

Conclusion

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Chapter 17: The PEERS Program: a New Way to Internationalize Teacher Education

Abstract

This concluding chapter of the collective work *Linking Research and Training in Internationalization of Teacher Education with the PEERS Program: Issues, Case Studies and Perspectives* aims to highlight the key points of the three preceding sections. To achieve this, a quality approach paradigm is used, which seeks to uncover the distinctive elements of the axiological and contextual frameworks, as well as the resources, practices, and models used in the PEERS program projects, as covered in the three sections: (1) “*Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges for the Internationalization of Teacher Training in a Globalized, Multicultural, and Connected World*”; (2) “*Case Studies and Lessons Learned from the PEERS Project in Southern Countries*”, and (3) “*Results of Research-Oriented PEERS Projects*.” This combined reflection enables us to define a series of original and novel characteristics that make the PEERS program a new way of approaching the internationalization of teacher education through research and innovation in educational theory and practice, in our increasingly globalized, multicultural, and connected world.

1. Introduction

Created in 2011–12, the PEERS (*Projet d'Étudiants et d'Enseignants-chercheurs en Réseaux Sociaux* or Student and Teacher-Researchers Social Networks Project) program (Gilles, Gutmann & Tedesco, 2012a, 2012b) has enabled the participation of nearly 500 students over six academic years, from 2011 to 2017, in 81 different PEERS projects. Over a hundred professors have also participated in this program, in a variety of projects, with some taking part over several years.

We return to the definition of PEERS as proposed by Gilles (2017) for this innovative international exchange program:

The PEERS program proposes international exchanges adapted to the context of teacher training institutions wishing to take advantage of internationalization in order to link training, research, and practice. PEERS is based on the completion of Research and Innovation (R&I) projects during the academic year, during which international groups of professors and students from teacher training partner institutions collaborate remotely as well as during two placements of one week. For the students, the PEERS program aims to develop competencies in distance collaboration with the help of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the management of intercultural groups, and the continuous improvement of their activities through reflective thinking and the spirit of research. For the professors, the PEERS program aims to better link research and training, to foster opportunities for international publications, and to reinforce their skills in the management of international research projects.

Within the framework of this chapter, we propose to present the key points of the three sections that make up this work, *Linking Research and Training in Internationalization of Teacher Education with the PEERS Program: Issues, Case Studies and Perspectives*. The first section, entitled “*Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges for the Internationalization of Teacher Training in a Globalized, Multicultural, and Connected World*”, focuses on the foundations and general features of PEERS projects, as well as the context of globalization in the intercultural and connected world in which it is situated. The second section, “*Case Studies and Lessons Learned from the PEERS Project in Southern Countries*” constitutes, as its title indicates, a series of chapters presenting case studies on PEERS projects

focused on innovation and cooperation in the developing world. Finally, the third section, “*Results of Research-Oriented PEERS Projects,*” considers the results from PEERS projects that have enabled the implementation of theoretical and practical educational research, generally taking the form of small-case research studies or innovations in the design of teaching units.

2. Theoretical Framework

The quality approach guiding our analysis of the PEERS program projects can be considered as a paradigm in the sense conceived by Kuhn (1983, p. 238): “*a collection of beliefs, recognized values, and techniques shared by members of a given group.*” For a community of teacher-researchers and students considering the advantages of an internationalization program such as PEERS in the context of teacher training, the quality approach paradigm presents one of the advantages described by Tardif (2001, p. 4): “*A paradigm not only suggests practices, but it also provides a specific framework for interpretation and understanding. In addition, it favors differentiated questions and responses because it constitutes a conceptual filter. It is equally crucial to highlight that a paradigm orientates, if not even shapes, representations.*”

It is with a view to making available a shared framework of interpretation for facilitating exchange and interaction, while also favoring the reflective approaches of continuous improvement, that we have proposed a quality approach paradigm for over fifteen years in the framework of R&I (Research & Innovation) projects in collaboration with different teams and in fields as diverse as evaluation design, general didactic methods, and school integration (Gilles, 2002; Gilles & al., 2007; Gilles & Renson, 2009; Gilles, Polson & Reynders, 2009; Gilles, 2010a; Gilles, 2010b; Gilles & al., 2011; Gilles, Tièche Christinat & Delévaux, 2012). The proposed paradigm constitutes a tool for enabling analyses and interactions between actors from different horizons. It is founded upon two frameworks of reference and four key factors. These four key factors are: a collection of

needs expressed by actors; an academic corpus combining principles and practices, of validated efficacy; theoretical models that give coherence to the interventions and analyses of actors; and the human and material resources necessary for execution. We believe that placing the PEERS program in a quality approach will enable these four key factors to be considered in a coherent and concomitant fashion. These key factors are also influenced by elements of two background frameworks: the first, axiological in nature, is related to the values conveyed, while the second is contextual and concerns a series of organizational, socioeconomic, historical, and cultural variables that determine the state of the environment, in the broadest sense of the term, in which the international projects of the PEERS program take place.

3. Key Points from the Section “Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges for the Internationalization of Teacher Training in a Globalized, Multicultural, and Connected World”

In regard to the contextual and axiological frameworks of the PEERS program, the first three introductory chapters (Gilles, 2017; Grin, 2017; O'Reilly, 2017) highlight the profound societal transformations that we are witnessing in the early twenty-first century, both on the economic front due to globalization and the linking of economies, and on the technological and social front with the emergence of a multicultural, connected society. Based on an analysis of the origins of the European Union (EU), the chapter by Grin (2017) allows us to understand the historical and humanist foundations of the voluntarist policies implemented by the EU since the second half of the twentieth century with a view to creating a space for the free movement of people, in which students are encouraged to study in foreign institutions, most notably through the creation of the ambitious Erasmus+ cooperation and mobility program. It is in this context that European higher education institutions have been internationalizing. In the area of teacher education, the PEERS program offers several advantages:

The PEERS program has a direct influence on involved teachers and students. But the influence of the program is much wider as it creates European and international collaboration networks, brings contributions to research and the creation of knowledge and, in the end, has transformative effects through the impact on pupils. As we know, these pupils will be the citizens of tomorrow. The more citizens can understand complexity and evolve in a world characterized by rapid transformations on a global scope, the more they will have a chance to pass sound judgment on the major challenges linked to the building of Europe (Grin, 2017).

Regarding the models that should inspire us when it comes to training effective teachers who can demonstrate critical thinking and an awareness of the issues raised by a globalized world, O'Reilly (2017) notably emphasizes the principle of empathy at the heart of PEERS projects:

Collaboration involves pedagogy and empathetic education and discovery (or enquiry-based) learning. More than one type of intelligence exists, with social and emotional intelligence progressively valued in workplaces (Goleman, 1996; Ioannidou and Konstantikaki, 2008). Empathetic intelligence is based on a theory of relatedness which is dynamic regarding thinking and feeling; ways in which each contributes to making of meaning. It is built on person-centered situations and professional contexts. Salient skills, abilities and attitudes underpin effectiveness in contexts with enthusiasm, expertise, capacity to engage, and empathy itself. [...]. Social usefulness of empathy and organization is crucial in developing cultures of learning essential for students and lecturers, on practice and professional relationships (Arnold, 2005). This perspective must be forefront in the digital age. Given the (emotionally) distancing effect of technology, students must develop empathetic intelligence so as to engage effectively as illustrated by PEERS collaborations where empathic learning is reinforced (Marron and Descoeudres, 2015). (O'Reilly, 2017).

Based on PEERS experiences in Ireland, O'Reilly (2017) also emphasizes the socioconstructivist nature of the learning achieved through the program:

In this constructivist approach, students were not provided with exact answers, but rather skills and materials to find answers themselves. Learners were encouraged to draw on their experience and prior knowledge, calling on that of peers, in group learning scenarios.

This “empathic intelligence” and “socioconstructivist approach” stimulated within PEERS projects are among the unique features of this

program, which is designed to internationalize the student curriculum by making use of research and training within tertiary teacher training institutions.

Two further striking observations from this introductory section: the clarification of objectives for both the teacher-researchers and the students in relation to the needs that the PEERS program aims to meet; and the formalization of the PEERS model through six distinct stages during the realization of projects. The first introductory chapter (Gilles, 2017) highlights the opportunities that the scheme offers to teacher-researchers, particularly in regard to developing their skills for managing international R&I projects involving students and practitioners, but also in relation to international publication of the results obtained with their partners. For students, the emphasis is on skill development in the areas of remote collaboration using ICT, the management of intercultural groups, and the continuous improvement of their activities through reflective practice and the research spirit. Six stages characterizing the PEERS procedural model have been clearly identified and defined: (1) preparation of the project before the start of the academic year; (2) remote team building and analysis of the project at the beginning of the process; (3) first one-week visit to the partner institution during the first term of the academic year; (4) remote collaboration during the following months; (5) second visit to the partner institution in the second term; and (6) concluding stage of remotely compiling the final report during the closing weeks of the academic year.

4. Key Points from the Second Section, “Case Studies and Lessons Learned from the PEERS Project in Southern Countries”

The six chapters describing PEERS experiences in developing countries (two in Bolivia, one in Burkina Faso, one in Madagascar, and two in Mozambique) reveal a common thread: a rich intercultural exchange that,

in the majority of cases, leads to a primarily constructive questioning of the paradigms guiding the action and reflection of trainee teachers. In regard to the good practices identified and the models put into use, becoming aware of issues of alterity, notably thanks to the human and theoretical framing of the teacher-researchers, enables a reduction in the negative impact of ethnocentrism, and contributes to solving the challenges linked to the encounter of very different cultures on both sides.

In relation to the contextual and axiological frameworks, the following observations are particularly noteworthy:

- A “Northern” culture benefiting from the development of economic, scientific, and technological means, established democracy, and social and judicial order, but troubled by a certain standardization of life that sometimes produces a crisis of values, particularly among young people, and which can partly explain forms of school dropout and a lack of motivation at school.
- A “Southern” culture benefiting from the ever-present need to adapt to constant changes and improve living conditions, and to tackle multiple social, political, and educational challenges, but troubled by innumerable obstacles of every order, which make changes difficult and sometimes lead to a dangerous devaluation of the individual and his/her physical and spiritual safety, with a consequent influence on the quality of school education.

In regard to the needs covered by the PEERS program, many of these projects have – in addition to the needs met for the teacher-researchers and students (*cf.* previous section) – the advantage of creating a significant social impact that is capable of generating motivation for positive and sustainable change within the communities and families involved, as long as an adequate way of supporting these communities over the long term can be found. Such is the case, for example, with the project developed

in Madagascar, which has long-term support from the “Zazakely” non-governmental organization (NGO)¹ that partners the project:

The Zazakely association, the third partner, is both the object and purpose of the research: largely financed by a Swiss NGO, its mission is to prevent the poorest from dropping out of school, by providing lunch to targeted pupils and giving them help with revision in addition to the education provided at the district’s public primary school (Gay & Razafimbelo, 2017).

This is also the case with the two Bolivian experiences discussed in the second section of the book. These were developed as two complementary projects, each in two periods, for a total duration of three years.

In three years, these projects influenced 28 students from three continents (15 in the first two steps and 13 in the last two steps), 5 faculty members from three universities and more than 50 families in three Andean communities (three communities in the first two steps and two communities in the last two steps) (Aliss, Hsieh, Silva, Morimoto & Gilles, 2017).

It is clear that the viability of these projects is affected not only by their duration, but also by the global context in which they are carried out. A context that can, for example in the case of the Bolivian communities, explain the inertia that was observed among some families at the start of the project.

In order to highlight the key ideas of these experiences and the relevance of the PEERS project in developing countries, we reproduce the following extracts of analysis, reflection and conclusion presented in the different chapters that constitute this section of the work.

From the chapter on the PEERS project in Madagascar, we recall the idea that the

experience of otherness is considered an essential dimension of the anthropological and historical approach that sets out to build knowledge about the culture of the other and of their own culture in return. However, there is no guarantee that the actor that embarks on this experience will use it as a step leading towards a questioning of the culture of the other and of his own and thus towards knowledge. Distancing

1 For more information on the Zazakely association, see <<https://www.zazakelysuisse.ch/>>.

is the process by which social actors become aware that their usual behavior is only one possibility among many. Ethnocentrism is a fundamental trap here that needs to be steered around (since it is impossible to abolish it) and it is an epistemic obstacle, i.e. a barrier to understanding others (Gay & Razafimbelo, 2017).

The chapter focusing on the PEERS project carried out with partners in Mozambique enables an appreciation of the importance of foundational values in human relations:

Indeed, each person's experiences depend on his or her own values. Moreover, this experience has shown me something I was not aware before about Mozambique. Indeed, I also had the experience of otherness with people with whom I shared the same culture. I observed that sometimes, despite the fact that our culture is very different, if values such as tolerance and respect are present, we can create friendships (Fanny, a Swiss student cited by Afonso, 2017).

The chapters on the PEERS projects in Bolivia illustrate the importance of interuniversity cooperation, and the significance of the engagement with Andean communities in making possible sustainable development.

Successful execution was shown by the community members' increased knowledge and improved cooking practices, as well as their management of natural energy resources (Zurita & Vargas, 2017).

Working with real people on real projects made me realize there's much more to consider than just applying what is learned in the academic pursuit of a career, we need to be more aware of the history, needs and rights of communities we are working with and realize that you can teach as long as you notice you are learning (USIP student cited by Aliss, Hsieh, Silva, Morimoto & Gilles, 2017).

The chapter on the PEERS project in Burkina Faso explores the question of sustainable development from a double perspective: that of the members of the Burkina Faso group, and those of the Swiss group.

Mankind has to contend with a string of concerns, but water remains one of the major challenges of our century, present and future. [...]. It has revealed that children are enthusiastic about exchanges between them and able to change behavior patterns. Furthermore, aware of the importance of the resource, they are capable of taking the initiative when they are involved in the reflection and action (Clavel & Idani, 2017).

The final chapter, “The Added Value of an International and Intercultural Exchange: The PEERS-Mozambique Project,” expresses the added value of an international and intercultural exchange in the following words:

[...] to understand that in discovering the Other, it is in the end ourselves that we question, and that the encounter with diversity is a continual source of richness if we are ready to welcome it and challenge ourselves. [...] travel abroad thus enables a student to acknowledge numerous aspects they had not been aware of previously, to step away from their routine and their prejudices, and thus become a better teacher in their home country (Laffranchini Ngoenha, 2017).

5. Key Points from the Third Section, “Results of Research-Oriented PEERS Projects”

The “Results of Research-Oriented PEERS Projects” section includes seven chapters describing educational theory and practices projects carried out in developed countries. Some of these projects constitute true small-case research studies based on surveys and observations, while others are of a more theoretical nature, or are distinguished by their innovation in the area of teaching unit design.

The first chapter of this research-oriented PEERS projects section concerns the project carried out in collaboration with the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore in the area of specialized education (Walker, Sermier & Tièche Christinat, 2017). The second chapter provides a comparative analysis between Switzerland and Spain in relation to gender stereotypes among primary school pupils (Bréau, Lentillon-Kaestner & Ribalta Alcade, 2017). The third looks at the development of teaching units focused on food in the context of education for sustainable development, and was carried out in collaboration with Lesley University in Boston (Pache, 2017). The fourth is a comparative analysis between Switzerland and US physical education, physical fitness, motivation, and self-concept in middle school students (Lentillon-Kaestner, Alicea & Braithwaite, 2017). The

fifth chapter considers one of the PEERS projects in partnership with Humboldt State University (HSU), where the participants constructed, taught, and improved teaching unit plans designed for marginalized pupils (Grigioni & Morago, 2017). The sixth PEERS project focuses on teaching urban ecology in schools in Switzerland (Lausanne) and in the United States (Boston), considering the design of an ecodistrict (Hertig, 2017). Finally, the concluding chapter of this third section explores how teachers from San Diego (US) and Lausanne (Switzerland) addressed challenges in multilingual and multicultural classes through a methodology based on pre- and post-reflection, interviews, and questionnaires to focus groups (Margonis, 2017).

In relation to the needs covered, the chapters relating to these R&I-focused PEERS projects, carried out in partnership with developed countries, demonstrate how they enable professors to expand their academic networks. The majority of these projects resulted in academic publications or communications at international congresses, sometimes including students.

[...] benefits for the faculty members: it was very interesting to discuss about researches and various teacher training strategies. Such an experiment permitted to enlarge our scientific networks and to initiate a fruitful collaboration (Pache, 2017).

[...] the project was presented at the PEERS Symposium organized as part of the World Association for Educational Research Conference (WAER), held in Reims in June 2012. In addition to the three trainers involved (Cristin Ashmankas, François Gingsins, and Philippe Hertig), the two Swiss students were able to participate in this research presentation thanks to support from the HEP Vaud. This was an important opportunity for them to gain their first experience of participating in a major conference, and of preparing a research communication (Hertig, 2017).

We also observe that these PEERS projects enabled the trainee teachers to have very enriching intercultural experiences while also requiring them to cope with the limitations of remote collaboration, where ICT was required in order to achieve the objectives of the international groups. These projects also enabled research and training to be integrated into the student curriculum. Different levels of research expertise were sometimes apparent within the international groups, as for example in the case of the partnership between the HEP Vaud and the NIE:

Involvement in the PEERS project provided an effective initiation into the research process for the Swiss participants while allowing the Singaporean participants to put their research skills into practice (Walker, Sermier & Tièche Christinat, 2017).

In addition to these transversal skills, the students also had to master a common working language: English. As one Swiss student noted, in the context of the partnership with the NIE in Singapore:

Thanks to the participation in this project, we were able to improve our level in English. Indeed, we trained it by communicating with our partners, but also by reading scientific articles in English (Isabelle, Manon, and Katya from Switzerland, cited by Walker, Sermier & Tièche Christinat, 2017).

This linguistic challenge also led to interesting realizations of benefit to the students' professional career:

When I observed the lessons in French I realized I don't get any of it and this would be horrible! It made me think of English learners in classrooms. This is very crucial; you must go out of your way to understand if the students are taking in the information (Testimony of a HSU student cited by Grigioni & Morago, 2017).

These R&I-focused PEERS projects are an opportunity for students to realize how diverse educational contexts can be, and to break with cultural stereotypes, as Pache (2017) highlights:

In cultural terms, the students emphasize openness to the world, an ability to move beyond prejudices and stereotypes. For example, the Swiss students were surprised to see that a school in Cambridge (Boston, MA) was based on the principles of sustainable development (locally produced organic food in the school canteen, environmentally-friendly heating and insulation, for example).

A willingness to discover new approaches is particularly apparent when the novelty concerns pedagogical practices, as was the case with the physical education projects developed with Humboldt State University in California:

In addition, beyond the research project, this international collaboration has allowed both teacher educators and students to discover other PE teaching practices, other

PE teaching conceptions, which has been highly beneficial for their professional development (Lentillon-Kaestner, Alicea & Braithwaite, 2017).

The resources available in other educational contexts very often surprise the members of the international groups, sometimes with unexpected effects on the development of research projects:

Although there were differences in the type of interventions and equipment available in Singapore and Switzerland, the exposure to different treatments opened the eyes of the participants to interventions of which they were not aware prior to the collaboration. In the project on the effects of dolphin therapy it was impossible for the Swiss student to collect data as dolphin therapy was not being used either in her professional context, or anywhere else in Switzerland (Walker, Sermier & Tièche Christinat, 2017).

In regard to the model of internationalizing teacher education proposed by the PEERS program, one-week visits to partner institutions play a major role in becoming aware of social codes and cultural particularities:

We liked to discover the richness of the different cultures in Singapore [...] In this project we collaborated with persons from each of the three majority cultural groups [...] confronted with the different cultures, we learned to respect different social codes, for example not looking at some men in the eye when talking, or not refusing a proposition too directly (Isabelle, Manon, and Katya from Switzerland, cited by Walker, Sermier & Tièche Christinat, 2017).

These intercultural differences sometimes constitute obstacles for interpersonal relations that must be overcome.

Some US participants expressed exasperation as they struggled to understand the direct communication style of their Swiss counterparts. Swiss participants reported frustration and surprise at the effort group communication required. However, over time as the groups collaborated on a common goal and continuously reflected, participants became more at ease with each other (Hertig, 2017).

For many students, the projects thus provide food for thought far beyond the aspects strictly linked to their research.

6. Conclusions

Through the key points outlined above, we have defined a series of characteristics of PEERS projects by using the quality approach paradigm as a framework for interpretation. We have discussed the requirements of this program for the internationalization of teacher education in the early twenty-first century: the development of international R&I project management skills; mastery of ICT and remote collaboration practices; the management of international groups; and continuous development of one's pedagogical and didactic behaviors through reflective practice and a spirit of research.

We have also shown two types of context in which PEERS projects take place: partnerships with institutions from developing countries, and partnerships with institutions from developed countries, the latter more often focused on empirical research. Despite the very different contexts, similarities due to the format proposed by the program have been observed: team building; discussions for defining a shared project and objectives; planning and sharing tasks over an academic year; management of an international R&I project in the area of educational theory and practice; the socioconstructivist approach; a one-week stay within a partner institution; inviting partners to one's own institution for a return one-week visit; cultural and pedagogical discoveries; remote collaborations using ICT; management of oneself and accounting for others in a multicultural group; emotional intelligence; collective assembly of a report; scholarly dissemination; building one's personal/professional network; and impact on one's practice. This group of very diverse characteristics, which is shared by all the PEERS projects, constitutes the DNA of the program.

In regard to the axiological framework that forms the background of the PEERS program, we return to the declaration of Walker, Sermier, & Tièche Christinat (2017), inspired by Gacel-Avila (2005):

One of the basic and fundamental functions of a university should be the fostering of global consciousness among students, to make them understand the relation

of interdependence between people and societies, to develop in students an understanding of their own and other cultures and respect for pluralism (p. 123).

We are confident that the PEERS program, through the international collaborations that it makes possible, will fulfill this function within teacher training institutions, and will enable trainee students to improve their understanding of the world, and their professional effectiveness, in a humanist approach.

But as we have also highlighted, another of the original aspects of the PEERS program is that it is equally beneficial to the professors involved in the projects. They also benefit, particularly in terms of expanding their research networks and developing opportunities for collaboration and international academic publications.

The PEERS program, like any internationalization program, has its costs, but in the context of teacher training this should be put into perspective by considering the potential impact on the generations of pupils that will be taught by the students when they qualify. As numerous accounts have demonstrated, experiencing an international PEERS program project over the course of an academic year is a highly significant experience.

Let us not forget that between its creation in 2011–12, up to 2016–17, no fewer than 81 PEERS projects have taken place over six academic years, involving nearly 500 students and over one hundred professors. Over these six years, the number of projects covered by the program has continued to grow, from four in 2011–12 to 25 PEERS projects in 2016–17.

We hope that the PEERS program will continue to grow in future, and that through this new form of internationalizing teacher education, those benefiting directly (future student teachers and their professors), and indirectly (generations of pupils and students taught by the direct beneficiaries), will develop the skills to collaborate intelligently, respecting the Other and his or her differences, in order to contribute with the critical distance necessary for a humanist society in an increasingly globalized, multicultural, and connected world.

