



Disorienting experiences during study abroad: Reflections of pre-service teacher candidates

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the study-abroad experiences of pre-service teacher candidates at the Faculty of Education, York University, using transformative learning theory. Disorienting experiences are a crucial first step for perspective transformation; students reported facing racial dynamics, “outsider” status, risk-taking behavior and power relations. Students’ utilized a variety of reflection opportunities; however, critical self-reflection imperative for transformation requires greater awareness of one’s frame of reference. Future studies need to examine how students’ specificities shape the realization of study-abroad goals for pre-service teachers and their ability to develop global consciousness and to work towards an equitable and just society.

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1. Introduction

Research conducted in mid-western universities in the United States in the 1990s (Baker & Giacchino-Baker, 2000; Cushner, 2007; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahon, 2007; Merryfield, 2000; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Quezada, 2004; Willard-Holt, 2001) generated significant literature on the relevance and importance of international experiences for pre-service teachers. Most studies examined the structure and nature of cross-cultural educational experiences for pre-service teachers; they all documented (Willard-Holt, 2001) their value (Williams & Kelleher, 1987; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Quezada & Alfaro, 2007; Willard-Holt, 2001; Roose, 2001; Alfaro, 2008; Wilson, 1993; Stachowski and Mahan, 1998; Sharma and Jung, 1984; Stachowski and Visconti, 1998) and identified a wide range of benefits. However, there is an increasing recognition of insufficient systematic documentation of teacher candidates’ international experiences (Conle et al., 2000; Cordeiro, 2007; Zeichner, 2002). In particular, there is concern that “[international] experiences alone do not make a person a multicultural or global educator” (Merryfield, 2000, p. 440) and that studies need to identify “a broader understanding of [the] lived intercultural experience[s] of teacher candidates,” noting that such an understanding is “a critical element in gaining a meaningful

understanding of other cultures as well as one’s own place in an interconnected world” (Cushner, 2007, p. 37; Wilson, 1987).

Transformative learning theory provides a framework for understanding how “lived experiences” provide a context for making meaning of the world. In attempting to understand teacher candidates’ study-abroad experiences, this study will draw on transformation theory; it will also refer to Dewey’s concept of “critical reflection” (Dewey, 1933; Montrose, 2002) and to Che, Spearman, and Manizade (2009) conceptualization of “constructive disequilibrium”. Using these concepts, this study will consider what, if any, such experiences are reported by students during study abroad and what, if any, opportunities students have for critical reflection. We will draw on researchers such as Che et al. (2009), Malewski and Phillion (2008, 2009), Merryfield (2000), and Talburt and Stewart (1999) who have identified the importance of socio-cultural differences as factors influencing students’ perspective and ability to meet study-abroad learning goals. Study-abroad programs for pre-service teachers aim to develop international/intercultural knowledge, skills and dispositions to work in diverse learning environments, and to encourage critical reflection in teaching practice to enable creation of a just and equitable society. Study-abroad literature refers to these outcomes as “intercultural competencies,” “cultural consciousness,” “global perspectives” or several similar concepts (Bennett, 1993; Che et al., 2009; Taylor, 1994). Using transformative learning theory, we attempt to understand the international/intercultural learning process associated with study abroad. We will also consider

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Helms's racial identity theory (1984; 1994; Thompson, 2003) to analyze critically how race diversifies and complicates the nature of the study-abroad experience. We aspire to fill the existing gap in the literature, while also contributing a Canadian perspective to the largely American discussion.

2. Theoretical framework

Mezirow (1978; Taylor, 2008) first introduced the concept of transformative learning. He said, “[A]t its core... it is about how we make meaning of the world through our experiences... how we develop a frame of reference for understanding the world” (Cranton & King, 2003, p. 31). Frames of reference are “structures of assumptions and expectations” that determine an individual's perspective and world view; his/her beliefs, values, thinking and actions. “It is the revision of a frame of reference [meaning perspective] in concert with [critical] reflection on experience that is addressed by the theory of perspective transformation” (Taylor, 2008, p. 5). Critical reflection leads to one opening his/her frames of reference, discarding old ideas/habits, and adapting new ways of thinking/believing, eventually changing one's assumptions and ways of seeing the world. This emphasis on critical reflection is synonymous with Dewey's “habit of reflective activity” (Dewey, 1933; Montrose, 2002) and is what enables Freire's development of “critical consciousness” (Taylor, 2008) and “conscientization” (Kitchenham, 2008).

Mezirow differentiates three progressive ways of reflection. “Content reflection” examines the content/description of the problem; “process reflection” focuses on the problem-solving strategies; and “premise reflection” questions the problem or issue itself. It is “premise reflection” that enables a person to question his/her perspective within a larger view, leading to transformation (Cranton & King, 2003; Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow outlines ten phases for perspective transformation; the catalyst for this change begins with a disorienting dilemma (Taylor, 1994). This idea of disorientation, or what Che et al. (2009) refer to as “disequilibrium or dissonance” (2009) is one that we take up in our research. This sense of dissonance or disorientation is described by the study-abroad literature as “culture shock” (Taylor, 1994). Adler (1975) identified culture shock as a form of anxiety resulting from the “misunderstandings of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols...” (p. 13). Oberg and Gudykunst (Pusch & Merrill, 2008) associate culture shock with feelings of panic, anxiety, alienation, frustration and helplessness. Culture shock theory and the intercultural development process has been examined by several researchers who propose phases of change in this experience over time (the U- and W-curve theories), the stage development of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) and the importance of various intensity factors to the intercultural experience (Paige, 1993).

3. Literature review

Williams (2005) states that, “[w]ithout concrete evidence of values and outcomes, study abroad experiences will lack the credence afforded other educational programs” (p. 357). This view may partly explain scholars' tendencies to focus on the beneficial outcomes of international experiences. The relationship between successful program design and beneficial outcomes is well documented (Cushner & Mahon, 2002), but little is known about how pre-service teachers develop a deeper awareness of their “frames of reference,” examine assumptions and world view, and eventually change their perspective (Kitchenham, 2008). Faulconer (2003) makes clear a need for “[...]much more research into how pre-service teachers internalize ...cultural sensitivity training ... and how we can better design experiences that are authentic and have

a deep impact on the future teachers' views of their diverse students” (p. 23).

Research on international opportunities for teacher candidates is built on the premise that the students going abroad undertake a “cultural exchange,” implying that a homogenous “home” culture comes in contact with a “foreign” culture; the reality of a *diverse* student body creates a much more complex dynamic. Students' identities are complicated and varied. For an international experience to have a solid foundation, as transformative learning theory suggests, student teachers should be encouraged to explore their own cultural backgrounds and biases in order to examine how these affect their experiences and have an impact on what they do and how they view and interact in the world (Conle et al., 2000; Faulconer, 2003; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Taylor, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As Weaver (1998) suggests, “the irony is that the way we often find our culture is by leaving it” (p. 73). Willard-Holt (2001) and Yee and Pik (Tang & Choi, 2004) emphasize that candidates on international teaching practicums demonstrate personal growth and develop empathy, “because of feelings of being an outsider” (Willard-Holt, 2001, p. 515) in an uncertain and unfamiliar environment. Cushner and Brennan (2007) also note students' ability to “strengthen their practice and stretch beyond their traditional zone of comfort” (p. 6). In asking participants about the experiences that have most influenced their work, Merryfield (2000) found that “[m]any of the lived experiences described by the teacher educators include disorientation, confusion, and discomfort when they have moved into new situations” (p. 439). Not only were uncomfortable experiences central to the teacher educators' chosen work; the nature of the experiences also showed common threads. Merryfield found that “[...]many experiences are centered upon societal, institutional or individual discrimination, poverty or injustice that comes from being treated as different or seen as the ‘other’ or a permanent outsider” (p. 439).

4. Background of the study

In conversations with students during their stay abroad and at re-entry at York University's Faculty of Education, the program coordinators noticed that students repeatedly spoke about incidences that might best be described as challenging “disorienting experiences,” which made them uncomfortable and confused. These incidences remained with them as part of their international experiences; several remained largely unresolved. Based on this observation and the reviewed literature, this study sought to achieve two objectives: (1) to identify and analyze what, if any, disorienting or discomfoting experiences pre-service teachers identified as salient to their study-abroad experiences; and (2) to examine opportunities for reflection which had been made available to the pre-service teachers. An e-mail invitation to participate in the study, which included a short quantitative questionnaire (asking for program of study, prior international experiences and reasons for participating in the current experience) and an interview, was sent to all ten participants of the 2007 and 2008 York International Internship Placement (YIIP) and all nine participants of the 2008 International Practicum Placement (IPP).

The YIIP was established in 2005 as an opportunity for students to work abroad for three months starting in May. York University arranges the internships and provides a stipend for airfare and other expenses to all participants. The students arrange housing in consultation with the placement site. Program admission is competitive, based on an application and interview process. Some students are placed together in pairs, while others are alone in their placement. Before and after their placements, students are required to attend pre-departure and re-entry sessions. During the placements, students are in touch with each other across different

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