

## Supervisor Perceptions of Student Teachers' Experiences in United States Department of Defense Schools in Germany

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Doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v8i3p213

**Abstract:** In this qualitative study, we explored university supervisors' perceptions of student teachers' experiences in a study abroad program in United States Department of Defense Schools in Germany. We identified six emergent themes as university supervisors: (a) identify characteristics among student teachers who have been successful in the program, (b) identify advantages for student teachers who participate in the program, (c) believe positive relationships are critically important, (d) believe university supports are critical for student teacher success, (e) compare their supervisor responsibilities with those in traditional student teaching programs, and (f) note opportunities for the program to better serve student teachers.

**Keywords:** Student Teaching, Study Abroad, University Supervisor

### 1. Introduction

Pre-service teachers typically complete a student teaching experience near the end of their education degree program and are referred to as "student teachers" during that time. While providing opportunities for student teachers to put educational theories, lesson plans, and behavior management ideas into practice, student teaching programs prepare student teachers for workforce readiness, degree completion, and teacher licensure. Within student teaching programs, university supervisors guide student teachers; address their social, emotional, and academic needs; and support them in their transition to teaching full time in P-12 schools (Caires et al., 2012).

Student teachers are often assigned school placements by their institution within their local community or state, but some student teachers desire a more diverse opportunity to work and live outside of their current location while still earning credits toward their degree and completing student teaching in international settings. One mid-sized, Midwestern university (Pelican University - pseudonym) has developed and maintained a partnership with Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools on United States military bases in Germany for nearly two decades.

Received: August 9, 2021

Accepted: September 17, 2021

Elam, N.P., Geesa, R.L., Teeters, A.D., Mulvihill, T.M., Ritchie, H., Clark, E., & Makayla L. Ceresa, M.L. (2021). Supervisor Perceptions of Student Teachers' Experiences in United States Department of Defense Schools in Germany. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 8(3), 213-228.

The mission of DoDEA (2020) is to “educate, engage, and empower military-connected students to succeed in a dynamic world” (para. 1), and there are 160 schools in 11 countries outside of the United States, seven states, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Through this university-sponsored student teaching experience, student teachers have the opportunity to live in Germany and teach P-12 students of military families during a 16-week semester.

University, college, and program faculty and personnel assist in the coordination with DoDEA leaders and teachers to provide this unique experience to student teachers. Since the university-DoDEA student teaching program inception, university supervisors have joined student teachers in Germany during the duration of their student teaching in DoDEA schools while serving military children. While most student teachers experience being in local schools and working with local children throughout their degree programs, this student teaching program requires student teachers receive additional training and guidance by university supervisors and DoDEA faculty to live and teach in an international setting and meet the unique needs of their military-connected students (e.g., transient community, parent deployment, and death of family member).

International student teaching programs similar to this university-DoDEA student teaching program may be challenging for universities to coordinate and manage. However, university leaders and faculty recognize the benefits of studying abroad for students and educators to better prepare P-12 students for success in a global economy. The purpose of this study is to better understand the perspectives of university supervisors and experiences of student teachers in this university-DoDEA undergraduate study abroad student teaching program. In this paper, we will (a) explore university supervisors’ perceptions of student teachers’ experiences in the study abroad program, and (b) understand university supervisors’ perspectives of how student teachers experience success in the study abroad program.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

As the purpose of the current study is to examine university supervisors’ perceptions of the experiences and success of student teachers in an undergraduate study abroad program, the following literature review will highlight past studies’ findings related to these items. Themes within previous literature include benefits of study abroad for student teachers, challenges faced by student teachers studying abroad, and commonalities between student teaching study abroad programs and more traditional student teaching programs.

### **1.1.1 Benefits of Study Abroad for Student Teachers**

Studies have shown that study abroad programs effectively instill creativity and a student-centered mindset (Çelik, 2017), and improved independence, confidence, problem-solving, and communication (Jiang et al., 2010; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; York, 2020).

More prevalently, numerous studies have indicated that study abroad programs serve to increase student teachers’ cultural awareness. “Studying abroad is one approach to helping teachers better engage with our culturally diverse students today” (Nero, 2018). This aim and effect have been articulated in subtly different ways by various researchers: study abroad experiences enhance student teachers’ “self-efficacy in culturally diverse contexts” (Major & Santoro, 2016); “Student teaching abroad can be a means toward

the goal...of creating a worldly teacher” (Clement & Outlaw, 2012); student teaching in international settings develops teachers with new competencies and instructional practices to work with an increasingly diverse student population (Binbin & Devillar, 2011); study abroad compelled student teachers to challenge their implicit biases (Mesker et al., 2018).

These researchers agree that this effect on student teachers ultimately benefits the children they go on to serve. “Globally competent teaching includes...knowing how to help students develop cultural self-awareness and awareness of other cultural perspectives” (Holliday & Brennan, 2021, p. 3). Other researchers also point to this important benefit, while illuminating other aspects of developing cultural competency. Stachowski and Mahan (2019) noted that teachers increased cultural awareness not only benefits students, but also students’ families. Helen and Moss (2015) noted that increased cultural awareness can be especially beneficial to prospective social studies teachers, given the nature of their subject area. Brewer et al. (2015) stated that increased cultural awareness can make prospective teachers more competitive in the marketplace. Bartzis (2016) discussed how increasing cultural awareness among teachers can mitigate the effect of the homogeneous makeup of the teacher workforce.

### **1.1.2 Challenges Faced by Student Teachers Studying Abroad**

While student teaching abroad can be beneficial in many ways, this type of setting and experience can present challenges. Mesker et al. (2020) discussed the amplified emotional ups and downs student teachers can face while abroad. Nilsen (2005) raised the concern that not all institutions provide guidance to student teachers in addressing the logistical considerations associated with living and studying abroad, allowing these considerations to overshadow the ultimate aim of developing as a teacher. Witt and Liu (2021) noted that some student teachers fear that a study abroad program will not provide a direct path for them to meet the teaching licensure requirements unique to a particular state.

Bartzis (2016) raised the concern of cost, both to student teachers and to universities:

“Finances are a genuine concern for teacher education students, the majority of which come from middle class backgrounds. Their degree institutions have concerns, too. Some United States institutions may lose money when students spend time away and do not utilize campus housing.”

### **1.1.3 Commonalities between Student Teaching Study Abroad Programs and More Traditional Student Teaching Programs**

Many features of a student teaching study abroad program are unique, including the setting, preparation, university support, experiences, benefits, and challenges. However, studies have shown that student teaching study abroad programs share certain aspects with more traditional student teaching programs, where student teachers are placed in schools near the university. Among these, certain areas of emphasis are essential to student teacher development and success in any setting, including: the importance of a student teacher’s placement, regarding the school and mentor teacher (Dumayas, 2016); the importance of ongoing constructive feedback from the university supervisor (González-Toro et al., 2020); and an emphasis on student teacher reflection throughout the program (Svojanovsky, 2017).

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

Self-Determination Theory relates to human motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, and serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The most prominent intrinsic motivators are those that serve to advance one's autonomy, relatedness, or competence (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). These needs are particularly relevant to the experience of student teachers in a study abroad program. Student teachers seek to develop the autonomy necessary to guide their experience; student teachers seek to develop strong relatedness with university supervisors, mentor teachers, fellow student teachers, and their own students; and student teachers seek to develop their competence as aspiring educators. These connections are evident in the design of this study, and in the themes that emerged as findings.

A number of education-related studies have been framed by Self-Determination Theory. However, these studies do not address student teaching study abroad programs. This study aims to address this gap in Self-Determination Theory literature by connecting university supervisors' perceptions to autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

## **1.3 Pelican University (pseudonym) and DoDEA Student Teaching Program**

Pelican University is a mid-sized institution located in the Midwest. In 2002, Pelican University was one of three institutions selected by the National Education Association to develop a student teaching program in DoDEA schools in Europe on United States military installations. Since 2003, Pelican University has maintained a partnership with DoDEA for the university's student teachers to complete their required one-semester-long student teaching experience while serving P-12 grade students of United States military families stationed in Germany.

On average, approximately 15 student teachers participate in the Germany program per semester. Enrollment is typically slightly lower than average during a fall semester, and slightly greater than average during a spring semester. One or two university supervisors, depending on the number of student teachers enrolled, accompany student teachers while in Germany. University supervisors include university faculty who have experience educating, supervising, and mentoring pre-service teachers, student teachers, and/or teachers in P-12 school and higher education settings. Supervisors typically rotate positions each semester.

## **2. Methods**

The following research questions were examined by the research team in this study:

1. What are university supervisors' perceptions of student teachers' experiences in an undergraduate study abroad student-teaching program?
2. What are university supervisors' perspectives of how student teachers experience success in an undergraduate study abroad student-teaching program?

These research questions emerged as important after a first-round analysis of interview data from a broader study examining this particular study abroad program for undergraduate student teachers. The perspectives of university supervisors were analytically rich. We focused our inquiry on their perceptions of stressors

for student teachers; student teacher relationships with peers and mentors; and how student teachers navigated various expectations from the university supervisor, the mentor teachers and from DoDEA. Among other topics, the university supervisors also had the opportunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages student teachers experienced by participating in the study abroad program, and their thoughts about the overall student teacher feedback process. University supervisors who served with a co-supervisor were asked additional questions related to the delegation of the supervisory workload. Furthermore, interviewers asked university supervisors to share candid feedback and suggestions for any program improvements that might lead to further success for student teachers. Table 1 provides the full list of interview questions.

Table 1: Interview questions

Questions related to student teachers
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did you define success for student teachers? Was their own definition of success similar to or different from yours?</li> <li>2. What do you believe are the most important keys to success for student teachers?                      Probing Question: What traits/approaches distinguished some of the most successful student teachers from some of the least successful?</li> <li>3. In what ways did certain non-teaching factors affect student teachers' performance in classroom?</li> <li>4. What do you believe is student teachers' motivation for participating in program?</li> <li>5. What were biggest stressors for student teachers (homesickness? Social/travel? Job search? Teaching performance?)</li> <li>6. Who did student teachers seek out for emotional support?</li> <li>7. Describe the student teachers' relationship with each other</li> <li>8. Describe the student teachers' relationship to their mentor teacher</li> <li>9. What advantages/disadvantages are there for student teachers participating in this program, compared to student teaching in Indiana?</li> <li>10. Do you believe student teachers were glad they participated in program, or do you believe they wish they had completed student teaching in a more traditional way?</li> </ol>
Questions related to university supervisors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Were you approached about this position, or did you actively pursue this position?</li> <li>2. What was your motivation for accepting/pursuing position?</li> <li>3. Describe your responsibilities as university supervisor</li> <li>4. How did you define success and/or set goals for yourself as supervisor?</li> <li>5. What do you believe are the most important keys to success for supervisors?</li> <li>6. How did you structure your day/week/semester regarding scheduling and completing tasks?</li> <li>7. What was your approach to?                     <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Developing teachers' practice?</li> <li>b) Structuring seminars?</li> <li>c) Remaining hands-on/hands-off regarding non-teaching considerations?</li> <li>d) Collaboration with mentor teachers and principals?</li> <li>e) Focus on all student teachers evenly, or emphasize student teachers with greatest room for improvement?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

<p>8. How were mentor teachers, in terms of commitment and ability to help student teachers develop and to act in their best interests? In what ways, if any, did you and mentor teachers disagree about what was in the best interests of student teachers?</p> <p>9. In what areas did you feel most/least prepared? Who did you reach out to for guidance?</p> <p>10. What type of feedback/guidance did you receive from <i>your</i> supervisor? Probing Question: Was this helpful, or do you think more/less/different feedback/guidance would have been more helpful?</p> <p>11. What were student teachers' expectations of you? Do you believe their expectations were always appropriate/fair?</p> <p>12. In what ways have you contributed to student teachers' development/advancement after the semester? Probing Question: For example, have student teachers reached out to you for guidance? Have they asked you to be a reference, and/or have you been contacted as a reference?</p> <p>13. What is the greatest success story? The greatest failure?</p> <p>14. What surprised you most about the experience?</p> <p>15. What were biggest stressors for you as supervisor?</p> <p>16. What did you miss most about home?</p> <p>17. What did you enjoy most about being away from home?</p> <p>18. What part of the experience stands out aside from supervision responsibilities?</p> <p>19. What did/would you do differently? How do you believe the program itself could be improved?</p> <p>20. Some universities send student teachers over to Germany with no university supervisor; In what ways do you think this would affect the experience and development of those student teachers? Probing Question: Do you think a university supervisor is necessary?</p> <p>21. Was this experience beneficial/detrimental to your other responsibilities at the time of your supervision assignment(s)? Was this experience beneficial/detrimental to your career pursuits following your supervision assignment(s)? In what ways?</p> <p>22. Anything else you would like to share?</p>
<p>If you had a fellow supervisor, during your experience:</p>
<p>23. How did you delegate responsibilities with your fellow supervisor?</p> <p>24. Briefly describe your relationship/familiarity with your fellow supervisor prior to this semester</p> <p>25. In what ways, if any, did you disagree with your fellow supervisor about how to serve the best interests of student teachers? How did you resolve these disagreements?</p>

All interviews were conducted during the fall of 2019, using platforms such as FaceTime, Skype, WebEx and Zoom, via phone calls, in-person meetings and submitted by written responses. The decision to utilize one platform over another was determined by the interviewee based on their preference. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed.

To begin analysis, all research team members read all transcripts. Each research team member was then assigned a portion of the transcripts to conduct a line-by-line open coding (derived both from the literature and from a free-association review by the research team member), and to produce a coding sheet for each transcript assigned (coding sheet columns included: Open Code, Description of Meaning for Open Code, Best Example(s) of Excerpts from Transcripts where Code was Assigned, and Page Number/Line Number

of Excerpt). The research team then met to review and discuss all coding sheets/open coding to jointly assemble a codebook by collapsing, refining, and categorizing open codes into a manageable number of axial codes and themes. The research team members were then assigned a different set of transcripts for the next round of analysis, using only the previously identified axial codes and themes.

## 2.1 Data Sources

Nineteen former university supervisors were interviewed by members of the research team who had insider experiences as former university supervisors. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes in length. All interviewees were sent a recruitment letter and consent form, via email, for invitation and secured acceptance to participate in the research study. Confidentiality of all participants was maintained by identifying each interviewee numerically and randomly, 1-19. Pre-interview surveys were also completed by all participants prior to interviews. The pre-interview surveys provided the research team with information such as which semester(s) the former university supervisor served, how many student teachers were enrolled during the given semester, which base the supervisory experience took place, whether or not the supervisory role was performed solo or with a co-supervisor, as well as the living arrangements for the supervisor while overseas. The form also provided the research team with demographic information for each of the university supervisors. Table 2 provides the full list of pre-interview survey items.

Table 2: Pre-interview survey

Questions
Information about supervision assignment
a. Which semester(s) did you serve as university supervisor in Germany?
b. How many student teachers did you supervise?
c. Which base did the student teachers serve on?
d. Were you the sole supervisor, or did you serve with a co-supervisor?
e. Did you live on base or off-base?
Demographic information
a. What is your gender (if you wish to share)?
b. What is your race/ethnicity (if you wish to share)?
c. What was your age at the time of your supervision assignment(s) (if you wish to share)?
d. What was your position/title at the institution at the time of your supervision assignment(s)? What is your current position/title?
e. What is your background in education and in teacher preparation/supervision?

Of those interviewed, eight participants were male and eleven were female; all university supervisors identified as White. With a mix of graduate and post graduate degrees, all university supervisors interviewed held professional educational experience in one or more areas: elementary, secondary and/or higher education settings. The university supervisors ranged from 35 years of age to 74 years of age.

### 3. Findings

Based on the data the researchers collected from these interviews, six themes emerged related to university supervisors' perceptions of student teachers' overall experiences, and of how student teachers experience success, in this undergraduate study abroad program: University supervisors identify specific characteristics common among student teachers who have been successful in the program; University supervisors identify specific opportunities and advantages unique to student teachers who participate in the program; University supervisors believe relationships are critically important among the key stakeholders; University supervisors believe university supports, especially the presence of a university supervisor, are important to student success in the program; University supervisors note a wide range of responsibilities in serving student teachers – some unique to a study abroad program, and some common to more traditional student teaching programs; and University supervisors note challenges faced by student teachers that are unique to the program, and areas to improve the program to better serve student teachers. These themes represent the major claims of this study and are discussed in more detail below.

#### 3.1 University Supervisors Identify Specific Characteristics Common among Student Teachers Who Have Been Successful in the Program

On a fundamental level, university supervisors discussed definitions and indications of growth and success for student teachers, primarily related to developing competency. These included measurable growth in elements of teaching grounded in Interstate Teaching Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards, and a level of preparedness in feeling “capable of walking into your own classroom and being on your own” (Interviewee 3). “I want student (teachers) to feel like they are ready to teach when student teaching is over. This is the last stop before they actually get paid to do this” (Interviewee 2). University supervisors spoke about the ultimate and decidedly tangible indication of success related to student teachers' autonomy in guiding their career path – by gaining full-time employment as a teacher upon completion of the program. “Beyond the semester then I started to define their success whether they were being able to land a teaching position after that” (Interviewee 4).

University supervisors cited certain attitudes (Interviewee 12: “being coachable;” Interviewee 16: “seeing them try suggestions”), approaches, and competencies common among student teachers who had demonstrated growth and success in the program. “The ability to understand the learner styles and the differences between children is very important and finding ways to meet those needs” (Interviewee 5). These included “being receptive to feedback...and constructive criticism” (Interviewee 4) from multiple sources (Interviewee 19: “being able to discern which information is important and which isn't, because they're being bombarded”), self-awareness (Interviewee 19: “Can they analyze that lesson to know whether parts of it worked and parts of it didn't?”), “passion for the classroom and for the students” (Interviewee 12), organization and time management (Interviewee 3: “I had some who would stay after every day and by Friday, everything was done for the next week. They knew they could travel and not stress about being prepared for Monday”), and the ability to foster a positive classroom environment conducive to learning. “Behavior management: are they able to do that efficiently and well, so that allows them to teach and students to learn? How well did they plan and how well do they translate to instruction and then the actual instruction itself? Are they able to carry it out effectively in the sense that they engage the students?” (Interviewee 19)

### **3.2 University Supervisors Identify Specific Opportunities and Advantages Unique to Student Teachers Who Participate in the Program**

University supervisors believed the study abroad program provided a uniquely immersive experience with regard to relatedness, with student teachers living on the military base where their schools were located and living with fellow student teachers to foster further development outside of school hours. “On base gave them a realism where they had to use their time also to do laundry and to get groceries and things like that. But also, they were close enough together to be able to talk to each other and to exchange ideas...They wanted to be as totally immersed as they could” (Interviewee 6).

By serving in DoDEA schools, university supervisors believed student teachers not only had the opportunity to develop in high-performing schools with strong mentor teachers (Interviewee 4: “These schools that they're working in are such great schools. The fact that our programs had good long-standing relationships with some outstanding mentor teachers, has been great”), but also to develop an understanding and pride in serving the military community, and enjoy an advantage if they plan to pursue a teaching career in DoDEA schools (Interviewee 3: “A few have gone with the idea that maybe they wanted to be DoDEA teachers at some point. So, they saw this as an opportunity to sort of get their foot in the door”).

University supervisors believed the study abroad program distinguished student teachers even if they plan to seek employment in the United States (Interviewee 2: “I think they believe that it may separate them from other candidates, something they can put on their resume that most others will not have”), as student teachers developed coping skills (Interviewee 3: “The personal growth during this is astounding...I think that's one of the biggest takeaways from this is it forces them out of their comfort zone”), and travel experiences built cultural competencies and a global view of education. “I think the access to parts of the world that never be able to see...It enriches their own teaching so that when they come back to teach (in the United States), they have so many more resources available and experiences to bring into the classroom that bring credibility for them” (Interviewee 7).

### **3.3 University Supervisors Believe Relationships Are Critically Important among the Key Stakeholders**

University supervisors discussed the importance of relationships among student teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. This relatedness would ultimately serve to develop student teachers' competency. Overwhelmingly, student teachers had a positive relationship with mentor teachers – “a really solid connection with the mentor teacher...like family” (Interviewee 12). “The supervising teacher kind almost adopted them like their own children and took them into their families and would have gatherings and take them to share special things about either the school or the community. I think that was definitely a non-teaching factor that made them feel more welcomed and more accepted earlier into the program” (Interviewee 6). In the instances when this relationship was not strong initially, university supervisors often saw this as an opportunity for the student teacher to work through the situation and build their capacity for developing a positive relationship. “They're still student teachers, so they don't know exactly sometimes when to speak up, when not to speak up. So, I think that's something they learned and are learning as they go along” (Interviewee 19).

This balance carried over to other situations, where university supervisors had to seek the right balance of intervening vs. allowing student teachers to develop independently (Interviewee 7: “Students need to trust you respect you, know that they can count on you. But also know that you're going to allow them space to make decisions”), and the right balance of positive feedback and critical feedback.

University supervisors cited the relationships among student teachers themselves (Interviewee 4: “In our particular group, from the very start, they lean on each other for emotional support. They even started a tradition of having weekly family dinners”), and the factors that led certain student teachers to develop closer relationships (Interviewee 4: “They kind of gravitated toward other student teachers who were in the same building they were in...In some ways, it was just their roommate groups. In some ways, it was the school that they were placed in”). In most cases, these relationships were positive, with student teachers providing emotional support to each other and helping each other develop as teachers. However, occasionally these relationships were contentious and required supervisor intervention. “There's a closer working relationship with the supervisors, which I think it's good in a lot of ways. (In the United States), if you're a supervisor every couple of weeks, you go out to school. (In Germany), you're mom and dad” (Interviewee 7).

### **3.4 University Supervisors Believe University Supports, Especially the Presence of a University Supervisor, Is Important to Student Success in the Program**

Student teachers from other universities are placed in the same schools, but without a supervisor from their university. Consequently, university supervisors cited concerns pertaining to relatedness and competency. They observed these student teachers experienced isolation and difficulty with meeting basic needs - “(a lone student teacher) had to come over and find her own apartment” (Interviewee 19) and lacked an advocate in setting them up for a successful experience. Because Pelican University student teachers had a university supervisor to advocate for them, “we worked through... (an increasingly) stormy relationship (between student teacher and mentor teacher) ...to make the last month a success” (Interviewee 19).

These lone student teachers were often preoccupied with logistical considerations at the expense of developing and focusing on their teaching practices (Interviewee 4: “These are student teachers, they're at the very early stage of their career and their development. There's always going to be some sort of constructive criticism to offer”) and received less frequent and fruitful feedback related to teaching practices and relationship-building.

### **3.5 University Supervisors Note a Wide Range of Responsibilities in Serving Student Teachers – Some Common to More Traditional Student Teaching Programs, And Some Unique to A Study Abroad Program**

University supervisors discussed the many ways they served student teachers, primarily to develop their competency. These responsibilities included conducting observations and walkthroughs (Interviewee 16: “(at least) once a week or twice a week, depending on the lesson”), providing timely feedback, reviewing student teachers’ written work, developing, and facilitating seminars throughout the semester to help student teachers develop their practice (Interviewee 8: “(Doing so in a way) they would feel comfortable

in their space. So, one seminar might be in the kindergarten classroom, and one seminar might be in the fifth-grade classroom”) and serving as references for student teachers during their job search.

Additionally, university supervisors served student teachers in ways that are unique to a study abroad program, managing paperwork to obtain the necessary credentials (e.g., Status of Forces Agreement cards - a rough equivalent to a work visa - and base access and base privileges cards), conducting preparatory meetings about the experience with student teachers and families leading up to their departure (Interviewee 2: “I had several meetings with the students prior to the trip as well”), and tending to various basic needs of student teachers such as mental health (Interviewee 6: “having a supervisor to talk to with questions and problems”), physical health (Interviewee 7: “If they got sick, we would get them where they needed to be”), and overall safety throughout the semester abroad (Interviewee 4: “We were very clear in setting travel guidelines”). “There is so much more that goes on outside of that mentor teacher-student teacher relationship” (Interviewee 19).

### **3.6 University Supervisors Note Challenges Faced by Student Teachers That Are Unique to the Program, And Areas to Improve the Program to Better Serve Student Teachers**

University supervisors identified concerns related in some way to autonomy, relatedness, and competency. Supervisors noted rising costs of the program (Interviewee 5: “I felt kind of terrible for the kids who didn't have the money to travel”), particularly related to housing arrangements, as a burden for student teachers. While living overseas, many student teachers experience homesickness at some point in the semester, though most have overcome this.

University supervisors’ other specific concerns related to the conduciveness of the work environment, including internet connectivity and the proximity of student teachers’ housing to their schools (Interviewee 16: “(One semester), they had to stay about 20 to 30 minutes away...They managed by using the bus or we would go and pick them up, if necessary. But I think the logistics were a little hard”). Additionally, because this program experiences a high degree of supervisor turnover (due to life circumstances, not supervisor satisfaction), some university supervisors believe this affects the overall level of continuity in the program.

In very rare cases, student teachers have failed to complete the program, whether due to poor teaching performance, poor work ethic, or poor representation of the university. With this in mind, university supervisors believed the process upfront “needs to be more selective” (Interviewee 5), as this could ensure that the highest possible percentage of participants successfully complete the program.

## **4. Discussion**

This study sought to address two primary questions: (1) What are university supervisors’ perceptions of student teachers’ experiences in an undergraduate study abroad student-teaching program? and (2) What are university supervisors’ perspectives of how student teachers experience success in an undergraduate study abroad student-teaching program?

We described and provided evidence to support the six themes that emerged from the data and connections to Self-Determination Theory in the findings section. In this section, we discuss further the connections

between the results and the works included in the Literature Review – specifically, how the results directly or indirectly aligned with, contradicted, or did not address findings from previous research.

Results of this study directly aligned with previous research in some ways, most prominently regarding the student teaching study abroad program’s ability to instill independence (Jiang et al., 2010; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; York, 2020) and cultural competency (Binbin & Devillar, 2011; Clement & Outlaw, 2012; Major & Santoro, 2016; Mesker et al., 2018; Nero, 2018), and the importance of ongoing constructive feedback for student teachers to develop their practice (González-Toro et al., 2020). In still more instances, participants’ perceptions aligned with previous research, including the program’s positive impact on student teachers’ marketability (Brewer et al., 2015), the importance of the mentor teacher/student teacher relationship to a student teacher’s success (Dumayas, 2016), and echoing concerns about the financial burden placed on student teachers in such a program (Bartzis, 2016).

In other ways, results of this study aligned indirectly with previous research. While Nilsen (2005) raised the concern that some programs fall short in supporting students through the many logistical challenges of a study abroad program, participants in our study noted that the program at hand effectively addresses such a concern. Çelik (2017) and Stachowski and Mahan (2019) discussed developing a student-centered mindset, and student teachers being better prepared to serve the families of students, respectively. Although study participants mentioned these only occasionally, the unique nature of the program was discussed extensively, which provides opportunities for student teachers to serve the unique needs of military children and interact regularly with their families.

Supervisor perceptions proved to have little to no connection of some of the previous research findings: the emphasis on student teacher reflection throughout the program (Svojanovsky, 2017), whether such a program is especially beneficial for social studies teachers (Helen & Moss, 2015), and whether such a program has a broader cultural impact of mitigating the effect of the relatively homogeneous makeup of the teacher workforce (Bartzis, 2016). The main contradiction to previous research pertained to the emotional ups and downs associated with a study abroad program (Mesker et al., 2020). Participants largely did not see this as a drawback of the program, but instead as a feature to further develop the autonomy, relatedness, and competence of student teachers.

## **5. Limitations**

Limitations of the study include willingness and ability of past supervisors to participate in the study (19 past supervisors participated in the study; nine did not), the varying length of time that had passed since each supervisor had served in the role, the varying age and experience of the supervisor interviewed, the varying number of student teachers under the supervisor per term, a lack of racial diversity amongst student teachers in attendance at any given time, and whether or not a co-supervisor was present during a particular semester. Each limitation can impact the generalizability of responses.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this study, we investigated university supervisors’ perceptions of student teachers’ experiences in a student teaching study abroad program through a partnership with the United States Department of Defense Schools in Germany. While many research studies covering student teaching study abroad exist,

our team addressed student teaching study abroad through a partnership with the Department of Defense Education Activity. This specific topic lacks in research and we believe our efforts will help a number of individuals seeking to facilitate or participate in such an experience.

Through qualitative research processes, we transcribed interviews, completed line-by-line open and axial coding of the transcriptions, and determined emergent themes from university supervisors' perceptions. In our study, we discovered six emergent themes, which include: university supervisors identify characteristics among student teachers who have been successful in the program; opportunities and advantages for student teachers who participate in the program; believe positive relationships are critically important; believe university supports are critical for student success in the program; compare and contrast their supervisor responsibilities with those in traditional student teaching programs; and note challenges and opportunities for the program to better serve student teachers.

Several identified emergent themes connect to findings from previous studies. For example, the theme university supervisors identify characteristics among student teachers who have been successful in the program connects with the topic where studies have shown that study abroad programs effectively instill creativity and a student-centered mindset (Çelik, 2017). In our study we similarly found that student teachers show growth and success as they are responsible for themselves and the individualized learning needs of their students. Another theme, opportunities and advantages for student teachers who participate in the program links to the findings which noted that teachers increased cultural awareness not only benefits students, but also students' families (Stachowski & Mahan, 2019). In our study, we relatedly found that the student teachers' travel opportunities provided an important and unique advantage. These experiences instilled a global view for student teachers that helped them develop personally and as a teacher.

A key finding in our study went on to show that our student teachers were also immersed in the cultural awareness of a military lifestyle. The student teachers were working in schools on a military base, the schools were small, and they were able to get involved in base, school and community activities thus expanding on a greater variety of cultural classroom demographic. The next connected theme, university supports are critical for student success in the program, ties to the study where Mesker et al. (2020) discussed the amplified emotional ups and downs student teachers can face while abroad. Likewise, our study found the personal growth of student teachers in a study abroad program to be unique to their situation as Interviewee 3 states "they have to learn coping skills that some of them weren't prepared to learn, but they had to learn them." Our team determined that supervisors built relationships with their student teachers to provide social and emotional support in addition to academic support. Our study also went further to recognize the belief that the supervisory role included but was not limited to parent-like responsibilities at all hours in order to keep student teachers safe.

The next emergent theme, compare and contrast their supervisor responsibilities with those in traditional student teaching programs, linked to the literature review discussing the importance of ongoing constructive feedback from the university supervisor (González-Toro et al., 2020). Our study, likewise, found that student teachers need ongoing feedback throughout their experience resulting in greater success when suggestions from university supervisors were given and the student teachers tried the suggestions to improve their practice. The emergent theme, note challenges and opportunities for the program to better

serve student teachers, relates to a study where Nilsen (2005) raised the concern that not all institutions provide guidance to student teachers in addressing the logistical considerations associated with living and studying abroad. Our team found how the supervisory role demands time for the supervisor to fix issues that occur along the way- this includes maintaining communications and working with the school personnel in order to maintain positive relationships between DODEA and the university.

With our study, additional important factors were discovered that surpassed general logistics as a challenge. Findings included the benefit for both supervisor and student teachers if the supervisor was made aware of any mental illness issues during the study abroad experience, a supervisor's ability to communicate with mentor teachers earlier on, and the consideration of the financial burden and considerable turnover among university supervisors thus resulting in inconsistencies in supervision as key challenges unique to the program. Our remaining theme, positive relationships are critically important, did not align with findings from our review of literature and our study addresses apparent research gaps. The particular theme address dynamics and impact of relationships among the most integral stakeholders in the program.

While research on student teaching is plentiful, few studies exist about study abroad student teaching programs. Furthermore, no formal studies are available about university supervisor perspectives and student teacher experiences in a university-DoDEA student teaching program. This study is significant as it informs university leaders, study abroad coordinators, university supervisors, and other faculty and personnel of the benefits and challenges student teachers may experience in a study abroad program for student teachers who complete their experience in DoDEA schools in areas other than the United States.

This study focused specifically on student teachers' experiences in DoDEA schools located on United States military bases in Germany. The information shared from this research may be considered in the design and implementation of study abroad programs throughout the world. Further research can focus specifically on student teachers' experiences in working with a racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse group of military-connected students during their study abroad programs to promote supporting equitable educational opportunities for all students.

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