

Laura Hamman

Mellon Foundation Area and International Studies Fellowships for Incoming Graduate Students

Submitted: September 19, 2015

This summer I used my Mellon Recruitment Award to support international study in Uganda. During my time in the country, I took a qualitative methods course with doctoral students and professors from both the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Makerere University in Kampala. Through this unique international comparative course, I gained insight into different paradigms for understanding teaching and learning. For example, during one class session we watched a short video of instruction in a Ugandan classroom, and it became clear that notions of “active engagement” had multiple manifestations, depending upon the interpretive frame. Some of my Ugandan colleagues, working from a cognitive lens, perceived children to be actively engaged when highly focused on the task at hand, even when working independently; conversely, my training through a sociocultural framework led me to understand engagement as necessarily social, with peers working together to negotiate meaning. Through our subsequent discussion, I came to realize that both definitions were valid and that a more nuanced understanding of our interpretations broadened what I was able to see in the video of the Ugandan classroom.

Based on this experience and others, my colleagues and I have submitted a proposal to the 2016 conference for the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) to critically reflect upon our experiences and to explore the possibilities of cross-cultural collaborative learning opportunities. Our working paper is entitled, “Making the Familiar Strange: Considering Rich Points and ‘Big C’ Conversations in a Collaborative Qualitative Research Course.”

In addition to taking the qualitative methods course, I also visited several schools and non-profit organizations to gain a deeper understanding of the educational, political, and social context of living and learning in Uganda. As my own research is situated at the intersection of language, education, and identity, I was especially interested in the implementation of language-of-instruction (LOI) policies, which were intended to increase the use of local languages in primary schools. Interestingly, despite the fact that many Ugandan teachers and students seemed to value home languages and cultures, the successful implementation of local language policies was undermined by significant challenges, including the reliance on English-based standardized tests, the linguistic diversity of many classrooms, and teachers’ own beliefs about English as an enabler of educational and societal mobility. I left Uganda with a more critical and nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between language policy and practice, a perspective that will certainly drive my thinking on my own research in dual language immersion classrooms.

I am extremely grateful to the International Institute for providing me with the opportunity to deepen my understanding of qualitative research and the Ugandan educational system. Thanks to their generous funding, I have begun to push the boundaries of my own understandings of effective educational research, policies, and practice. As I begin the third year of my Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, I am confident that these experiences in Uganda will continue to shape the ways in which I conceptualize my dissertation research and my broader understandings of cross-cultural, collaborative learning opportunities.