

TEACHING INTERNSHIPS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EXTREMADURA (SPAIN) AND THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S COLLEGE AT WISE (US): EXPERIENCES FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

During my stay as a Fulbright Postdoc Scholar at the University of Virginia's College at Wise (VA) I collaborated in teacher training internships. This paper summarizes this experience from a comparative view, contrasting the strengths and weaknesses of teaching internships between my home and host institution. Results show that in Extremadura the courses offer students more specialization, whereas student monitoring from both the College Supervisor and the Mentor Teacher is higher in Virginia.

Keywords: teaching internships • Spain • US • comparative education • rural education



INTRODUCTION

When I was thinking about applying for a Fulbright Scholarship, I was more interested in finding a public host university than a private university for selected elites. The main reason that supported this preference was my interest in getting to know the diversity America is worldwide known for. Considering my academic trajectory in comparative education, I wanted to learn as much as possible about American education, as well as delve into the Appalachian sociocultural background of The University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA Wise). One of the practices that I enjoyed the most was related to how teaching internships were implemented. Since both my home institution (Universidad de Extremadura, Spain) and UVA Wise belong to rural regions, I considered contrasting my experience assisting teaching interns in both places. The purpose of this paper is to extend to the academic community how future teachers are trained through their internships in rural areas of Spain and the United States from a comparative perspective.

Methodologically there is a triangulation between participant observation and official primary sources from both institutions. But first it is important to provide an approximation to the context of these institutions and briefly describe them.

The 21st Century has been incredibly influenced by the advent of globalization and postmodernism in every social and educational context of western societies. However, a rural exodus continues to take place, translating into a significant problem for the development of the less inhabited areas. In the case of Spain, Extremadura not only is the Autonomous Community that has a higher percentage of rural population (49.1%), but also is one of the regions in which the population has encountered a higher decrease and, according to predictions, will continue on this trajectory in the future. The situation is also applicable to Appalachia (US), particularly as Appalachian counties are currently the ones that suffer the biggest population decrease. Due to the great geographic extension of Appalachia, this paper's focus is centered on the area of Southwest Virginia, where UVA Wise is located.

In terms of background, the Teacher Training College (*Facultad de Formación del Profesorado*, in Spanish) is the oldest center at the University of Extremadura (UEx). It was initially an autonomous institution named Normal School for Teachers from Cáceres (*Escuela Normal de Maestros de Cáceres*, in Spanish), but when the UEx was created in 1973 the New School became part of it. Today, UEx provides undergraduate, graduate and PhD programs at two campuses located in Badajoz and Cáceres and two university centers in Mérida and Plasencia.

In 1954 a modest College opened its doors for the first time in Wise County (VA, US) – it was initially named Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia. Currently, UVA Wise is a residential campus of a public College of liberal arts located in a rural area in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia that provides undergraduate Higher Education programs to 2,021 students. It is part of The University of Virginia and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on College.

TEACHING INTERNSHIPS AT UEX AND UVA WISE

This section summarizes the main observed differences and similarities between teaching internships while teaching in Spain (UEx) during Spring semester 2022, and in the US (UVA Wise) during my Fulbright PostDoc during Fall semester 2022. Observations are divided in five topics: curricula, seminars, portfolio, supervisors and their duties, and evaluation.

In relation to the teaching internship curriculum, UVA Wise students followed a similar manual, with independence of their field and level of expertise as future teachers. However, at UEx teaching interns would follow different manuals (student guides for the course) depending on the degree

they were enrolled in (Bachelor's in early childhood education, Bachelor's in primary education, and Master's in secondary education). This is one of the main strengths teaching internship at UEx have in comparison to UVA Wise, because the curriculum differs in terms of specificity within their area, field, and educational level as future teachers. This means that each group of students are composed of peers that are enrolled in the same degree. From my perspective, this enables students and teachers to focus on a more individualized teacher training. At the same time, gathering students from different degrees in the same seminars implies that groups of students are varied, and for me that is a qualitative strength of UVA Wise.

Regarding the academic seminars, both institutions require compulsory attendance and participation for all teaching interns, even though their periodicity differs. On one side, at UEx three are the number of seminars (4 hours each) that students must attend, whereas at UVA Wise the seminars (2 hours each) take place weekly during the whole semester. This means that students at UVA Wise receive more hours of training and guidance in relation to their teaching internships than students at UEx, at least in relation to the seminars.

At both UEx and UVA Wise, two main figures are responsible for the accurate learning and development of teacher interns, which are: The College Supervisor and the Mentor Teacher. The College Supervisor is the main academic reference point that students have during their teaching internships at UEx and UVA Wise. Their duties pertain to the teaching and management of seminars, providing guidance to students and evaluating their portfolios. In addition, College Supervisors at UVA Wise perform another task that is not contemplated at UEx: visiting students (4-5 times) at schools during their teaching internships for observing and evaluating their teaching performances. These visits impressed me as they are something normal and even obvious in the US, whereas this practice does not occur at any public Spanish university. In Spain the relationship between College Supervisors and Mentor Teachers is mostly limited to administration and, perhaps, an optional online meeting. For this reason, the relationship between College Supervisor and Mentor Teachers in Spain is not as significant as those in the US. This relationship and contact is crucial for the further progress of students, the development of their skills at schools, and professional growth.

Another major difference between both teaching internships is in the aim and scope of portfolios that students must write about their teaching experience. On one side, UEx students has the option of presenting a portfolio which mainly consisted of describing the experience of their teaching internship: Introduction or summary of the portfolio; detailed description of the school they have been doing their teaching internship at (classrooms, context, students, teachers, internal organization, etc.); unit and lesson plans; professional development activities; journal; and reflection on teaching internship. In terms of UVA Wise students, they must include not

only information relating to their training internship (lesson plan, unit plan, bulletin boards, use of technology, impact on student learning, classroom management, parental communications, professional development activities, reflection on internship and future education plans), but also to their own academic and professional achievements and ideas (resume, teaching philosophy of education, educational tests, documentation, transcript, etc.). While in Spain the focus is predominantly on the academic, its scope is limited to internship experiences; in contrast, US portfolios facilitate the entrance and trajectory of students into the working world.

In relation to students' assessment, in both cases it is a combination of evaluations from Mentor Teacher and College Supervisor. Differences are evident in *what is* evaluated and *how*. At UEx, students obtain their grades from the Mentor teacher who evaluates students' teaching skills at school, and the College Supervisor, who evaluates seminar attendance, participation, and portfolios. At UVA Wise, the Mentor teacher evaluates the student's teaching skills at school, whereas the College supervisor evaluates students' teaching performance during school (visits), portfolios, and seminars' attendance. Students' assessment, mentoring and monitoring in the US seems to be more complete than in Spain due to the combination of several evaluation techniques and instruments. It encompasses a more personalized assessment, which can be linked to individualization that, according to Spring among other authors, has traditionally characterized American education.

CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS OF TEACHING INTERNSHIPS FROM A COMPARATIVE VIEW

Teaching internships in Spain have a clear academic tendency, whereas at UVA Wise are more focused on the profession itself and guaranteeing the proper integration of students into the labor market. This is a reflection on how American education leans towards pragmatism, whereas in Spain the importance of theory is emphasized. However, the main conclusion relates to the relationship between teaching internships and the attention that must be paid to the rural environment both universities are part of. It is important to establish relationships between teaching skills that are transmitted and the rural areas in which those skills are implemented and developed.

Focusing teaching on the context and place in which education occurs is one of the most relevant strengths that teaching interns at UVA Wise have over UEx students. While the importance of context is encouraged through the students' portfolio (theoretically, descriptively) at the UEx, this is not specifically the case at UVA Wise. At the same time academic supervisors at UEx barely have contact with the very education centers where students undertake their internships, which can be translated in a somewhat limited perception of the reality that students are immersed. This does not happen

at UVA Wise, as recurrent visits from academic supervisors to school as the teaching internships take place (practical, active) is an embedded practice. In this light, it is possible to deduce that the balance between theory and practice can be improved in both institutions contrarily.

Guiding students towards their professional path is important all around the globe, and especially in rural areas, where there is a very high percentage of youth unemployment. Globalization and postmodernism have an unavoidable impact that is latently applicable in higher education too. Teacher interns must be trained for developing the necessary skills that the globalized society of the 21st Century requires. However, at the same time, local needs may not be ignored. Hence, universities and colleges located in rural, remote, and depopulated regions will be required to train future teachers encountering problems and challenges that people from these areas experience, i.e., rural exodus, isolation (lack of good public transportation), unemployment, etc. In order to improve teaching internships at both institutions, the following measures are suggested:

Spanish education supports the notion that to offer good education, it is important to go beyond the standards of learning by studying and analyzing the school context and the close reality around it – thereby, enabling it to be adapted to the direct needs of the school community. The theoretical and academic importance of considering and analyzing schools, their context, and its impact on teaching (especially in rural areas) that UEx promotes through students' portfolios could be implemented at UVA Wise. This could be done by adding an extra section as part of students' portfolio, at the level as other areas within the degree, i.e. teaching philosophy.

External visits are very much integrated in teaching internships within the US, whereas in Spain this emphasis is barely apparent. For this reason, it is difficult for Spanish education policies to provide as many *in situ* visits at schools from College supervisors as are allowed in the US. This measure will not only be challenging in Extremadura, but all over Spain. However, I believe it is something Spaniards can definitely learn from Americans. What could be feasible is scheduling at least one or two face-to-face meetings between the College supervisor and the Teacher mentor at school. This would contribute to College supervisors' attaining a better knowledge of the school, the area itself, the mentoring teacher, etc., and would positively lead to a more individualized guidance of students, in accordance with the context and reality in which their teaching internships are taking place.

In addition, I would suggest training Spanish and American faculty to: a) teach through a local-global ('glocal') perspective, which consists of merging the needs of a globalized world that also considers local needs and particularities; and b) achieving a better balance between theory and practice within teaching internships by progressively adapting the manuals.

HOW MY FULBRIGHT WORK IMPACTED ME

This publication will allow the academic community to know more about the strengths and weaknesses of teacher training through teaching internships in rural territories of Extremadura and Southwest Virginia from a comparative approach. By doing this, it aims to increase the visibility of higher education in rural areas. One of the main goals of the Fulbright Program is the fostering of exchanges with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding among nations, and that is exactly what this paper seeks to engender.

Of course, being a Fulbrighter in Southwest Virginia has impacted me in several ways. This contribution is only a part of it, emanating from the collaboration with other colleagues from the Education Department. For me, being able to experience the two described realities *in situ* has been an incredible opportunity. Maybe it can be even perceived as a romantic tribute to the origins of comparative education in which travelers (i.e., Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris), share their perceptions after being abroad learning from other models. In essence, the Fulbright experience has helped me becoming familiar to American education beyond the books.

Initially, the purpose of the scholarship was not studying this topic. I prepared a combined project for teaching and research entitled “Pedagogy as a scientific discipline: epistemology, history and current situation at Higher Education in the United States of America and Europe.” What I mean with this, is that the Fulbright experience provides as many possibilities as scholars desire, not being just limited to the project itself, but so much more. That said, during my stay at UVA Wise, I participated in a Faculty Colloquium with a contribution entitled “Pedagogy as a scientific discipline in European Higher Education: The cases of England, France, Germany and Spain from a comparative perspective.” I presented the main results of my PhD, which were the starting points of the research project that I developed during my stay there, entitled “Pedagogy as a scientific discipline: epistemology, history and current situation at Higher Education in the United States of America.” I received feedback from colleagues and faculty members, specialized both in education and other areas. As for the research part, this experience has enabled me not only to learn from the history of Pedagogy as a discipline in the US, but also to closely collaborate with a colleague, writing a paper that is in the process of being published. In addition, I joined other colleagues in training activities, among which I highlighted specialized courses about Institutional Review Boards (IRB) for future research works.

The Fulbright experience provides as many possibilities as scholars desire, not being just limited to the project that has been accepted, but much more.

NOTES

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Dr. Sianes-Bautista at the Faculty Colloquium at UVA Wise (US)

BIOGRAPHY

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