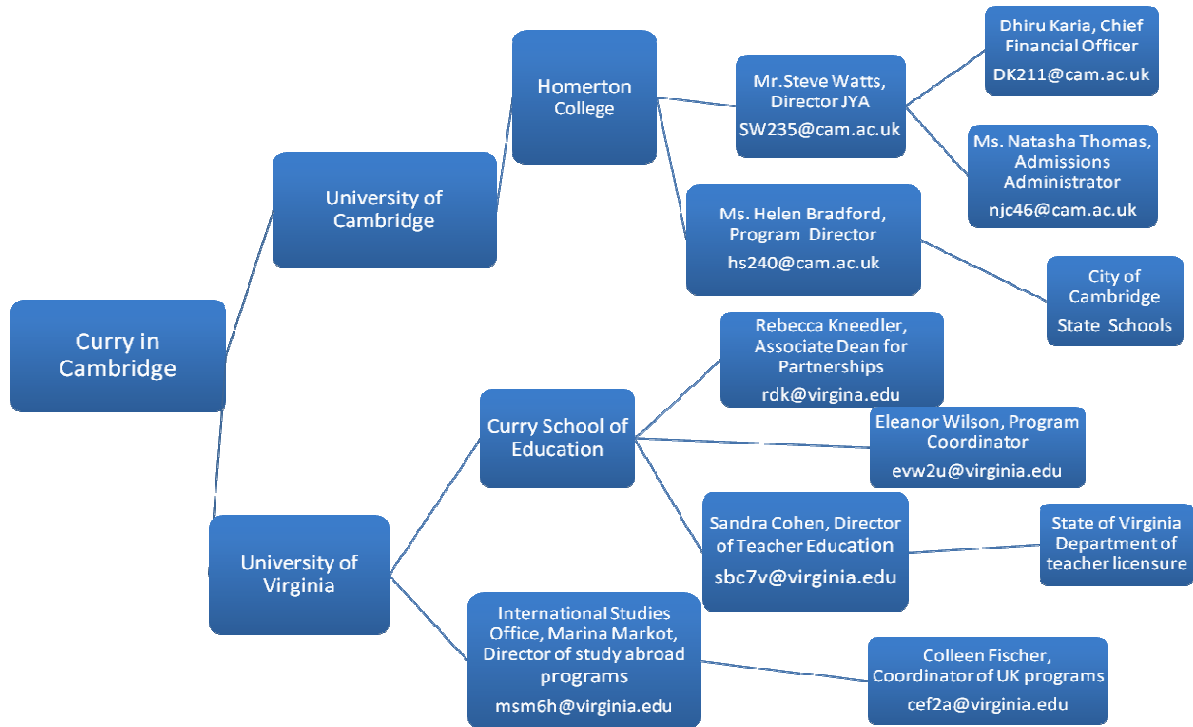
Background

My idea for developing an international student teaching placement began in 2007 when I was on leave in Cambridge, England. Over the course of several months I had the opportunity to meet primary education faculty at the University of Cambridge, become familiar with curricular materials used in their programs, and visit the training schools associated with the PGCE program (the degree program for licensure in primary teacher training). I was immediately struck with the theoretical similarities underlying the Curry School program and the Cambridge teacher training programs, the quality of instruction in the UK training schools, and the potential for American students to work with the diversity represented in these schools. It became clear to me that it would be an incredible opportunity for American students to hone their teaching skills in these schools.

I came back to Virginia in the fall of 2007 hopeful of creating an international program such as this, but completely unaware of how complicated it would turn out to be! The five-year teacher education program in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia is an integrated BA/MT program, and leaves little time for students to study abroad as they need to complete all coursework for two degrees in five years. Creating a practicum placement that would not count for state licensure was not an option

In 2008 I negotiated the logistics related to setting up this program with Curry School faculty and the University of Virginia's International Studies Office. The University's president, John Casteen, has long supported international programs, and with the appointment of the Vice Provost for International Studies, Dr. Gowher Rhizvi, there is an additional emphasis on creating international opportunities for students that are integral to a course of study as opposed to being additional, practicum placements. In the spring of 2009, 12 students applied to go on the program (through the International Studies Office), and 4 were selected after review by the elementary teacher education faculty. So, I thought, we're ready to go! As it turned out, not yet by any means...the dramas had yet to begin!

It takes a village: the diagram below illustrates personnel involved in the planning



....and timeline of key events

- Establish timing of placement (Curry and VDOE)
- Create link with Cambridge University college for social membership for Curry students. (summer 2008 and 2009)
- Hire Cambridge Education faculty member to work with students while in Cambridge (summer 2008 and 2009)
 - Faculty of Education contact
 - Homerton College contact
- Receive approval from Curry School administration to proceed (summer 2008)
 - Associate Dean for Partnerships
 - Director of Teacher Education
 - Elementary Education faculty
- Approval from University of Virginia International Studies Office (fall 2008)
 - Created application format
 - Cleared students through UVA offices for credits, financial aid, etc.
 - Supplied on-going support for obtaining Tier IV visas (to be accompanied by much angsting from myself!)

Developing research questions

Once the logistics of the program were agreed upon, I felt it was important to establish a framework to use in determining the effect this placement had on the preservice students. As I started examining the literature it quickly became apparent that little data exists related to outcomes for preservice teachers' experiences in international teaching placements, but I hit the jackpot when I came across a wonderful dissertation written by Professor Helen Marx, "Please Mind the Gap: A pre-service teacher's intercultural development during a study abroad program." I contacted her, along with her advisor, Professor David Moss at the University of Connecticut, and their support and interest in the nature of what we're doing has been incredible. In designing this pilot I also chose to work with a small group of Curry students here in Virginia in order to see what, if any, differences there were between the nature of the way the each group of students experienced their placements. The following questions serve to guide this study:

1. To what extent does an international student teaching placement affect the teaching beliefs of American elementary education preservice students, especially their developing multicultural awareness and sensitivity to issues of diversity in teaching today (Marx, Moss, and Wilson, 2009);
2. how do preservice students in American teaching placements express their views on working with diversity compare with those placed in the British classrooms;
3. and, what measures and be effectively used to determine these outcomes? (Cushner & Brennan, 2007)

Table one summarizes data collected: column one refers to UK students and column two, the US students.

Multicultural Efficacy Scale	Mid-September Early-December	Mid-September Early December
First Focus Groups	Late September (Skype)	Late September
First video-recording (CLASS)	Late September (school site)	Late September (school site)
Second Focus Groups	Mid-October (Skype)	Mid-October (Ruffner)
Third Focus Groups	Mid-November (Skype)	Mid-November (Ruffner)
Second video-recording	Mid-November (Skype)	Mid-November (school)
Fourth/final focus group	Early December (Skype)	Mid-November (Ruffner)
Final exit interview	Early January 2010 (Ruffner)	Early January 2010 (Ruffner)
Reflective journals	On-going	On-going
Lesson plans and feedback	On-going	On-going? open portfolio

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Table 1

The program is in place!

I met with the four students we selected regularly during the spring of 2009 and then just prior to their departure in September. While I had provided them with as much information as I could, there still were many issues left to address. We placed the four students in Virginia classrooms for 3-4 weeks prior to departure to ensure they had full-time exposure to the elementary classrooms here.

The weeks in September were filled with trying to take care of administrative details, not the least of which were the hurdles posed by visa requirements, but at last things were in place and the students arrived safely by September 15th.

My English colleague arranged the school assignments and found housing at a B & B for the students as the Cambridge University college, Homerton, was unable to provide housing for one term. She provided orientation and support for the students during their initial week in Cambridge, and then they were off to the schools: two in each of two schools. The students had weekly seminars with the UK supervisor and I found myself emailing and or skypeing with the students almost daily along with weekly 'group' meetings which proved very helpful. I also am the instructor of record for the placement, basing my decision to pass the students on the feedback I received from Cambridge

I spent a week in Cambridge in mid-October visiting the students, the schools, and talking with various people associated with the program. Just before this visit, my English colleague realized this placement was a "final" placement, in other words, the last placement prior to obtaining their license for the Curry students, and raised the concern that this translated into a responsibility she had not expected. Her concerns were legitimate: in the eyes of the UK system of licensure as she would have been expected to sign off on the students for their final approval of a teaching license, and I have worked hard to address this for future cohorts, making it clear to the group going forward that they will be expected to do another placement if necessary on their return to the States. Most Curry students return to classes for a final semester of coursework and a seminar focusing on research related to issues they have encountered in the classroom after their student teaching placements, although we do the option of taking these courses in a May term prior to student teaching.

Student outcomes

The challenges of translating the goals of the English primary school curriculum were not as straightforward as I had anticipated, and this is a significant area we will work to improve for the next group. One issue that emerged was that our students do their teaching associateship in the fall of the fifth year, timing that we have come to think is optimal but required some explanation for the UK primary teachers as they work with trainees in the spring. Additionally, Curry students were acclimating themselves to a new curriculum along with a new school environment, a complex task indeed. As one of the students wrote early in the Cambridge placement, she was “tired of translating”:

I am tired. All of this code switching is hard. I mean this both in the sense of professional terminology and just everyday language. I don't think I realized just how many differences there are between British and American English. In school, I feel like the United States is often lumped with Britain under the umbrella of 'western culture' which makes it seem like we have much more in common that is different. Perhaps this is true, but there are still significant differences. (Journal entry, Sally, October, 2009)

The pilot study carried out this past fall (2009) included collecting varied forms of data to describe the experiences of the first group of Curry School preservice students and with a group of their peers student teaching in Charlottesville (Cordeiro, 2007; Zahn, 2007). As noted in the table 1, several instruments were used for assessing teaching efficacy about children and understanding of diversity – both at the beginning of the placements and at the end (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Guyton & Wesche, 2005); analysis and coding of video records using the CLASS, a standardized measure of teacher effectiveness used in the Curry teacher education program (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008); and other documentation related to the students' experiences. Additionally, weekly seminars were held with both groups. All of the students were white and in their mid-twenties; all but one were female. All but one of the students reported that they had attended high school with students different from themselves.

Initial analysis of the quantitative data measures (Multicultural Efficacy Scale and videotapes scored according to areas identified by the CLASS instrument) showed little difference between the groups during the placement. In answer to the question “Teachers should adapt lesson plans to reflect the different cultures represented in the classroom,” one of the Virginia students stated “Disagree somewhat,” before student teaching and changed to “Agree somewhat” after student teaching. All of the others agreed or agreed strongly before student teaching and did not change. In response to the item, “I can adapt instructional methods to meet the needs of learners from diverse groups,” all of the students answered that they believed they could do this reasonably well, “with time to prepare.” After student teaching, one person changed to answer, “I am quite confident that this would be easy for me to do.” That student had been in Cambridge. Overall, the survey results indicate that the students supported the use of

materials relating to diverse groups and were fairly confident that they could adapt lessons and materials to include diverse groups before they started student teaching. Preliminary analysis shows that, for the most part, their experiences did not do much to change their perceptions. Where there were changes, the direction was toward including materials and lessons supporting diversity and having more confidence about working with diverse students.

Analysis of the CLASS data shows similarities again between the two groups, with little change over time. Both groups scored strongly on measures related to emotional support (class climate, sensitivity to students), organizational support (behavior management, productivity, instructional learning format), and instructional support (concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling).

I have not completed analyzing the data from the group meetings or the individual interviews I conducted with the students, but I can say at this point with some certainty that the overall content and concerns of the Virginia students during their placements related to issues of classroom management, whereas the group in Cambridge was much more focused on reflecting on their daily teaching, talking about content they were expected to teach, and concerns about children in their care. The Cambridge classes were large (around 30 students per class), posing challenges for the students, and while classroom management in the Cambridge schools was discussed in our sessions, it always came up in the context of what was being taught. This differed from the American students, all of whom were in the same school, a school where they were easily familiar with the content to teach and had more time to focus on management strategies more generally. As one of the Cambridge students said

This experience turned out to be much more about reflection...we reflected and reflected and then reflected more; we were living and breathing our experiences together and the nature of this led to our making valuable use of our reflections as a group. (Helen, Interview, January, 2010)

When pressed about their beliefs concerning multicultural education and meeting the needs of a diverse population of students, the Virginia group noted that diversity in their placements was much as they had anticipated and felt they had little problems meeting the needs of their students from racially and economically different backgrounds. The Cambridge group, expectedly, had stronger feelings on this issue as their classes consisted of children from over thirty countries, half of whom were not native English-language speakers:

Multiculturalism is a 'big thing' [in our teacher ed program] and I've never really known what relationship I have with it. I was in THE most multicultural setting, and never thought of it, and I was a part of it [diversity] too... (Jane, January, 2010)

And a second Cambridge student observed:

...it's just that the class IS diverse...we don't celebrate but just live [diversity]...in some ways it puts a lot less pressure as it's an approach to diversity that we're very comfortable with...fits into the curriculum much more fluidly and is not a SEPARATE thing. (Catherine, November, 2009)

Program outcomes

With the perspective of several months, I feel overall the program was a success. Three of the four Curry students have returned to Charlottesville; the fourth student was eligible to graduate in December and has a teaching position in northern Virginia. We have a lot of videotaped information including the students' final presentations in Cambridge which is useful to view as we make sense of the positive aspects of the program along with determining areas we need to improve. Current research on study abroad programs emphasizes the importance of providing students with post-program chances to "de-brief" about the nature of their experiences. I am meeting with the students in Charlottesville weekly this semester, both to help them with completing their research projects and to continue to reflect on the Cambridge experience (vande Berg, 2007). Interestingly, the Curry School teacher education program is in the process of re-envisioning our present programs, and we have adapted the Cambridge students' research project, analyzing the needs of three 'focal' children in their student teaching classrooms, for our culminating research class.

Conclusions and thoughts for the future

Exposing future teachers to challenges associated with global diversity (cultural, ethnic, religious and economic) is of major importance in the 21st century. I'm more convinced than ever of the value of establishing an international student teaching placement for American students. However, most of all, I'm convinced that such a program requires time to reflect on desired outcomes and carefully study the benefits for all involved, the English schools and teachers and faculty, along with the American students. I certainly was not fully aware of the complexities of asking our students to learn a new curriculum without allowing them time to absorb the specific English standards. I also have learned how complex a matter it is to reconcile the requirements of an American program with

the English school system. The view from both sides of the Atlantic is essential to more thoughtfully coordinate the educational goals of this new Curry/Cambridge venture.

Most importantly, in many ways I too was a 'translator' as I helped work with the students and my English colleagues to make this program feasible. Negotiating the logistics of this program involved officials in the faculty of Education at Cambridge University along with Homerton College, and this was complex in its own right! Among other issues, one of several unintended consequences of the pilot program has shown me the value of current technology applications as tools for relatively easy communication between Virginia and Cambridge. The potential for using tools for shared 'live' time instruction and discussion is just one idea that has surfaced after this first year and I feel could be effectively explored to and add extra dimensions to our program. In one of their last seminars in England, the Cambridge group observed "good teaching is good teaching" wherever one is, yet prior to this experience they had little concept of the transferability of effective teaching practice no matter where one was geographically, something that 'would not have occurred to us in Charlottesville" (group, December, 2009).

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