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Welcome to America!

Integrating International Students in a New Culture

Cerisse Wilson

Service Learning Capstone Project

CST 431

Dr. Jeff Kerssen-Griep

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Abstract

This paper intends to help teachers at Portland Christian High School in creating a program consisting of lesson plans and class discussions that will help integrate international students within their new American culture. Previous research is used to explain why each part of the proposed program is essential in helping international students successfully adapt. Materials discussed in this proposal include information about international and host country students, stressors that can challenge successful enculturation, and ways international students can successfully and positively interact with their new culture.

Welcome to America! Integrating International Students in a New Culture

Introduction

International students coming into the American school systems is not a new phenomenon. However, it has significantly increased in numbers through the years. Approximately half a million international students attend American universities each year (Yang, Wu, Zhu, & Southwell, 2004). According to the Institute of International Education, the number of international students has increased seventeen percent in the last fifty years (Jiali, 2006). For these students, moving to a new culture can be an extremely stressful time, filled with confusion and a great sense of shock. While some may adapt better than others, there are many processes an international student will go through in order to take in and fully understand his or her new surroundings. Other issues surround international students in their acculturation experience. Concerns over a communication barrier play a major factor in these students' lack of interaction with home country students.

Problems like the ones mentioned above are not uncommon to international students regardless of what country they are studying in. Feeling accepted or welcomed can be a long process especially when someone is new to a different culture. While there are many challenges to face for these international students, if they are given the right tools and coached properly, the integration process can be a positive one. This training program is meant to help teachers better understand how international students adjust to a new culture and focus on recognizing different ways to ensure that their acculturation process will be successful.

Background

Observation Site

To help understand the journey international students face in coming to a new culture, I worked at Portland Christian High School helping tutor and advise students from Korea, Vietnam, China, Japan, Taiwan, and one from Brazil. These students are placed in different levels based on how well they speak English, with some students integrated with the American students. However, for the most part international students are segregated from the American students, with classes such as history and religion still being integrated. This change happened a few years back as teachers thought the international students would benefit from being in their own classroom where they could learn at a slower pace and also be more familiar with their surroundings. Out of the two hundred students that attend Portland Christian High School, approximately fifty are international students, which means that around one-fourth of the school is made up of students from different countries. Time spent in America had ranged quite significantly among the upper-level international students. Many had lived in America for only a few months while others had studied in the United States for several years.

One teacher stated that she enjoyed watching the students' progress from when they first arrived to when they started to find their place in their new culture. She described them like a garden, saying they are closed off and shy in the beginning but blossom into confident students who often times show success in the integration process.

There were some problems that began to surface as I continued to observe. Watching students walk down the halls during passing period, I noticed that the American students talked among themselves, while the international students stayed in small groups. It was apparent that there was little interaction between the American and international students. Portland Christian High School has tried in the past to better integrate the international students with the host country students. Last year the international students put on a talent show that was open to all students, and was a great success. Several years ago Student Government created a program that partnered American students with international students, but, this was successful only for the first couple of months. Around six years ago, the homecoming court created a spot for an international princess, which encouraged the international students to be a part of the homecoming celebrations. Also, there is an international student position in Student Government to ensure that these students can be more a part of the school.

During lunch periods, the international students would separate into small groups, showing a very distinct difference. The international students would gather in groups that included only other students from their home countries. The Japanese students took the tables close to the cafeteria doors, Vietnamese students closest to the lunch line, Korean students sat in the middle, and the Chinese students sat closest to the corner. However, in the classroom, the students were fairly distributed throughout with no particular separation of groups. The international students were also notably louder in their own classes than in the integrated classes. The students would joke and laugh among each other and they seemed to

feel comfortable around their home classroom teachers. However, these observations were primarily in the upper-level classrooms, whereas the less advanced international students were much more subdued and quieter in the classroom.

The issue of separating the international students from the American students has caused some problems within the school. Many parents complained that it was not fair that the international students had their own float for the homecoming game stating that they should not get special privileges. Many American students are confused to why the international students are in separate classes and blame the separation on why they do not try to interact with the international students. However, as one teacher stated, "It is a hard choice to make. You want the students to be integrated, but when you have international and American students in the same classroom, the international students disappear. They are quiet, uncomfortable, and afraid to be themselves."

Other problems have been found in regards to the host families. At Portland Christian, the host families are paid a certain amount of money each month to house the international students. Many situations have occurred when international students wanted to play sports or do other extracurricular activities, but the host families said no because they were not willing to pick the kids up at another time. One teacher shared that the parents have told the international students that they would not let them participate in extracurricular activities because it wastes gas money to drive back or they did not want to get stuck in traffic. The teacher then continued, "I do not understand because these parents are being paid to take care of

these kids. These parents would allow their children to do sports if they asked.

These international students need to be treated the same as their children.”

Another issue occurred when a host family took in two international students. A teacher found out from one of the students that they were required to cook three days each and clean up dinner on the days they were not cooking, while the mother only cooked on Sundays. This is another case of the international students not being treated like they are a part of the host family.

The final problem that was noticed dealt with the school in general. The international students pay many thousands more each year than the American students, which gives the school a large added income. The issue is the school sees the international students separate from the American students. In most of the American student classrooms, the teachers do not know the international students' names. The international students are seen as more of an added income than students at the school. There is a culture class taught at Portland Christian, but this class tends to focus on American culture. An English teacher for the American students, who had previously worked with the international students, says she tries to encourage the American students to interact more with the international students. She says she usually is met with hostility and defensiveness from the American students so she is hesitant to mention interaction again.

Most of these dilemmas have in some form been addressed in previous research. This would then indicate that these issues are all too common among international students. Because these issues are so prevalent, solutions are obtainable and often times have positive results.

Previous Research on Stressors for International Students and the Discrimination They Face.

Research has shown that there are many strategies teachers can use in order to help international students through the integration process. It is unsurprising that international students can more easily adapt to cultures that are similar to their own. Students who are also more familiar with the host country's culture are more likely to have a more positive integrative experience (Jiali, 2006). However, it is important to note that while international students may come from very different cultures, they share particular characteristics. They are a group that has gone to a different country to pursue various types of educational goals (Thomas & Althen, 1989).

Acculturation is the premise in which two cultures come into contact with each other and are somewhat merged together (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992). This merging may include adjusting eating habits, word choice, and level of contact with home and host country individuals (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). In the acculturation process, there are many stressors that may deter an international student's introduction to the new culture. Students from Asian countries account for the largest percentage of international students in the United States (Jiali, 2006). However, Asian students often times struggle the most in the adaptation process because their cultures often are so different from mainstream American culture. This means that international students from Asia often need to put forth more effort in the acculturation process in order to feel positively about their experience (Jiali, 2006). Asian students are also most discriminated against by host country students (Bird & Holmes, 2005). This then becomes an added stressor for Asian international

students as interaction among host country students becomes more difficult with an automatic prejudice set against them.

Another stressor for international students deals with interaction among host country students. Research has shown that overall there is a low interaction between host country and international students, particularly with Asian international students (Volet & Ang, 1998). Bird and Holmes (2005) discovered that it is typically the host country students that want less interaction while international students would prefer more interaction. Studies also found that host country students believed that it was important for people in the classroom to have the same level of host country speaking abilities and did not believe that mixing the international students in their classes was necessary (Bird & Holmes, 2005). Interaction with host country students is considered to be the most important factor in international students' ability to socially integrate (Zimmerman, 1995). Social interaction among host country students also determines academic success among international students. The more an international student interacts with host country students, the more likely that student will succeed in the classroom (Olaniran, 1993). However, the problem lies in the fact that international students rarely approach host country students. Language barriers among host country and international students play a major role in the lack of contact among each group. International students feel stress in interacting with host country students because they feel obligated to prove their communication competency in the host country language (Olaniran, 1993). Still, if international students are able to adjust their communication styles to one more similar to the host country, they are found to

adjust better to their new culture. This means that flexibility is a key component to success in interactions with host country students (Guo-Ming, 1992). Research has indicated that although interaction with host country students is the most important determinant of international students' success, host country students do not approach international students and the international students are afraid of interaction because of a discomfort found within the language barrier.

Proposal Part One: What Research Has Shown to Work

This proposal will particularly address the teachers of the international students, but also the international students themselves, and host country students. The goal behind this proposal is helping the international students better integrate within the school and serving the teachers with the tools and understanding to accomplish this. However, before a plan can be presented, it is important to first understand what researchers have shown to work successfully in integrating international students in the acculturation process. Based off of what research suggests, a plan will be presented that is obtainable and usable for teachers at Portland Christian High School.

Studies have indicated that there are certain approaches international students can take in order to successfully integrate themselves in a new culture. When international students first arrive in their host country, it is important for them to have a strong home country social network. Jiali (2006) suggests that the best way for international students to cope with stress is using online social networks for support. These social networks can offer informational support, which is advice related to new situations international students are facing or emotional

support, which is showing care or concern. Research has found that international students who use online social support groups feel less acculturation stress (Jiali, 2006).

Teachers play a major role in the success of international students' integration processes. If teachers show enthusiasm toward their own jobs, international students are likely to feel more positive about their experiences in their host countries (Plax, Kearney, & Downs, 1986). International students also prefer being in separate classrooms from the host country students. Aside from communication barriers, international students prefer a separate classroom because they feel more comfortable in a class setting that is more like their home countries (Wadsworth et al., 2008).

As stated previously, confusion of a new culture and a large language barrier causes a great amount of emotional tension among international students. There are several activities international students can partake in to help acculturate themselves better and also help reduce uncertainty in their new host countries (Laroche, Kim, Hui, & Tomiuk, 1997). One way to help with the integration process is to watch host country media. These media include radio, music, movies, books, magazine, broadcast and cable television, and the Internet. By doing this, international students will reduce uncertainty by learning the host country language with greater fluency, learn societal values, norms of behaviors, perspectives of interpreting the environment, and general events deemed important by the host country (Yang et. al., 2004).

Sensation-seeking activities can also generate interaction among international

students and host country students. This means anything that is considered new and exciting (Zuckerman, 1994). Arasaratnam (2005) found that sensation-seeking international students are more likely to seek out friends from their host country. This does not necessarily mean that students that are more adventurous will be the only ones to find host country friends, but this does lead to the idea that exciting activities can facilitate an environment where international and host country students would be more likely to interact among each other.

Unless schools are willing to intervene in order to get international and host country students to interact, there is a good chance that these two groups of students will continue to interact separately (Bird & Holmes, 2005). Olaniran (1993) found that international students are more likely to successfully handle stress and culture shock if they have a high number of host country acquaintances, rather than a small group of friends. In the case of adjusting to new cultures, quantity becomes more important than quality.

Among host country students, there tends to be a sense of defensiveness towards international students, as there is a mentality of “us” versus “them.” In order to encourage a greater understanding of different cultures among students with a defensive mentality, the best approach would be to not emphasize the differences among the cultures, but instead emphasize the similarities (Bennett & Bennett, 2002). Creating cultural awareness is also important. Schools need to create programs to educate host country students about other cultures and encourage the students to appreciate the diversity. Bird and Holmes (2005) found that older host country students saw the importance of interaction with

international students, stating that this would help them grow in cultural competence, while younger students did not see a real benefit in interaction.

Proposal Part Two: Customizing Research into an Integrated Plan

Based on the research presented, below is a proposal of better integrating international students at Portland Christian High School. This proposal is based on what researchers believe are proper solutions in helping international students in the acculturation process. This proposal is broken down into different activities, lesson plans, and helpful policy changes. Issues that are addressed include changes made to school attitudes, change in host family agreements, lesson plans for the international students, projects for host country students, and integrative activities for all students.

Adjusting Attitudes

As previously mentioned, Portland Christian has, up until this point, viewed the American students and international students as separate groups. In order for international students to have a positive integrative process, they must feel a sense of acceptance. When coming into a new culture, international students can feel perceived discrimination, homesickness, fear, guilt, or inferred hatred (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Because of this, it is vital that the school welcomes the students openly and treats them the same as the American students.

Another important way of making the international students feel accepted is for the teachers of American classes to learn the international students' names. International students feel an astounding amount of stress in classrooms that are unfamiliar. By not knowing these students' names, teachers are running the chance

that the international students will feel discriminated against, which can lead to poor grades and depression (Noh & Kaspar, 2003). Another important reason for the teachers to learn names is because often times, international students become extremely attached to their teachers, seeing them as a symbol and connection to adapting to their new culture (Wadsworth et al., 2008). If the teachers they rely on to show support and help them adapt to their new surroundings do not attempt to include the international students, their chances of academic and integrative success is hindered.

This is a simple solution that can have a major affect on international students. If the students feel accepted in the classroom, there becomes a much greater chance that they will acculturate faster and be more willing to interact with the American students.

Host Families Policies

Another issue that can easily be resolved deals with changing policies for the American families who are interesting in becoming hosts to the international students. There needs to be a requirement in the contract that states that in order to become a host family, families must be willing to allow the international students to be involved with sports or other extracurricular activities. International students that choose to be a part of extracurricular activities, particularly sports that are integrated with American students, have a much greater chance of camaraderie. Arasaratnam (2005) stated that international students who are a part of new and exciting activities are much more likely to interact with host country students. This will not only help with the acculturation process, but will also help the international

student feel more accepted as well as help improve their English speaking skills (Yang et al., 2004). Expanding from this, host parents need to treat the international students as a part of the group, accepting them and allowing them to do the same things their children would do. It is important to change the policies because international students need to feel accepted at home possibly even more than the biological child in the host family in order to succeed at school.

Lesson Plans for International Students

The previous two proposed plans dealt with changing basic school policies. This section deals with lesson plans for international students that will help them adapt easier to their new culture based on the research previously presented. If utilized, international students will feel more confident in their abilities to interact with American students and the school culture.

The first activity is having the international students write in a journal. These journals are particularly important when they first arrive to America, as they are experiencing many changes and possible culture shock (Guo-Ming, 1992). Students should write about their acculturation process including concerns, stressors, and positive experiences. Because the majority of the international students at Portland Christian are from Asian cultures, they will have a much more difficult time adjusting to a vastly different American culture (Jiali, 2006). The difference in cultures could feel overwhelming to the students, which is why it is important for them to write about similarities they notice between the American culture and their own. The more similarities they see, the less apprehensive they will feel. Students should write at least two journal entries each week, which will be

periodically checked by the teacher. Teachers need to assure the students that the journals do not have to be read by the teacher, but students should be encouraged to share, as the teacher can become a confidant to the student. The reason for only two journal entries each week is to ensure that the students do not feel overwhelmed. They should not have to feel forced to write about scenarios they do not have, but it is especially important in the beginning that they understand how they are feeling and what questions they want answered.

Based on the journal entries the students will be writing, there should be a program implemented once a week that involves interaction between international and American students. The idea is that every Friday, an American student volunteers to come into the international students' classroom where he or she will be answering questions. The intent behind this activity is mainly interaction. Research has shown that international students, especially Asian students, want interaction with people from the host country, but are nervous to start the conversation. Conversely, host country students do not tend to start interactions with students from different cultures (Bird & Holmes, 2005). Another important feature of this activity is having an American student who is the same age as the international students to answer their questions. Because this could be incredibly intimidating in the beginning, international students are given the option to write questions down and have the teacher give them to the speaker. However, the goal would be to eventually have the students ask the questions out loud. One question should be required each week. These questions can range from American pop culture to information about American slang words that could help ease the

language barriers. This activity would also help the international students to meet American students who could later on become their friends. American students could also see that the international students are more similar to them than first thought and could possibly encourage the American students to start conversations outside the classroom.

The last lesson plan is having the international students involve themselves with American mass media. This could range from requiring the international students to read an article from an American magazine or newspaper to watching an American film or listen to American music. The teachers for the international students do an incredible job at teaching the students to analyze famous literature and poetry. While these assignments are extremely beneficial at helping the international students become more comfortable with the English language, these pieces of literature do not reflect the current culture. That is why it is necessary for the students to have one project in which they are required to participate in current American mass media. An ideal assignment would be to have the students watch a movie that exemplifies the American culture and either have the students write a paper about similarities and differences among their cultures or have a class discussion of interesting things they noticed in the film. The goal of this project would be to have the international students connect to current American media so they can better understand the culture and improve their English.

American Student Activities

Because this proposal is about helping international students positively integrate into the American culture, there will not be a large focus on American

students. However, there are certain activities that American students can do that would not only benefit themselves, but also help the international students in the integration process. Being there is already a cultural class that takes place, it would be ideal that these activities would be completed in this class. Because students at Portland Christian show defensiveness when discussing the international students, it is important to form the activities around the idea of similarities instead of differences (Bennett & Bennett, 2002). In order to do this activity, there needs to be a discussion about Asian cultures. After students learn about these cultures, the activity following will be listing the similarities between their culture and particular Asian cultures. This is very similar to what the international students will be writing about in their journals. Students will work together in creating posters listing similarities between the two cultures. This activity will hopefully open discussions among the American students. The goal would be to open up curiosities among the students, create cultural competence and understanding, and lower discrimination towards international students.

Another assignment that could be given in the cultural course would be “adopting a cultural friend.” This would be considered an intervention created by the school to encourage interaction among international and American students. The idea behind this course would be for American students to each team up with an international student and interact with each other. The goal would be to form connections between these often-separate groups. Typically the international and American students do not start interactions because of different reasons, but this would somewhat force an interaction. Students would have to meet with each other

once every couple weeks. The teacher could also suggest that students could meet during lunch if after school meetings are not possible. Hopefully this assignment would encourage interaction outside of what is required and would allow both international and American students to be willing to start the conversation first.

Ultimately, it is important to address these problems as international students make up a large percentage of Portland Christian's population. With each group of students, there are different rewards for integration. American students will become more culturally affluent, while the international students will have a more positive and inclusive experience integrating into the American culture.

Conclusion

The goal of this proposed approach is to help integrate the international students in their new culture at Portland Christian High School. This proposal could help all international students, whether in the lower level or more advanced classes. Hopefully, this plan will help the teachers realize and understand different approaches and lesson plans that research has proven to help acculturate their international students. Also, it is intended that the suggestions for the host country students will spark curiosity in wanting to know and befriend the international students more often. This program most likely cannot alleviate all problems, but will hopefully lead the international students to a more positive adjustment where they will build more inclusive friendships amongst each other as well as the host country students and to also achieve a higher academic success rate.

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