

Traveling as Teachers: A Short-term Study Abroad Program in Japan

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Abstract

Introducing international elements into a teacher education program can help pre-service teachers plan, implement, and assess powerful classroom instruction. Here, the author shares the experiences of three undergraduate social studies education majors as they traveled to Japan to learn about the 2011 Miyagi earthquake, the ensuing tsunami, and the nation's subsequent efforts to improve its disaster preparedness. This article complements an earlier publication (see Author, 2024) which explored a different subset of participants; students chronicled here had only just begun their teacher education program. While abroad, the program participants were to collect items—literally anything appropriate for classrooms, something ephemeral (e.g., a shinkansen ticket) or more permanent (e.g., a 2000 Yen note)—that could be used as curriculum materials for a future social studies lesson that featured the people and cultures of Japan. He sought to learn the degree to which, if any, the task of gathering potential curricula could help the participants generate knowledge. The items they collected and the activities they created demonstrated only slight opportunities for generating second-order historical domain knowledge. This qualitative analysis suggests that pre-service teachers, regardless of previous international experience, may require intentional types of scaffolding, specifically conceptual and metacognitive scaffolds, to help translate a short-term study abroad program into dynamic learning opportunities. Another implication is that social studies pre-service teachers may need strong support to consider contemporary photographs as interpretable visual items of material culture.