



Preparing teacher candidates to serve students from diverse backgrounds: Triggering transformative learning through short-term cultural immersion



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ABSTRACT

This study followed 24 teacher candidates in a short-term cultural immersion field experience designed to help them reflect on their assumptions and perspectives in order to better understand the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students they will teach. Qualitative methods were informed by a phenomenological research approach to examine candidates' transformative learning experiences in a cultural immersion context. The findings are discussed within a three-stage framework of transformative learning: triggering experiences, frame of reference examination, and transformative change.

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1. Introduction

Global educators are preparing candidates who will teach a broad spectrum of racially, religiously, culturally, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse students. These trends raise many questions for teacher educators. How can we best prepare teachers to meet the learning needs of every student? What are the learning needs of every student—as community, nation-state, and global citizens? How can we help future teachers acknowledge and value students' funds of knowledge as a foundation for curriculum and instruction? How can we facilitate awareness and examination of teachers' own identities, assumptions, and perspectives in this pursuit?

Shaklee and Baily (2012) suggest that the final question provides a starting point for developing global educators, “we first need to uncover preexisting beliefs and experiences... helping teacher candidates ‘clear the lens,’ as part of teacher education preparation, is crucial to the acceptance and development of new perspectives” (“Developing,” para. 2). Although it is impossible to truly “clear the lens,” we must acknowledge and question these frames of reference through which we make meaning of the experiences and people around us. Facilitating this process is a crucial component of teacher education if we are to prepare candidates to meet the educational needs of diverse students. With this goal in mind, we investigated 24 preservice teachers' cultural immersion experiences to explore elements of transformative learning, including frame of reference awareness, triggered during a structured short-term practicum experience.

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Mezirow (2012) describes *frame of reference* as “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (pp. 81–82). In frame of reference construction, each interaction and experience adds, adjusts, or transforms a building block that reinforces the assumptions and expectations that will guide interpretations of future events. Many of the factors that collectively form our frame of reference filters are adopted without *critical reflection*—defined as “challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 207). Gradually, we examine and replace childhood building blocks that are noticeably inaccurate, moving toward a more “dependable” frame of reference, which Mezirow defines as “more inclusive, differentiating, permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change, and integrative of experience” (p. 84). However, the less visible blocks remain outside our awareness and continue to influence our expectations and reactions.

Uncovering these preexisting perspectives is essential to training educators and particularly important in settings where there are distinct differences between the formative experiences of a largely homogenous teaching force and an increasingly diverse student population. The diverse funds of knowledge that students bring to the classroom need to be utilized and expanded as foundational to the pedagogical framework rather than seen as a deficit or a temporary scaffold to teach the majority culture’s funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalaz, 1992). If teachers view diverse student groups, curriculum, and instruction through a majority-culture lens, to what extent can they understand their students’ frames of reference in order to effectively meet their learning needs? Without awareness and examination of this lens, teachers may minimize students’ funds of knowledge and frames of reference rather than seeking to equally enrich their ethnic, national, and global identities (Banks, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Increasing cultural awareness and making assumptions about diversity visible provide necessary scaffolding for preservice teachers as they learn to meet the needs of all students. This study examines the transformative elements that a cultural immersion field experience can trigger in order to better prepare interculturally competent teachers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Transformative learning

In 1991, Mezirow introduced the “first comprehensive presentation of transformation theory” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 5) based on his 1978 grounded theory findings on perspective transformation. Building on the work of Habermas (1971), who delineated learning into three domains: technical, practical and emancipatory, Mezirow also used Freire’s (1970) concept of *conscientization* to inform his theory. It is Freire’s highest stage of *critical transivity*—demonstrated by individuals who are able to think globally, critically assess perceived contradictions, and engage as agents of change—which most influenced Mezirow’s transformative elements of disorienting dilemma and critical reflection (Kitchenham, 2008).

Built on the foundational concepts of constructivist assumptions, humanism, and critical social theory, Mezirow (2012) defined transformative learning as the process “by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (p. 75). Based on his theory, the elements of critical reflection and dialog lead to a transformed frame of reference, resulting in individual and social change. The transformative learning process is triggered by experiential data that do not align with one’s current frame of reference. Instead of unconsciously filtering the data, these triggering events can prompt learners to critically reflect and discuss as they examine frames of reference.

Due to the cyclical nature of the transformative process, there is little agreement about the order of the phases (MacKeracher, 2012). From a cultural–spiritual perspective, Charaniya (2012) describes it as “a spiraling, creative, collaborative, and intertwining journey of discovery” (p. 235). Critique and debate have focused on tensions between seemingly dichotomous aspects of transformative learning theory such as cognitive vs affective, individual vs cultural, and personal change vs emancipatory (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012; Merriam & Kim, 2012). Cranton and Taylor suggest that these multiple perspectives need not be labeled as antithetical but can coexist in a holistic theory—experienced differently based on the individual and context, “these perspectives may simply be the result of scholars examining different facets of... the whole elephant” (p. 9). Mezirow’s original theory has expanded as a result of the shaping influence of multiple perspectives and voices (Baumgartner, 2012).

Based on Mezirow’s cognitive approach to the individual transformative process (Baumgartner, 2001; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1990, 2000, 2012) and a comparison of his ten-phase model to Cranton’s (2002) seven-phase model, we discuss the major elements of the transformative process in *three stages* that represent a fluid and recursive process rather than concretely defined boundaries: (a) experiences that trigger disequilibrium, (b) frame of reference examination through critical reflection and dialog, and (c) potential transformative change, plans, and actions.

2.1.1. Stage one: Triggering experiences

Cranton (2002) and Mezirow (2012) agree that a disorienting experience provides a trigger for transformative learning. Cranton describes it as “an activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard, or read” (p. 66). While many methodologies are possible conduits of

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