

GRADUATE DEGREES ABROAD: BUILDING CULTURAL AND INTERNATIONAL AWARENESS FOR A RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

POSGRADO EN EL EXTERIOR: CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UNA CONCIENCIA CULTURAL E INTERNACIONAL PARA UNA PEDAGOGÍA ADAPTATIVA DEL PROFESOR EDUCADOR

PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO NO EXTERIOR: CONSTRUÇÃO DE CONSCIÊNCIA CULTURAL E INTERNACIONAL PARA UMA PEDAGOGIA RESPONSIVA DO PROFESSOR EDUCADOR

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Abstract This paper is a discussion of the development of graduate programs in Nassau and Freeport, Bahamas. In 2010, our university made a conscious decision to offer an off-shore graduate program to Bahamian educators, at one specific site (one island), in response to a particular request. Today, we offer five different programs at three sites (2 islands) to teachers, school administrators, counseling professionals and organizational leaders across a range of institutional contexts. To date, over 20 professors from our School of Education have traveled in order to provide face-to-face off-shore instruction to Bahamians wishing to continue their education, in order to enhance professional learning and growth. Several of the administrators and faculty members who have been involved have begun to examine their experiences, individually and collaboratively, and are exploring the possibilities of future expansion of the international program, due to the success of the graduate programs offered in the Bahamas. This paper describes one of these sites, and the experiences of one administrator and one faculty member, of teaching, lessons

learned, and suggestions for institutions of Higher Education considering developing off-shore graduate teacher education, educational services and organizational leadership programs.

Keywords Graduate School Degree. Culturally responsive pedagogy. Teacher Education. International program development.

Resumen: Este artículo debate el desarrollo de programas de posgrado en Nassau y Freeport, en las Bahamas. En 2010 nuestra universidad tomó una decisión consciente al ofrecer un programa de posgrado *off-shore* para los educadores de las Bahamas, en un contexto específico (una isla) y en respuesta a un pedido particular. Actualmente ofrecemos cinco programas distintos en tres sitios (2 islas) para profesores, administradores escolares, orientadores pedagógicos y líderes organizacionales en una variedad de contextos institucionales educacionales. Hasta el presente momento, más de veinte profesores de nuestra Facultad de Educación viajaron para dar clases presenciales *off-shore* para alumnos de las Bahamas que ansiaban continuar su formación para mejorar el aprendizaje y en busca del crecimiento profesional. Varios de los administradores y profesores que estuvieron involucrados empezaron a examinar sus experiencias individualmente y de manera colaborativa. Ahora ya están explorando las posibilidades de una futura expansión internacional del programa debido al éxito de los programas de posgrado ofrecidos por la Barry University en las Bahamas. Este artículo describe uno de esos contextos y las experiencias de un administrador y de un miembro del cuerpo docente, de la enseñanza, las lecciones aprendidas y sugerencias para instituciones de enseñanza superior que estén considerando el desarrollo de posgrado en educación, servicios de educación y programas de liderazgo organizacional *off-shore*.

Palavras chave: Posgrado. Pedagogía cultural e internacional adaptativa. Formación del profesor. Desarrollo de Programas Internacionales.

Resumo: Este artigo discute o desenvolvimento de programas de pós-graduação em Nassau e Freeport, nas Bahamas. Em 2010, nossa universidade tomou uma decisão consciente de oferecer um programa de pós-graduação *off-shore* para os educadores das Bahamas, em um contexto específico (uma ilha) e em resposta a um pedido particular. Hoje, oferecemos cinco programas diferentes em três locais (2 ilhas) para professores, administradores escolares, orientadores pedagógicos e líderes organizacionais em uma variedade de contextos institucionais educacionais. Até o momento, mais de 20 professores da nossa Faculdade de Educação viajaram para dar aulas presenciais *off-shore* para alunos das Bahamas que ansiavam continuar sua formação para melhorar a aprendizagem e em busca do crescimento profissional. Vários dos administradores e professores que estiveram envolvidos começaram a examinar as suas experiências individualmente e de forma colaborativa. Agora, já estão explorando as possibilidades de uma futura expansão internacional do programa devido ao sucesso dos programas de pós-graduação oferecidos pela Barry University nas Bahamas. Este artigo descreve um desses contextos e as experiências de um administrador e um membro do corpo docente, do ensino, as lições aprendidas e sugestões para instituições de ensino superior que estejam considerando o desenvolvimento pós-graduação em educação, serviços de educação e programas de liderança organizacional *off-shore*.

Palavras-chave: Pós-graduação. Pedagogia cultural e internacional responsiva. Formação do professor. Desenvolvimento de Programas Internacionais.

OVERVIEW OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Graduate programs introduce students to specific academic disciplines that prepare them professionally. The majority of graduate programs have sequentially based courses that guide students through required courses, electives and/or practicum projects, while introducing these individuals to content knowledge needed to develop essential, critical skills to achieve academic and career success. As graduate students advance academically and professionally, they begin to mature as leaders in their fields. Throughout the United States, graduate programs at several colleges and universities have been at the forefront of academic discussions as retention and enrollment issues rise. There remains a commitment to making the necessary improvements to the academic curricula, developing contemporary educational practices, and offering courses online or internationally to attract more students. Because education faces a number of issues regarding effective ways of improving the quality of academic experiences (Ford and Kea, 2009), educators are constantly examining, probing and searching for ways to improve learning situations. Consequently, it is imperative for graduate programs to prepare knowledgeable and conscious professionals globally.

GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN THE BAHAMAS

Universities and colleges in the U.S. today face increasing challenges with respect to enrollments, student retention, and disproportionately large numbers of underprepared students. As higher education costs continue to rise, and headlines warn of the perils of student loan debt, competition amongst institutions of higher education for a dwindling pool of students presents greater obstacles than ever, in obtaining sufficient domestic enrollments to ensure financial stability. Many institutions, especially those that are private, independent and not privy to state funding sources, are choosing to capitalize on their graduate program offerings as well as seeking students from outside of the traditional geographic markets.

Given our university's location in a large urban setting in South Florida, and one of several options available for pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, it was increasingly apparent that we needed to explore alternative options to increase our admissions and attract more students to our programs. At a time when we were exploring several options to reduce

expenditures, share resources and generate new revenue streams, the opportunity arose to explore the delivery of off-shore graduate programs that were of need to a specific constituency, while doing so was also closely aligned with our University's mission and enactment of the Core Commitments.

In the Fall of 2009, while serving as the Chair of the Curriculum and Instruction Department at my university, I was approached by one of my faculty members who had just returned from offering a professional development workshop to a group of teachers working in a private school in Nassau with a request. The principal and owner of the school, whose daughter had graduated from our Bachelor's in Education program a few years prior to this time, had suggested to my colleague that there were many teachers in the Bahamas who were interested in pursuing graduate degrees, but they could not leave their homes and families to do this, nor were there sufficient local options available to meet their needs. Given my commitment to our university's mission of providing collaborative service, and fostering inclusive community, my immediate reaction was to say, "Of course! What do I need to do to make this happen?" My response to this request, and subsequent actions over the next four years, provide the historical context and framework for this article.

When the idea of offering a graduate program in the Bahamas was first presented to our Dean, she directed the faculty member to speak to me, as I was chairing a faculty committee charged with the development of a new Master's in Curriculum and Instruction program. At the time, we were teaching out several Master's degrees in specific areas (i.e., Elementary Education, Pre-K Primary Education, Technology, etc.) that had low enrollments with the intent of replacing these programs with a more generic "generalist degree" that would meet the needs of a wider audience and provide experienced classroom teachers and educators with the requisite knowledge, skills and dispositions to grow professionally as teachers and leaders. Intrigued with the possibility of beginning an off-shore cohort in the Bahamas to help meet the needs of local educators there, I contacted the principal for further information regarding the needs of her teachers, as well as others from the public and private sector.

After two conference calls and a face-to-face meeting between the principal and me, I was able to determine that the new program we were developing might be a great fit and was something that many Bahamian educators would be interested in pursuing if offered locally. After preliminary research into the educational system in the Bahamas, I began by seeking counsel and permission from the Bahamian Embassy, with an initial meeting with the Consul General in Miami. This led to my first official trip to Nassau, where I

attended the National Teacher of the Year event and met with the Minister of Education and Permanent Secretary of Education. We discussed the current challenges to the government's educational system, with a specific focus on the perceived professional development needs of their teachers, as well as the low achievement levels of students in literacy and numeracy. Their concerns included large numbers of teachers who had been prepared in an older system, lacked technology skills, or were not adequately prepared to meet the needs of the 21st century learner.

Both the Minister and PS were very interested in our Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction, specifically those courses that would prepare teachers with more advanced pedagogical and assessment strategies, and the knowledge to revitalize the curriculum and bring their teaching up to 21st century standards. It was in this initial meeting where I received permission from the Ministry of Education to move forward with efforts to bring our first graduate degree program to the Bahamas, as well as forming the bonds of what would be a truly collaborative partnership between the PS of Education and myself.

The next six to eight months were spent in curriculum development, negotiation with key stakeholders at my institution, as well as in the Bahamas, marketing, recruitment efforts, meetings with teachers, principals and other educational leaders, and the crafting of a program delivery model that would not only meet the needs of the working adult student, but also the faculty members that would be delivering the courses and supporting these international students.

COURSE OFFER MODEL IN THE BAHAMAS

36 credit Master's Programs – Each semester, teachers (graduate students) take two three-credit courses, for a total of six credits per semester, three semesters a year. Each of these programs may be completed in two years, or a total of six semesters. Each course consists of four alternating weekends, and each weekend consists of twelve hours of instruction. During the summer months, when most of the teachers are not working, the weekends are scheduled consecutively, allowing for a one month break between years one and two.

Continuity – After the completion of the first Master's degree program (C & I), we were asked to bring the MS in Exceptional Student Education and the MS in Organizational Learning and Leadership. Due to the close professional learning community formed by the first Bahamian graduates,

they were motivated to launch the first international chapter of our Alumni Association. Many of them have gone on to work with their respective schools and colleagues in leadership positions, and continue to meet regularly as a cohort, where they continue to grow and support each other as writers, researchers and leaders. Several have encouraged friends and colleagues to join subsequent cohorts, and a few have recently joined our first doctoral cohort offered in the Bahamas.

In-service programs – On multiple occasions I have been asked to develop and deliver customized in-service programs to local schools and institutions in both Nassau and Grand Bahama, and many of my faculty have done the same. Our reputation in the Bahamas continues to grow as more and more educators and leaders consider our programs as viable options for higher education and professional development.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION

Culturally responsive instruction centers on students' culture in order to preserve it and to transcend any damaging effects of the mainstream dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Cultural responsiveness is the acknowledgement and appreciation that students are alike in some ways, but also different in others (Ford & Kea, 2009). Culturally relevant teaching has an affirmative influence on students' academic achievement when students are provided with activities and lessons that afford them authentic opportunities for them to explore, appreciate, and comprehend classroom assignments and literature based on their cultural backgrounds and school experiences (Whitney, 2005). It also includes utilizing the cultural uniqueness, experiences, and perspectives of diverse students as avenues for effective teaching (Gay, 2010). Throughout their program of study, graduate students in the Grand Bahama cohort investigated and enhanced teaching and learning in culturally relevant environments. Consequently, educators, too, must have an intensified consciousness of ways to effectively serve minority students as a means to assist in planning effective and appropriate instruction through a cultural lens, to enhance students' self-esteem and to apply pedagogy focused on differences across cultures (Carter et. al., 2008; Irvine, 2010). As more and more teachers enter graduate programs, it is essential to provide instruction that focuses on their authentic needs in their classrooms.

The educational environment is essentially about building relationships, communication, and expectations as it directly impacts the students' authentic

self (Ford & Kea, 2009). In graduate programs, it is pertinent to encourage students to become culturally responsive teachers who modify their instructional strategies for their students in an effort to promote academic gains by incorporating responsive classroom practices focusing on students' values, interests, needs, and cultural norms (Ford & Kea, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is also obligatory for culturally responsive teachers to have expectations and standards of excellence for all students (Shealy, 2007). Graduate students in Grand Bahama cultivated collaboration amongst their peers with respect to individuality, and displayed caring attitudes towards their students (Ford & Kea, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

TEACHING READING, THINKING AND LITERACY SKILLS: DR. NICOLE'S EXPERIENCE

There has been an increased demand for educators to produce change in their academic and professional communities and to earn advanced degrees as a step towards this needed transformation. Higher numbers of teachers in k – 12 classrooms are enrolling in graduate programs at universities and colleges to obtain graduate degrees. By earning a graduate degree, teachers expand their knowledge, build their teaching repertoire and become groundbreakers in the field. Essentially, there is an academic power of those teachers who have been exposed to effective instructional practices in graduate programs.

Teachers are at the heart of the classroom, where they can make an enormous impact on student learning (Abadiano, Turner & Valerie, 2009). In the midst of high stakes testing and accountability, teachers must exude a level of professionalism and leadership at all levels. The majority of teachers enter graduate programs inspired to learn while gaining applicable and research based skills beneficial to k–12 learners. While teaching *EDU 611: Reading/Literacy and Thinking Skills* in Grand Bahama, graduate students enrolled in the Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction were introduced to theories, models and authentic teaching techniques necessary to improve literacy/reading and thinking skills in k-12 didactic environments. In addition, Bahamian graduate students in Grand Bahama learned pertinent reading and literacy strategies that helped encourage their own students' thinking, with an emphasis on reading/literacy skills.

On the first day of class, I was extremely excited to meet my new students. Although I have traveled outside of the United States numerous times for pleasure and education conferences, this was my first experience teaching away

from home. I can recall the ocean-wide smiles when I entered the room and announced that I was the professor and I would be taking them on a literacy journey for the next couple of weeks. As I began my usual first day overview of the course, I observed an eagerness of each student to become emerged in academic discourse. Students were engaging in conversation, typing notes on their laptops, jotting citations in their notebooks, and participating in activities. It was an impressive academic scene desired by any professional. It was apparent these exemplary graduate students were dedicated to education and were hungry for knowledge that would positively affect their academic and professional growth, as well as their complete dedication to increasing the academic achievement of their own students. As a college professor for the past eighteen years, I was elated to meet each one of these students, and to share my knowledge and my literacy experiences with them.

Before my instructional experiences in Grand Bahama, I was accustomed to teaching a graduate level class once a week for 2.5 hours. It was interesting for me to critically examine an inventive approach to deliver the course content in Grand Bahama over two days with longer class hours. Due to the course weekend model (Friday and Saturday), some modifications were made to the syllabi distributed to the graduate students. Throughout my literacy journey teaching *EDU 611: Reading/Literacy and Thinking Skill*, graduate students were assigned collaborative in-class assignments and presentations, reading/literacy focused lesson plans, professional development activities, and the Literacy Skills Professional Notebook. The Literacy Skills Professional Notebook was our capstone project.

The Literacy Skills Professional Notebook was introduced to my graduate students in Grand Bahama as their culminating project that required them to write their professional goals and targets related to literacy and thinking skills at the onset of the semester. From day one, I introduced this project and guided graduate students with effective ways to research professional journals to support their professional notebook, document their professional observations and experiences, and write an evaluation and goals. In short, the Literacy Skills Professional Notebook included: *Professional Goals; Philosophy Statement; Evidence of Professional Resources; Readings and Experiences; Final Statement of Evaluation and Future Goals; and Presentation Handouts*. Throughout the class sessions each weekend, my students would spend time discussing this capstone project. I provided examples for them to follow, and individual student conferences were also held that would assist them in directing their project development. After all the students had established the "theme" of The Literacy

Skills Notebook, it was apparent that these graduate students were also teachers who had a burning passion to see their classroom students succeed.

Our rich academic discourse took me on a journey throughout the island of Grand Bahama. I learned more about the language and culture, the education system, the parental expectations on education, island histories, education equity issues/concerns, school curriculum, and the society as a whole. Most importantly, the need to promote the education and academic achievement of all k-12 learners was not dismissed (Nieto, 2010). As a participant and facilitator of this literacy journey, I was enlivened by their dedication and drive to provide culturally responsive books for their students and to share information with other teachers about books and literature of the islands. As mentioned above, these graduate students showed an exceptional passion for the advancement of student learning throughout the island. According to Abadiano, Turner & Valerie (2009), there has been a much needed call for teachers as literacy experts. With the emphasis on the Literacy Skills Professional Notebook, their research, and dedication and commitment to enhancing their professional careers, the graduate students enrolled in the EDU 611 course, were introduced to a new aspect of literacy, and I was thoroughly introduced to their world. Overall, the graduate students in my course welcomed the academic discourse, the professional development, the research, and the power of knowledge. I acknowledged and embraced the authentic voices of each one of them in my class. In the end, as a professor, my teaching experience in Grand Bahama reconfirmed by commitment to bringing awareness to learning in global communities.

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE: DR. JILL'S EXPERIENCE

I believe that what has helped me to be successful in the Bahamas, both as a teacher educator and as the administrator responsible for bringing programs to a different context and ensuring that the curriculum and the manner in which it is delivered IS culturally responsive, lies in my adherence to the 5 elements of Culturally Responsive Teaching, as elucidated by Geneva Gay (2002). These dimensions include developing one's communication skills and knowledge base with respect to cultural diversity, a curriculum that includes ethnic and cultural diversity content, building and nurturing caring learning communities, and an instructional delivery system that is responsive to ethnic diversity.

Getting to know the Bahamas and Bahamian culture, on many levels, has helped me to understand their priorities and values, as well as what is required to

assist educators and leaders in developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions of students at all levels to help in their country's optimal development. My experiences as a collaborative partner, anthropologist, researcher and teacher have helped me to learn the local lore, and to understand the 'nuance of difference' between how the system operates, and teachers within those systems in both Nassau and Grand Bahama. Having had the privilege of sailing the Bahamas for 20 + years, I was already familiar with the lifestyle on the Family Islands, and while Nassau and Freeport are definitely not as unique in character as the family islands (i.e., Abacos, Crooked Island, etc.) there are still things to be learned and taken note of within each of these contexts. "Friendraising" has been very helpful as I have worked to make the connections needed to ensure that our programs were welcome in another country, as well as build the appropriate relationships required to implement and sustain this model.

Meeting students where they are has forced me to focus on my patterns of communication and the perfecting of my communication skills to include an awareness and sensitivity to the way in which our students are receiving information, both curricular and programmatic. "When in Rome" (or in this case, the Bahamas) has become our mantra, and we all do this willingly. Our faculty embraced the students, and their customs and preferences have become ours!

From the first course that I delivered in our first C & I cohort, I made a conscious decision to use content and topics specific to the Bahamas. In order to contextualize the curriculum for delivery to Bahamian graduate students, I integrated the theme of sustainability - environmental and economic - into EDU 552- Critical Thinking in Science and Social Studies. Since most of the students were classroom teachers, I felt that utilizing content that was relevant and context-specific (sea turtle reading when teaching a specific pedagogical strategy) would serve as a useful model in helping them to become more "culturally responsive". Throughout this first semester, I totally modified this particular course for delivery in the Bahama

Fortunately, my prior experiences in the Bahamas had provided me gain a fairly strong knowledge base that included detailed, factual information about the cultural particularities of the diverse islands that make up the Commonwealth, as well as the Bahamians and their history. But my first experience teaching there was an eye opener! I believe that my willingness to meet them where they were, listening to their concerns regarding an outdated curriculum and antiquated instructional approaches, and my use of an "ethic of care", went a long way in ensuring the successful introduction of our first course delivered off-shore.

Our collective experiences have been instrumental in helping to build learning communities. Through the provision of graduate programs offered in this international context, we have brought our Barry community to the people of the Bahamas. Through this exchange, we have cultivated relationships and connections between educators, leaders, and the wider community, and in the process, we have all come together to create a new learning community. This has been due in large part to the efforts of many dedicated faculty members who “walk the walk” of CRT and are committed to meeting students where they are. Modeling an “ethic of care” for and about our students has allowed me to lead the way for my colleagues to do the same, resulting in the successful delivery, growth, and maintenance of several cohorts to date. We have all put ourselves into ethical, emotional, and academic partnerships with our ethnically diverse students, and these relationships are anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the power of transcendence.”

My experiences growing our off-shore programs and building an international model for the School of Education have been noticed by the Deans and Associate Deans across the campus. I believe I have been successful in building an “in-school” team of others committed to growing our international programs, who understand the mission aspect of it, as well as the financial aspects. I have not asked my colleagues to do anything that I have not done, or would not do myself. Their passion and enthusiasm for teaching in the Bahamas, and collaborating with our international students, has continued to fuel my passion. My next challenge lies in trying to build an international division/unit for the University, and securing the fiscal and human resources needed to take this to the next level.

GRADUATE PROGRAMS – THE FUTURE

It is vital for college educators to continue to be conscious of societal needs and curriculum changes that have the most positive impact on graduate students in their content area programs and program standards (Dean, Lauer & Uruquhart, 2007). As this paper has discussed the development of graduate programs in Nassau and Freeport, Bahamas, it remains important for university faculty and administrators to use these experiences to document the academic success of establishing off-shore graduate programs. In fact, some graduate programs may even begin to utilize these experiences to revise academic program and attract new faces globally. In the end, graduate programs offered abroad at our university provided an assortment of institutional contexts

and innovative teaching practices focused on culturally diverse students. As institutions progress and continue to recruit more students and develop new academic programs, it is imperative for graduate programs to be conscious of culturally diverse practices, experiences, and assignments that are relevant to a global society.

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