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Exploring the Influence of an Ethiopian Short-Term Study Abroad Experience on Pre-Service Teachers' transformative Learning and Reflection Skills

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Abstract

This case study explores the transformative learning of pre-service teachers that occurred during a short-term study abroad trip to Ethiopia. During this study abroad trip, students participated in a variety of experiences that led to transformative learning. These included teaching lessons in primary classrooms with Ethiopian children, participating in cultural excursions, and engaging in critical reflection throughout the trip. Data sources for this case study include students' blogs and journals, university faculty's anecdotal notes, and a focus group with students a year after the trip. Findings from this study suggest students faced disorienting dilemmas, emotional disequilibrium, and exploration of new roles and situations that all led to transformative learning. This case study adds to the body of research supporting the benefits of short-term study abroad trips on students' learning. Recommendations for study abroad organizers and faculty are provided.

Keywords:

Case study, critical reflection, pre-service teachers, short-term study abroad, transformative learning

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Introduction

Study abroad experiences have become a common way for colleges of education to expand students' perceptions of the world, increase global competence, and expose them to cultures outside of their own. Education-focused study abroad trips can also introduce students to educational systems and teaching philosophies beyond the United States. Numerous researchers have discussed how study abroad experiences have the potential to change pre-service teachers' (PSTs) attitudes, beliefs, and practices when working with culturally diverse children (e.g., Bennett, 2009; Stachowski et al., 2015). Typical education study abroad experiences provide students with tours through schools, classroom observations, opportunities to talk to teachers and staff, and other cultural excursions. These experiences can impact PSTs pedagogical beliefs about teaching culturally diverse children during their field placements, student teaching, and later in their classrooms (He et al., 2017). Participating in study abroad has resulted in students being able to identify more specific components of global competence such as the political, religious, economic, historical, and cultural diversity of children and families in the school community who come from different countries (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

While study abroad experiences aspire to expand students' global competence, short-term study abroad trips have received scrutiny as to how influential these experiences are on student learning. While traditional study abroad programs typically last a full semester, this is not possible for most students for many reasons including cost and area of study. This has caused short-term study abroad programs (8 weeks or less) to gain popularity. For short-term programs to be beneficial to students, researchers have offered insight into establishing these programs. Critics of study abroad programs argue that "simply sending students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient in facilitating the larger goal of creating effective global citizenship" (Pedersen, 2010, p. 71). Furthermore, critics argue that study abroad programs need to have specific learning outcomes, meaningful preparation, and be intentionally organized (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Pedersen, 2010; Williams, 2017). In other words, program leaders must critically plan and evaluate what areas students will grow personally and professionally. This includes teaching students how to reflect, providing systematic feedback on their reflections, and scaffold students' reflections before, during, and after the trip (Chiocca, 2021; Savicki & Prince, 2019; Jackson, 2015, 2018). Perry et al. (2012) argued that short-

term study abroad experiences can be a source of transformative learning through concrete, real-world experiences, and critical reflection. For example, in Chiocca's (2021) study of a short-term study abroad trip to Israel, students reported greater transformative learning by engaging in dialogue with both locals and their peers in the classroom community. Chiocca argues programs incorporate student engagement with local communities and critical reflection afterward to enhance transformative learning.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) is founded on experiential activities or thought-provoking scenarios and the opportunity for new perspectives to be developed through 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow suggests that learning can foster change or perspective transformation in the learner's self and outlines 10 steps that can lead to a learner's transformation:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame,
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions,
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change,
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions,
6. Planning a course of action,
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans,
8. Provisional trying of new roles,
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

In an examination of Mezirow's work, Taylor (1994; 2008) noted that critical reflection is essential to a disorienting dilemma to lead to change and transformative learning. Additionally, Lange (2004) refers to disorienting dilemmas as "pedagogical entry points" (p. 183). These entry points represent students' purposive engagement in their dilemmas, which may lead to a transformative experience (Perry et al., 2012). Mezirow further explains that the use of eye-opening discussions, books, or challenging experiences are ways to

foster an opportunity and environment conducive to students' perspective transformation. In other words, learning opportunities that involve a challenging problem to be solved in a way that may not align with students' usual process of doing, thinking, or seeing, or experiences that are outside of their comfort zone can bring about transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

Naturally, TLT is not only concerned with the experience a learner has, but also with how they interpret and reflect on what happened – or critical reflection. For example, Biber (2020) explored transformative learning activities during short-term study abroad trips to Belize. These activities ranged from high-impact practices like service learning and community-based projects to cultural integration practices like guided tours, excursions, and family meals with locals, to personal reflection practices like journaling and reflective whole group discussions (Biber, 2020). Biber also notes the importance of creating programs that are mutually beneficial to students and the country being visited. By doing this, all parties have a voice that can facilitate transformative learning and critical reflection.

Critical reflection includes looking at one's culture, histories, worldview, and lived experiences that impact one's personal knowledge and professional practice (Husu et al., 2008). Critical reflection is related to Dewey's (1933) notion of reflective practice – experiencing, reflecting, and acting upon experience to transform how we perceive ourselves and others. Dewey suggests that critical reflection as a meaning-making process is the basis of all teaching and learning. Importantly, experience does not guarantee change or learning but what leads to change or learning is a person's ability to be able to reflect and make meaning of experiences. The goal of critical reflection is to make meaning of one's experience that brings change into one's understanding of the self and the world (Dewey, 1933).

The current study focuses on Pre-service Teacher's (PSTs) development of critical reflection skills during and after a short-term study abroad program to Ethiopia. Specifically, we examine which aspects of the trip created opportunities of transformative learning thus allowing PSTs to engage in critical reflection.

Overview of Ethiopia Trip

As part of our university's commitment to diversity, globalization, and teaching excellence, faculty and staff frequently engage undergraduate and

graduate students in applied learning opportunities that include over 1,000 study-abroad choices (UNCW, n.d.). As a study-abroad destination, The International Field Experience in Ethiopia is an applied learning opportunity for education majors. This trip provides participants with a chance to visit the Horn of Africa and experience a country rich in cultural and ethnic diversity and one of the oldest nations in the world (Milkias, 2011). According to the UN World Population Review (2022), Ethiopia is one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, with an estimated population of over 123 million people belonging to more than 80 different tribes and ethnic groups. With Ethiopia's rapid population growth, government schools struggle with a lack of basic school supplies and resources, poor facilities, and high student-to-teacher ratios. The Ethiopian school system includes six years of primary and six years of secondary education. However, education is compulsory only from the ages of 7 to 14. Ethiopia has four categories of schools that include (1) alternative primary education (ABE), (2) public schools, (3) community schools, and (4) private schools. The ABE and public schools are run by the government, while community and private schools are considered private institutions. In the past 20 years, Ethiopia has expanded access to education. However, the literacy rates in Ethiopia are still lower than regional and world averages. The most recent literacy rate for men and women ages 15 years and older determined in 2017 is 51.8%, an improvement from 34% in 1994 (UNESCO, 2022).

The creation of the International Field experience in Ethiopia began in 2014 when the second author travelled to Addis Ababa to meet with a doctoral candidate who had recently relocated from the US to Ethiopia. The candidate worked in local schools and had established relationships with directors interested in collaborating with teacher-training faculty from universities in the United States. The collaboration interest included opportunities for Ethiopian teachers to talk with faculty and US pre-service teachers who would observe, co-plan in pairs, and co-teach lessons and for US PSTs to model lessons in English. During this initial trip, the second author was introduced to Milki, who would become a central figure in the program's success. Milki not only helped secure lodging at the guest house where students and faculty stayed but also provided transportation, was the interpreter, and helped maintain communication with the directors of the schools. Language barriers, cellular service shutdowns, and power outages, common occurrences in Ethiopia, meant that Milki finalized any reservations made via email while planning the trip.

Recruitment for the Ethiopia study abroad begins in the spring semester, with participation limited to 10 students. This limitation is intentional as the coordinators, who are the authors of this manuscript, prefer to travel around Ethiopia in one van that can only accommodate 14 passengers. The group travels together in the van to all destinations, and a smaller group size allows for more intimate conversations, which is an integral part of the success of this trip. Students accepted into the program must be education majors, participate in pre-and post-departure meetings, and travel during the selected days. The students who applied and met these criteria were accepted into the program. Students and faculty depart for Ethiopia at the close of the fall semester, which typically occurs in mid-December, and then spend approximately ten days in the country. The inaugural trip occurred in December 2015, and the subsequent cohorts travelled to Ethiopia in December 2017 and 2019. The first author participated in the 2019 trip, the third author in 2015 and 2017, and the second author participated in all three years. This study draws from data collected during the 2019 cohort.

To prepare for the trip, PSTs participated in multiple pre-departure meetings focused on various topics. The subjects include conversational Amharic, an overview of language structure, both oral and written, as well as useful phrases, Ethiopian culture, Ethiopian education (e.g., structure, focus, curriculum), and connections between education and culture and how this compares to schools and schooling in the United States. While in Ethiopia, faculty and PSTs stayed in a Guest House managed by Ethiopians, with many of the employees continuing with each subsequent trip. During the weekdays, the university group spent time at three different schools in Addis Ababa. See Table (1) for a description of school sites. The PSTs observed Ethiopian teachers in the schools, provided instructional support, co-taught lessons with their Ethiopian and American colleagues, and developed curricula and support materials. PSTs were also allowed to participate in Amharic language classes during the school day.

School No.	Type of School and Grade Levels	Tuition	Teachers	Language Instruction
1	Private pre-k through grade 8 school with two campuses. Nurse students were at a compound that was separated from the main campus.	Tuition-Based and scholarships are available	Ethiopian	English

2	Private pre-k through grade 12 school with three campuses.	Tuition-Based and scholarships are available	Ethiopian	English
3	Private pre-k through grade 2 school. School serves lower socioeconomic families affected by HIV/AIDS.	Tuition, textbooks, supplies, uniforms, medical, breakfast, and lunch are paid for through donations	Ethiopian	Amharic

TABLE (1): DESCRIPTION OF SCHOOLS VISITED IN ETHIOPIA

The group spent afternoons exploring Ethiopia and Ethiopian culture. See Table 2 for the daily itinerary. Throughout the trip, PSTs were invited to engage in the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony; a cultural ritual passed down from generation to generation. Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee, as it was discovered in the 16th century in the Province of Kaffa. An invitation to participate in the ceremony is considered a deep mark of friendship and respect and involves a ritualized form of brewing and then serving the coffee (Yedes et al., 2004). A highlight of the trip was when the PSTs and faculty were invited to Milki's home, where they were treated to a traditional Ethiopian meal with opportunities to ask questions about the food and learn how to make the popular Ethiopian food, injera. They also were given time to chat and listen to music with his family. The group spent evenings at the Guest House, where PSTs engaged in group discussion and personal reflection.

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Day One (Tuesday)	Arrival into Addis Ababa	Coffee Ceremony at Guest House Van Tour of Addis Ababa	Dinner at Guest House
Day Two (Wednesday)	School One Morning Meeting with School Director Coffee Ceremony	National Museum	Dinner at Guest House
Day Three (Thursday)	School One	Shiro Meda Market	Dinner at Guest House
Day Four (Friday)	School One Closing meeting with Director	Bowling	Dinner out - Pizza Evening at Guest House
Day Five (Saturday)	Guest House	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Entoto Hill Selassie Museum	Dinner at Guest House
Day Six (Sunday)	Guest House	Born Free Animal Sanctuary Toured Bishoftu	Dinner at Guest House

Day Seven (Monday)	School Two	Addis Ababa University Museum	Dinner at Guest House
Day Eight (Tuesday)	School Two Morning Meeting with Headmaster	Post Office Market	Traditional Dinner and Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony at Milki's House
Day Nine (Wednesday)	School Three Meeting with Director	Trinity Church	Dinner at Guest House
Day Ten (Thursday)	School Three	Afternoon at guest house	Dinner at Yod Absinnia Cultural Restaurant
Day Eleven (Friday)	School Three Meeting with Director and Coffee Ceremony	Afternoon at Guest House – Packing	Coffee Ceremony Departure

TABLE (2): DAILY ITINERARY FOR ETHIOPIA TRIP

Research Design

The purpose of this case study is to examine the personal and professional learning experiences pre-service teachers had during a short-term study abroad trip to Ethiopia. According to Yin (2014) a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions when contextual conditions need to be explored because they are relevant to the phenomenon. Specifically, a descriptive case study should be used to describe a phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2014).

Participants

Participants of this case study are the third cohort of education majors who visited Ethiopia in December 2019. Five PSTs were undergraduates in elementary education or early childhood education, and one was a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) elementary education program. The cohort consisted of six female participants: five white and one Black. Table 3 provides a breakdown of participant demographics. Three students had prior experience traveling internationally. Two participants (Marissa and Devyn) attended university-led study-abroad programs to Malawi, Sweden, and Japan. These trips were all short-term and lasted three weeks or less. Amy's past international experience included 10 years serving in the United States Marine Corps as Military Police. She was stationed in Japan and Afghanistan.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Class	Major	Prior International Expérience	Post Study Abroad
Amy	36	W	Graduate Student	MAT in Elementary Education	Ten years International experience with the U.S. Marine Corps	5 th grade Teacher
Constance	22	B	Senior	UG Early Childhood Education	No previous experience traveling abroad	Kindergarten teacher
Devyn	22	W	Senior	UG Elementary Education	University led study abroad trip to Japan (2 weeks)	3 rd grade teacher; Graduate program in Global Education
Juliette	22	W	Senior	UG Early Childhood Education	No previous experience traveling abroad	Infant-toddler teacher
Marissa	23	W	Senior	UG Early Childhood Education	University led Study abroad trips to Malawi (3 weeks) and Sweden (1 week)	Kindergarten Teacher
Savannah	22	W	Senior	UG Elementary Education	No previous experience traveling abroad	3 rd grade Teacher

TABLE (3): PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Data Collection

This case study seeks to provide findings that are relevant and applicable to teacher education and study abroad programs. To present valid and reliable conclusions, multiple sources of data were collected from participants who had a shared experience of participating in the study abroad trip to Ethiopia (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Data sources included reflection blogs from PSTs, faculty member anecdotal notes, and a focus group conducted with participants a year after the trip.

Reflection blogs: As part of the course requirements of the trip, PSTs were required to maintain a blog of pictures and reflections throughout the trip. PSTs began this blog on the first day of travel and recorded a minimum of one reflection blog for each day of the trip. Students were encouraged to reflect on the school visits, similarities and differences between Ethiopian and U.S. cultures, and teaching and classroom practices. The term ‘journals’ is used

interchangeably with 'blog' throughout this case study as PSTs hand wrote in their journals each day then transferred what they wished to share to an online blog for friends and family to read. This was not a requirement of the trip; however, all PSTs chose to write in their journals.

Faculty member anecdotal notes: Throughout the trip Author 1 recorded anecdotal notes on observations and conversations with PSTs. This included group conversations during meals, debriefing sessions throughout the trip, and individual conversations. Notes were also made when PSTs led lessons and activities in Ethiopian classrooms.

Focus group: A year after the study abroad trip participants were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss how the trip impacted their current teaching practices. Five participants participated in the focus group.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach was used to analyze the data. This approach aims to generate meanings from the data to identify patterns and relationships (Yin, 2014). This process began by reading and re-reading the data until patterns emerged naturally (Yin, 2014). The patterns that emerged were then used for open coding and grouped into topics (McMillian, 2016). Each topic was given a code and memos were created to document initial interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To organize findings, specific codes were merged to produce broader themes. These steps were repeated until saturation occurred, and no new ideas emerged from the data. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings the data was triangulated, meaning only themes that appeared across all sources of data were presented.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from this study are not meant to generalize across all PSTs or all study abroad trips; our findings give insight into our PST's unique experiences during a short-term study abroad trip. Meanwhile, the discussion summarizes aspects of the trip that had the greatest impact on students' transformative learning and critical reflection.

Classroom Experiences

This study abroad trip differed from traditional educational study abroad trips in that university PSTs went beyond watching and observing Ethiopian teachers and school children, they were asked to lead short lessons

with the children. The PSTs could decide which type of activities and lessons to do, though they were asked to focus on lessons that supported English language and literacy development. Using feedback from university students from previous trips, it was noted that books and stories that contained rhymes or very few words, and science experiments had the most impact and were able to capture children's attention, this cohort decided to work together to design similar types of lessons. The second author received funding for the PSTs to purchase materials or books that they might need for their lessons. During the pre-departure meetings, PSTs spent time sharing and brainstorming lesson ideas and deciding which materials they might need. Since PSTs did not know the age level of the children they would be teaching until they arrived in the country, they did their final planning and lesson adaptations during the evening hours at the Guest House.

Not surprising, these experiences resulted in the most significant transformative learning experiences for students. These experiences were valuable in that they gave PSTs an opportunity to practice their professional skills, gave first-hand insight into what teaching looks like in a different culture, and created a disorienting dilemma. During the trip, PSTs reflected on how these experiences challenged them to adjust and make changes mid-lesson based on children's skills and abilities and offered an authentic experience navigating a language barrier with children. For example, Devyn noted in her blog how she had to adjust her science lesson to be age appropriate for children younger than she expected as well as the language barrier she experienced. She shared,

When I planned for the slime lesson, I had in mind older grades and not pre-k, but adjustments are a teacher's best friend, right? I am so bummed that the texture of the slime turned out more like play-doh than the slimy texture. The kids took turns mixing the materials together. They really enjoyed mixing everything together, but I did a poor job of integrating this into learning. The language barrier really threw me. The students and teacher at this school spoke limited English. I knew this; I should have planned better.

Amy noted how she had to adjust a lesson based on the culture of the classroom:

I started the day by doing a read aloud for pre-kindergarten students. The culture was different from what I am used to and when I read the book, I read it in a way I would do at home. I was

trying to get students to laugh with funny voices and actions, but the teachers quickly “ssshh-ed” them. This led to a bit of awkwardness in trying to do the read-along because it was difficult for me to adjust and understand what the students were learning from the book or what I should have explained more.

Similarly, Juliette reflected on how she had to adapt a lesson to meet the needs of students who spoke English as a second language:

Today we were asked to teach a lesson with the students. This was an exciting opportunity, as I have never had to adapt a lesson to students who speak English as a second language. I think I would have liked to see more teaching before being asked to adapt a lesson, so I had to improvise. I had planned to do a reading of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, which fits in well with their current lesson. I was really worried about the lesson because I have never taught ESL children before and I was not sure I had enough information about the teaching style of the classroom. Overall, I feel like it went well. I learned a lot from the experience based on how the students and teachers reacted to the lesson. The students seemed to really enjoy being actively involved but the teachers were surprised I did not prepare a worksheet for the students to do. It struck me as quite different, particularly since we have been taught not to give children in pre-k worksheets.

A year later, in the focus group, Juliette revisited the challenge of teaching with a language barrier but explained how this experience was beneficial to her during her internship experience the semester following the trip. She explained,

Looking back, I feel like it would have been helpful to have more guidance over how to navigate the language barrier. But honestly, it ended up being helpful for me because in my internship experience [student teaching] I was in special education and not all my students were verbal. I felt like after experiencing the language barrier at the third school, I felt more prepared to figure out how to communicate with the students in my internship classroom who were nonverbal. I felt disappointed at the third school because I felt I failed to find a way to communicate with kids in a short amount of time but it motivated me to make sure that that does not happen in my own classroom. It was a different kind of language barrier with the kids in my internship that were nonverbal, but I still knew the importance of making that connection because of my experience at the third school.

The experience of leading lessons in unfamiliar and culturally diverse classrooms provided two steps of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory – a disorienting experience and trying new roles. Lange (2004) considered disorienting dilemmas as “pedagogical entry points” that when students engage in can lead to a transformative learning experience (p. 129). Although challenging at the time, these experiences led to transformative learning regarding their professional skills as teachers. Juliette's initial comment, “it would've been helpful to have more guidance [on navigating a language barrier] ...” then change of opinion, “but honestly, it ended up being kind of helpful [not having more guidance] ...” illustrates Stone et al.'s (2017) caution that, “it is possible that too much preparation at home could limit disorienting dilemmas and the subsequent learning that is associated with negotiating those dilemmas” (p. 30). By not focusing on the language barrier in the pre-departure meetings allowed students to be fully immersed and challenged during the teaching experience. Finally, while other students also mentioned the self-confidence they gained while leading their lessons, Juliette's reflection a year later in the focus group highlights an additional step of Mezirow's steps of TLT – that of building competence and self-confidence in new roles.

Experiencing Strong Emotions

The second most common theme that emerged from the data regarding transformative learning centered on the strong emotions that students experienced during the trip and through their reflections. Dirkx (2006) explains how emotions are intertwined with transformative learning and critical reflection and suggests these opportunities may be accompanied by emotions like guilt, fear, shame, or anxiety. Further, Dirkx argues that the “expression of powerful emotions within the learning experience suggests deep involvement of the learner's psyche or self” (p. 20). Also, Chicocca's (2021) study illustrates the impact of emotions on the learning process. Chicocca discusses the ‘emotional disequilibrium’ students experienced during a study abroad trip to Israel. Although students experienced strong, and often uncomfortable emotions, these emotions led to changes in perspectives and efforts to learn more about the host country. Two specific experiences led to strong emotions that were documented throughout the data. First, the school experiences generated many emotions each day. This was evident in our debriefing sessions throughout the trip and was also documented in the overall data. Juliette

reflected on how some of the experiences from the trip stirred up anxieties but proved to be a valuable learning experience:

I felt the teaching experience with the Ethiopian children was beneficial. It was nerve wracking, but I had a lot of fun. It was a good thing for me because I was going into my internship next semester. Doing a lesson in an Ethiopian classroom made me feel like if I could get over the anxiety and just push through...I mean it gave me a lot of confidence going into my internship. So, it was a benefit, even with the stress and anxiety that went along with it.

Devyn also reflected on the strong emotions she experienced throughout the trip and how these led her to expand her learning. She noted:

For me, it really showed me how naïve and sheltered I was, especially seeing what an education system looks like in a struggling country. That is why I was constantly overwhelmed during the trip. I could not decompress and always felt so overwhelmed by the diversity, the language, the school...it was so much that it really opened my eyes, and I was like, "I need to know more, I need to know more about other countries and other policies that countries have." This led me to want to pursue my master's degree in global education so I can explore more countries and how they view their education system. I mean, you can learn so much from what another country is doing...it really impacted what I want to do with my career and my teaching.

During the focus group she offered:

One thing I wish I could've done differently during the trip was to find a way to decompress and really think through the thoughts and emotions I was having because they were deep...like questions about the meaning of life and the differences between the U.S. and other countries. There was a lot going on in my head and it was hard for me to process everything I could have because I was too overwhelmed with all of it. I wish I could have thought through them then instead of when we left.

These emotional reflections illustrate Dirkx's thesis that powerful emotions are deeply entwined with transformative learning. Devyn's realization of her naivete and experience seeing educational settings in a developing country mirror Chiocca's (2021) discussion of the emotional disequilibrium study abroad students experience; particularly how emotions

like shame and embarrassment led to efforts to learn in short term study abroad students in Israel. In this case, Devyn experienced strong emotions that led her to feeling overwhelmed yet sparked her desire to pursue a master's degree in global education.

Not only did the school experiences create strong emotions but the cultural excursions did as well. This is to be expected as students were experiencing a new culture, language, and way of life outside of their comfort zone. Biber (2020) noted that cultural excursions teach students to become aware of cultural differences in a novel way outside of the classroom. One cultural experience to Addis Merkato, the local market, was documented by most of the students as one that generated a lot of emotions. Marissa described her experience at the market:

Being foreigners in a place which was the heart of the city, we got a lot of stares and comments, but I expected that because it is not every day where they have white people come shopping and exploring their market. Our guide, his friend, and a police officer led us through the market to ensure we were not going to attract unnecessary trouble. I have never felt so admired but so disrespected at the same time, with that said, I enjoyed the time spent at the market so much.

Juliette shared her experience as well:

The experience at the market was different from anything I have ever experienced. Our guide wanted us to see life at the market, and it was a valuable experience, but it was stressful. I do not always do well in crowds, and it was very crowded and many of the market stalls were very tight, and it made me incredibly anxious. The atmosphere was not super welcoming to us, but I wasn't really surprised by this. It did make the situation a lot more stressful, but I was glad we had our guide, his friend, and the police officer with us.

Interestingly, Amy reflected on the emotions she noticed other students experienced and shared her perception:

There were a lot of mixed emotions about going to the market, students who were once excited were now very overwhelmed, while I was strangely elated. I wouldn't trade that experience in, and hope that future students are also able to see the marketplace

in its entirety. It gives you a TRUE sense of Ethiopian culture. I can tell this experience will remain as one of my top 5 from the trip.

The experience at the market also provided a powerful experience of what it means, and feels like, to be cultural outsiders. For example, as we weaved our way through the booths, an Ethiopian lady pinched each white student and faculty member on our arms as we passed by her to let us know we were not welcomed. However, she did not pinch the Black student. While we first laughed off the experience, it led to a deep discussion of what it means to be unwelcome in a culture, especially being a minority. This situation, and subsequent conversation, allowed white students to experience what it feels like to be an outsider and what this means for their future students who might be cultural outsiders.

These reflections illustrate similar situations of emotional disequilibrium as Chicocca described. Additionally, since PSTs had the shared experiences of working in Ethiopian classrooms and cultural excursions, they were engaged in one of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning steps described as recognizing that one's discontent is shared with others and the group is undergoing the process of transformation. In this case, 'discontent' could be described as uncomfortable emotions and situations. Not surprisingly, these two types of situations were the most discussed in students' written reflections and in the focus group.

Student Reflection Through Documentation

A requirement of the coursework for the study abroad trip was for students to reflect and document their experiences through photographs, journaling, and blogging during the trip. Photographs and videos were taken for a variety of reasons by all members of the trip. For example, students took photos to document experiences and to document the new friendships they formed with their peers. For example, many students took selfies or group pictures highlighting new friendships with each other. Faculty took pictures and videos to document the trip but to also capture the students "in action." For example, when students were leading their lessons in classrooms a faculty member recorded some or all their lessons via video. These videos were then shared with the student and used to informally debrief with the student on their teaching.

Students documented their experiences in a variety of ways and used different techniques for different purposes. For example, one student carried two different journals to use to capture her reflections. One was for her experiences related to teaching and being on a study abroad trip; the other was for her to reflect on and manage her anxiety and feelings she had related to being abroad for the first time.

For some students, journaling was a new concept and one that took time to get used to but proved to be beneficial. For example, several students discussed how they were not “into journaling” at the start of the trip but they found this exercise to be useful both for processing their emotions and to also revisit a year later to remember aspects of the trip and what they learned. For example, Marissa shared in the focus group:

I'm not really a journaling person but I found it helpful to sit down and reflect on how the day went, especially when we were there, I was in a “live in the moment” mindset and part of journaling was to just keep myself from getting stressed out about being in a new country and away from my family. It was important for me to sit down at the end of the day and think about everything that we saw, what we learned, and what I could build on. So journaling was helpful, but it took me a few times to get used to.

Similarly, Savannah discussed how the use of a blog during the trip was helpful to her as a classroom teacher a year later. She said,

I found being able to blog has been helpful reflecting back a year later. During the trip I reflected on what I saw classroom teachers doing and how they taught. Now when I look back at my blog, I can read about ideas to try in my classroom now or in the future.

Finally, Devyn reflected on how her documentation of the trip, both photos and written reflections, allowed her to process the trip and to consider how she can still learn from the experience a year later. She noted,

I was constantly in a state of being overwhelmed because it was so different from what I have experienced before. It took me a month to fully go through all my thoughts and to process everything from the trip. Reviewing my photos and reflections let me go back and relive those memories and see how I can still learn from that experience.

Reflective journaling and blogging proved to be helpful for reflecting on experiences of the day but to also process strong emotions. This is in line with Paige et al. (2004) who noted, “journals can serve as a record of experiences, provide a reference for culture and language learning and development; or help cope with feelings and emotions” (p. 115). These examples also illustrate Taylor’s (2007) argument that critical reflection is essential to a disorienting dilemma leading to change and transformative learning.

Learning from ‘Others’

Throughout the trip, the conversations and relationships students built with Ethiopians were the highlight of the trip for many students. Through their reflections, conversations, photos, and reminiscing a year later during the focus group they shared how impactful these relationships were on their overall experience. The most common person students commented on was our trip guide Milki who was with us every day as our driver, tour guide, translator, and most importantly, a new friend. Also, we got to know Milki’s family when the group was invited to their house for a traditional Ethiopian meal. Marissa reflected on this night in her journal where she wrote:

Not before long, I was out of my seat, dancing with them. It took me a bit to get into the same rhythm as them. I was laughing so much at myself, trying so hard to learn but still missing the groove. I was in heaven because I felt so immersed in Ethiopia’s culture. The evening was surreal. Their family was so kind for letting us join in celebrating traditions of their culture in their home and treat us like family. My respect and admiration for Ethiopians are unimaginable. They truly are so resourceful and so grateful for what they have. Family is a crucial bone to their culture, and this night gave me insight into the love they share for each other and their country. I strive to see this perspective on life through my eyes.

The second most common relationship discussed were those formed with school professionals and Ethiopian students. During our school visits, PSTs engaged in conversation with school directors, teachers, staff, and students. Because we were at each school two days or more, PSTs were able to have ongoing meaningful conversations with school personnel. This proved to be meaningful not only for students to learn about the Ethiopian education culture but also to give them an opportunity to reflect on what they had learned in their teacher preparation program. Juliette reflected on her conversations with

personnel from two different schools and the similarities and differences she noticed. She wrote:

I also got to have some great conversations with a few of the staff. I talked to one of the facilitators of the school, as well as Benyam, the English instructor for the elementary level. They were both so kind and were willing to talk to me and answer questions. I asked the facilitator about inclusivity in this school, and he told me that the school was fully inclusive, but the school does not have the resources to provide accommodation or differentiate the curriculum. This stood out to me because by an American standard, we would not really classify this as inclusivity, but that based on my conversations with the director and the facilitator of [second school] the definition of inclusivity is quite different. As someone who wants to work towards developing inclusive programs, this really stood out to me.

Constance also described what she took away from the teachers she spoke to at one of the schools we visited and how she hopes to incorporate what she learned in her future classroom.

The relationship between students and teachers really struck me at [second school]. The teachers that I spoke to were so loving towards all the students at the school, but still maintained extremely high expectations for them as far as behavior and academics go. I admire the balance that I found between caring for students and not coddling them, and it is something that I would like to incorporate in my own classroom one day.

Considerations

This study focuses on six students from the same college. Most students were undergraduates and white females. While these demographics are representative of the overall field of teacher education and demographics of teachers in the United States, the findings from this case study are not generalizable to all PSTs or teachers. As with any study abroad trip, countless factors contribute to the overall experience of everyone involved. This case study is on the third cohort to visit Ethiopia from our university and many of the trip details had been solidified previously. Yet, given the global, historical, political systems (Smolcic & Katuich, 2017) in Ethiopia there are contextual factors that must be considered while planning travel to the country and while there that can affect the itinerary for cultural activities annually.

Areas of Future Research

In the future, for white PSTs, scholars can examine the experience of being an outsider in Ethiopia and how this may influence cultural sensitivity as an educator. For African American students, researchers can examine what it may be like to fit in with the majority and how this may alter their perceptions of race in the U.S. Directions for future research include a deeper exploration of the six participants from this trip to learn how this international experience influenced their teaching practices two, three, or five years later. Also, research exploring how Ethiopian teachers were influenced by the participants on the 2019 trip may enrich our understanding of the reciprocal or mutually beneficial nature of the partnership. Given the benefit of case study research in addressing distinctive situations within its real-world context (Yin, 2014), it may be appropriate to use a different type (e.g., explanatory, or exploratory) to examine specific aspects of the trip such as how the educational materials that the university students and faculty brought to the schools used once the trip concludes. This research would inspire an ongoing partnership between the faculty at the University and respective school sites.

Recommendations for the Field

When short-term study abroad programs are designed with intention, they can serve as a vehicle for fostering transformative learning environments where students can develop their cultural awareness and gain new perspectives. The study abroad program described here was what Eckert et.al. (2013) term a “self-organized approach” where one or more of the faculty take responsibility for the organization and implementation of the trip versus working with a third-party vendor or partner university. The “self-organized approach” was conducive to the type of program that we wanted to offer and to the country that we were visiting. The most difficult parts of the trip were organizing the school visits, the in-country excursions, and lodging as these were dependent on relationships that had already been established. As with Biber (2020) we encourage anyone who is planning a study-abroad experience to take the time to develop relationships with someone or a group of individuals who can offer meaningful opportunities for university students.

We engage pre-service teachers in study abroad experience to expand their perceptions of the world and to expose them to different educational systems and teaching philosophies. For these experiences to have an impact on PST’s beliefs about teaching the students in the host country and later back

home, it is imperative that they are engaged in opportunities to critically reflect. While we think that the required journaling for this study abroad experience was invaluable, we also believe that the PST's needed the time to reflect and process what they were seeing and experiencing with others in the group. We recommend that there should be a designated time each day, for PST's to not only engage in reflective journaling but time for the PST's to talk and share with each other what we called our "peaks" and "nadirs" for the day's events. We argue that offering them this time will help them to define and process their experiences which will help them to develop critical cultural awareness and critical thinking skills.

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