Research Article

Transformative Learning in International Short-Term Teach Abroad Programs

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Abstract

The task of preparing future teachers for diversified classrooms is imperative. We aimed to deepen our understanding of the capacity of international teach abroad programs (TAPs) to prepare Canadian teacher candidates to be more culturally responsive in their classrooms. Data were collected using pre- and post-questionnaires, focus groups, and anecdotal notes during a short-term (two weeks) TAP in the Dominican Republic with Canadian teacher candidates. The findings revealed that participation alone is not enough to develop culturally responsive teachers. Candidates must be challenged, supported, and guided on how to positively develop cultural competence in situations where they feel vulnerable, including purposeful mechanisms to intentionally interrupt and challenge participants' positionality. Otherwise, at best, the candidates achieve superficial levels of learning that potentially reinforce biases and privilege.

Abstract in Spanish

La tarea de preparar a los futuros docentes para las aulas diversificadas es imperativa. Nosotros apuntamos a profundizar nuestra comprensión de la capacidad de los programas internacionales de enseñanza en el extranjero con el objetivo de preparar a los profesores candidatos canadienses para que sean más receptivos culturalmente en sus aulas. Los datos se recopilaron mediante cuestionarios de pre-prueba y post-prueba, grupos focales y notas anecdóticas durante un corto plazo de dos semanas en la República Dominicana con

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candidatos a docentes canadienses. Los hallazgos revelaron que la participación por sí sola no es suficiente para desarrollar maestros culturalmente receptivos. Los candidatos deben ser desafiados, apoyados y guiados sobre cómo desarrollar positivamente la competencia cultural en situaciones en las que se sienten vulnerables, incluidos mecanismos con propósito para interrumpir y desafiar intencionalmente la posición de los participantes. De lo contrario, en el mejor de los casos, los candidatos alcanzan niveles superficiales de aprendizaje que potencialmente refuerzan los sesgos y los privilegios.

Keywords:

teach abroad program (TAP), teacher candidates (Candidates), vulnerability, transformative learning, culturally responsive teaching

Introduction

Preparing teacher candidates for today's increasingly diverse classrooms is an important task. Currently, practicing teachers are being challenged to create and facilitate culturally responsive learning environments that can meet a broad range of diverse student needs (Gay, 2018; He et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Nieto, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary that teacher development programs prepare future teachers for the realities and scope of diversified classrooms. One approach in this development process has been to increase teacher candidates' cultural responsiveness. Many Canadian teacher programs over the last few years have begun to implement teach or study abroad opportunities (Universities Canada, 2017). However, less is known about how effective these programs are in terms of encouraging candidates to learn and further enact culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. Although the existing research (for example, Brabant, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 2012; Moely & Miron, 2005) on teach abroad experiences offers insight into the influence of these programs on candidates, these studies have not shed sufficient light on the ways these programs influence the candidates' learning during the experience. Many questions remain, and this research study aims to shed light on the following:

- Does participating in a teach abroad program increase the cultural responsiveness of candidates and are they better prepared to teach in a diverse classroom?

- How should—and could—teacher development programs design short-term teach abroad experiences to increase teachers' cultural competencies in ways that lead to culturally responsive pedagogies in their future classrooms?
- Do our teacher education programs challenge or perpetuate unearned privilege, the status quo, and/or Eurocentric frames of learning?

Although these questions are not easy to measure, charting shifts in teachers' beliefs and values is necessary; understanding and supporting a candidate's responses to feelings of shame, vulnerability, and conflicting or contradictory thoughts and beliefs is key to determining whether a teach abroad program will result in more culturally responsive teachers. We[1] conducted this study because we were unsure what level of learning candidates were gaining from teach abroad experiences. For example, were candidates achieving a level of learning that transformed their beliefs and values, or were they simply rejecting, accommodating, modifying, or assimilating new knowledge into previously held beliefs and values? Desjardins et al. (2014) suggested that well-designed international practicum settings have the capacity to provoke deep change (i.e., transformative); the objective of this study was to explore whether these programs can increase cultural responsiveness among candidates during a short period of time. Furthermore, we investigated concepts that constitute a well-designed international practicum setting that increases cultural responsiveness. In this study, increasing cultural responsiveness involves transformative learning theory (Mezirow 2000), whereby one's default beliefs and values are challenged. The two-week international teach abroad study involved 12 candidates from a teacher education program in Ontario, Canada. The study took place in two schools in Muñoz, Dominican Republic. In this paper, we provide an overview of the significant findings, make recommendations, and suggest key areas of focus for future international teach abroad opportunities during teacher preparatory programs.

Teach Abroad Programs

Teacher field placements within home schools that serve culturally diverse student bodies do not automatically result in Candidates examining the sociocultural dynamics of schooling. As a result, some teacher education

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programs include international TAPs. These experiences immerse candidates in a different cultural context, which has the potential to cultivate intercultural awareness in ways not possible in domestic placements. Advocates for these types of programs suggest that the opportunity to live and work in a foreign culture provides a unique opportunity to transform candidates' ethnocentric worldviews and set them on a path toward culturally responsive teaching (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Heyl & McCarthy, 2003). Researchers have suggested that travelling and teaching abroad is one of the most effective ways to increase a teacher's cultural competence because working in a different cultural context can develop teachers' pedagogical beliefs (Andrews, 2007; Correa et al., 2008; Ho & Hau, 2004; McMullen et al., 2005). In Canada, for example, there has been an increase in the number of teacher education programs that have implemented short- and long-term international teach abroad programs (Universities Canada, 2017). In fact, universities in Canada have developed policies and programs to support greater engagement with the world by creating opportunities for faculty, students, and staff to have international experiences (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2014); almost 75% of faculties of teacher education programs in Ontario now offer students the opportunity to have international practicum placements (Larsen, 2016).

Immersion in an unfamiliar context can be a catalyst for transformative learning (Gawronski, 2012; Hoshino-Browne, 2012; McLeod, 2015). Research has shown that international teaching experiences can result in participants returning with greater empathy for students (Martin, 2012), enhanced cultural competence and awareness of inequities within classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Malewski et al., 2012), and greater efficacy in creating inclusive, equitable classrooms that foster intercultural sensitivity in students (Cushner, 2007; Cushner & Brennan, 2007). Scholars have therefore proposed that international practicum settings be used to expose candidates to a greater variety of classroom experiences, to prepare them to teach a greater variety of students (Black & Bernardes, 2014; Kauh, 2017), and to expose them to conflicting ideas in new situations and discomfort caused by uncertainty (Cooper, 2007; McLeod, 2015). International cross-cultural experiences can also reveal a person's cultural unconsciousness, i.e., when one is not aware about another culture and unaware of underlying influences of their beliefs (Yakushko et al., 2016), thereby transforming their worldview (Bennett, 1993, 2004; King & Baxter

Magolda, 2005). If done well, teach abroad opportunities can provide an ideal setting and context for transformative learning to happen.

That said, not all TAPs are created equal or yield the same or similar outcomes. It is also important to note that TAPs are starkly different from a study abroad program in which students travel to other universities to complete individual course work. In this manner, the experiential difference of a TAP depends on the location and context of the program, which raises issues. For example, a TAP in a similar context to the candidate's home may contribute to developing intercultural awareness (Grey et al., 2019), but may not necessarily challenge it. When TAPs or study abroad programs are carefully designed and planned with the purpose of developing culturally responsive teachers, candidates should find themselves outside their comfort zone and living and working with people from different cultures, religions, ideologies, languages, values, and behaviors—a process that can be daunting. Therefore, context and location of TAPs are critical. Program success will also likely depend on the participants' backgrounds and previous experiences, specifically whether they are open to the level of discomfort required for transformative learning.

Challenges with Teach Abroad Program

One of the most common errors is the expectation that the cultural experience alone will lead to a deeper understanding of cultural difference (He et al., 2017). Scholars have voiced significant concerns about the validity of whether exchange programs can achieve the goal of increasing candidates' cultural competencies and if/how these conceptual changes will make their way into practice (Brabant, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 2012; Moely & Miron, 2005). Merryfield (2000) argued that a teach abroad experience itself is insufficient to prepare teachers for the needed intricacies of teaching in diverse classrooms:

> Experiences alone do not make a person a multicultural or global educator. It is the interrelated relationships across identity, power and experience that leads to a consciousness of other perspectives. (p. 440)

The experience itself may do little in terms of providing students with opportunities to critically challenge their frames of reference—a necessary condition for becoming a multicultural educator. In fact, some researchers (Heron, 2007; Tiessen & Heron, 2012; Zemach-Bersin, 2008) suggest that teach abroad experiences risk creating "we–they" binaries or stereotypes that in turn

reinforce privileged and or biased assumptions that, if left unchecked, can strengthen deficient frameworks rather than challenge them.

Some research has indicated that international teaching experiences can also be unpredictable when confronting issues of identity, privilege, and race (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) argued, "transgressing boundaries" of positionality and identity can be disturbing, and in the words of bell hooks, even "frightening" (2014, p. 9). These experiences can provoke feelings of loneliness and frustration and even lead to illnesses (Gu, 2013). Brown's (2006) extensive work on shame is a fitting starting point for understanding resistance to and protection from change. She explained the concept through feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and vulnerability—all of which are predeterminants to a candidate's willingness to engage in transformative learning. Powerlessness manifest in three areas: consciousness, choice, and change. Isolation evokes feelings of being trapped and powerless resulting in increasingly disconnectedness. Vulnerability is "the emotion we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2018). In some people, feeling vulnerable can trigger feelings of shame, which can evoke "directing feelings of fear, judgment, anger, rage and blame toward themselves, towards others and a combination of inward and outward" (Brown, 2006, p. 48). These emotions, or more specifically, a person's lack of willingness to lean into these emotions, can make deep learning difficult to achieve.

Conceptual Framework

Scholars have repeatedly asserted that what teachers do in their classrooms with students daily has the greatest potential to influence students' academic outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2009; Marzano et al., 2001). Furthermore, Pajares (1992) suggested that expanding the beliefs teachers hold should be a priority because they influence their perceptions and judgments, which in turn affect their behavior, teaching pedagogies, and competencies. Villegas and Lucas (2002) agreed with this assessment, adding that "a teacher's beliefs about students significantly shape the expectations they hold for students' learning" (p. 31). Many researchers have agreed (Falkenberg, 2010; Lay et al., 2005; Lortie, 2020; Richardson, 2003; Russell, 2009) that a candidate's prior knowledge and experiences are significant factors in their development as culturally responsive: They should not only acquire knowledge and skills, but also challenge, expand, and transform their beliefs and values toward critical self-learning and unlearning. It is important for educators in teacher preparatory programs to have a thorough understanding of how to

prepare candidates to enter classrooms with a deep level of knowledge, a variety of skills, and a critically reflexive attitude toward their own beliefs and values.

In this study, we were concerned with the processes that are necessary to facilitate candidates challenging their beliefs and values within the unfamiliar context provided by the short-term teach abroad. The conceptual framework was two-pronged: (a) to employ the tenants of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2012) and (b) use the unfamiliar context as the disorienting dilemma to evoke critical awareness, i.e., conscientizacao (Freire, 1970, 1997a) by thought-provoking questioning that requires candidates to (re)examine their assumptions and understandings about the world and themselves. We were also mindful of limits so that the challenging dilemmas or questioning were powerful enough to cause discomfort, but not powerful enough to cause trauma (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Transformational Learning Theory

According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning happens when adult learners are faced with a disorienting and/or decentering experience in which they are forced to reconsider and challenge the accuracy of their own thinking, underlying assumptions, and beliefs. More specifically, learners experience personal and intellectual growth when they grapple with disorienting dilemmas, critically assess their beliefs and values, examine their assumptions, seek out additional perspectives, and acquire new knowledge. Teach abroad programs can provide the disorienting dilemma necessary for students to engage in transformative learning because it "generates pressure for a change in one's worldview," which "happens because the 'default' ethnocentric world view, while sufficient for managing relations within one's own culture, is inadequate to for developing and maintaining social relations across cultural boundaries" (Bennett, 2004, p. 74). However, expecting that the critical reflection necessary for transformative learning will happen as a natural process is flawed, especially when participants resist feelings of vulnerability.

Critical Awareness

The disorienting dilemma was the new and unfamiliar environment. The concept of intentional interruptions (Katz & Dack, 2013) or thought-provoking questioning was used to achieve critical awareness, which required candidates to (re)examine their assumptions and understandings about the world and

about themselves. We guided these intentional interruptions (Katz & Dack, 2013) using Villegas and Lucas's (2002) six salient characteristics of culturally responsive teachers (CRTs): (a) becoming socially conscious—multiple ways of perceiving reality; (b) affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds; (c) seeing oneself as responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change for students; (d) understanding how learners construct knowledge and being capable of promoting learners; (e) knowing about the lives of one's students; and (f) using this knowledge to design instruction that builds and stretches student knowledge (p. 21). As described in more detail in the following section, we purposefully designed this study in Muñoz, Dominican Republic to help teacher candidates examine their beliefs and experiences.

Methods

The qualitative research took place in a short-term international teach abroad program with Canadian teacher candidates in Muñoz, Dominican Republic. The research study focused on: (a) how candidates reflected on and challenged their beliefs and values for learning, unlearning, relearning, and increasing their cultural responsiveness for their future teaching; (b) the extent to which short-term teach abroad programs achieve the goal of increasing cultural responsiveness among candidates..

Participants

The teach abroad opportunity was available to all first-year students (139) in the teacher education program[2] . There were no criteria to participate, only that student must be in good academic standing with the university and have the financial resources to pay for their trip. Of the 139 students, 12 participated in the TAP and 10 agreed to participate in this research study. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 30 years old. All 12 participants spent two weeks together in two schools in Muñoz, Dominican Republic, observing, teaching and being a part of the school community. Ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 30 years old. During the TAP, they lived in self-contained apartments near the schools. Because this study included human participants, we submitted an ethical approval application that was approved by our institution's ethical review board, and we have used pseudonyms for names of the participants.

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[2] All students in a teacher education program in Ontario, Canada must have an undergraduate degree.

Only two of the ten participants had any prior experiences with an international teach abroad program.

The Teach Abroad Setting

The Community

The program took place in two schools in Muñoz, Dominican Republic. Muñoz is a small town three kilometers outside the city of Puerto Plata with a population of approximately 5,000 people. The community has a mixed population of Haitians who mostly speak Creole and French and Dominicans who speak Spanish.

The Schools and Placements

There were two participating schools within a five-minute walk from each other. School A is a government-funded public school in Muñoz that has two school levels combined: primary/junior grade levels (Kindergarten to Grade 6) and a high school (Grade 7 to 11). The overall school population is approximately 800 students: 500 in the primary/junior grade level and 300 in the high school. There are 18 teachers in the primary/junior level. The language of instruction is Spanish, and the school is in the center of the small town. Classes vary in size from 25 to 36 students. The other participating school, School B, is a non-profit school run by a charity foundation based on external donations. It services the mostly Haitian population who live in Muñoz. This school has five teachers (one of whom is the lead teacher) and a student population of approximately 65 students with classes offered from pre-kindergarten (ages 3–5 years) to Grade 6. Class sizes are small and vary from six to 12 students. Each candidate was placed in a class with a host teacher at one of the schools. In the second week, the students had an option to switch schools or spend a day visiting a second classroom in the other school so they could experience both school settings. During the two-week period of the TAP, the teacher candidates were responsible for observing and participating in the daily school routines, shadowing their respective host teacher, assisting the host teacher with lesson delivery and classroom management. They were also responsible for planning and delivering one lesson which was observed and evaluated by the home university teacher.

Data Collection

We triangulated qualitative sources: (a) a pre- and post-survey, (b) three open-ended focus groups during the two-week teach abroad period, and (c) daily anecdotal notes we took based on observations, consistent interactions, and consultations with the participants. These notes also guided the direction of conversation for the focus groups.

The pre-survey was completed two weeks prior to the program to garner participants' expectations and expected learnings. The post-survey contained the same questions and was completed within one month after the participants returned home; participants could choose to submit a written response or have a face-to-face interview. The three focus groups were conducted during the two-week teach abroad period: The first one was conducted after the third day, the second one on the sixth day, the third one on the 11th day. We used these conversations to ask general questions that would encourage them to share their observations and experiences. For example, we asked the participants to share what was working well, what the challenges were, what they were learning, and so forth. Then, we used specific questioning based on Villegas and Lucas's (2002) six salient characteristics of CRTs to encourage participants to probe their transformative learning, e.g., *what did you notice or learn about the lives of your students that changed your perspective? How has this helped you understand that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality?* The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

We conducted ongoing analysis throughout the two-week period. Our observation notes guided subsequent focus group discussion meetings. To ensure validity and reliability of our analysis, after the completion of the program, we each separately completed a deductive analysis to identify common themes by reading and rereading the transcriptions from the collected data. We then cross-referenced our analysis to identify repeated themes. As well, we repeatedly read all data to identify specific themes of importance (Kumar, 2014) related to transformative learning. We triangulated the three data collections to cross-analyze the data related to transformative learning and developing CRTs. Through the combined inductive and deductive processes, themes were identified and evidence of the level of participants' transformative learning was determined, as well as barriers to it. Our goal was to deduce the

level of self-learning that participants experienced based on their reflections in the focus groups and from our daily observations and interactions with the candidates at the school site. We also used inductive reasoning to determine why. We aimed to identify personal growth, professional growth, and growth in their awareness of cultural differences and understandings.

Findings

Our analysis of the data resulted in two broad and interrelated themes: (a) the context for transformative learning and (b) evidence of transformation. We also concluded that the role of the project leaders is critical in supporting transformative learning for participants in a TAP.

The Context for Transformative Learning

Initial Expectations

Understanding why candidates signed up to participate in the teach abroad opportunity and what they expected to learn was a crucial starting point (or base context) for assessing their potential readiness to engage in transformative learning. The pre-survey provided us with this information and the candidates' responses aligned with the common responses found in other similar studies on international teach abroad settings (He et al., 2017; Malewski, 2012; Merryfield, 2000; Walters et al., 2017). Overall, participants expressed that they were curious about education in a different country, and they wanted to increase their knowledge about teaching in a culturally different environment. They expected to learn what most beginning teachers expect to learn from a practical experience: new pedagogical knowledge and skills to use in their future classrooms. However, they also expected to learn about a different culture and way of educating other than the ones with which they were already familiar. For example, Chrissy stated:

> I expect to learn what it is like teaching in a different country. The school dynamics, the environment, the students, the relationships between teachers and their students and to understand   the   meaningful difference between teaching there versus teaching here (Ontario).

Considering that none of the participants spoke Spanish, they all agreed that their biggest challenge would be the language barrier. When asked what they expected to learn specific to their teaching beliefs, most replied with ideas

about teaching in diverse classrooms where they do not speak the language. Maria wrote:

> I expect to gain knowledge and practice that I can apply to my ESL work with students at my practicum in Toronto. I want to also be able to learn how to work with students who speak another language and how I can help them and promote my teaching skills.

The participant responses were primarily descriptive—and, it could be argued, involved basic rhetoric associated with teaching—and focused on the accumulation of new skills and knowledge and limited inclusion or reference to self-learning. There was minimal evidence in the responses that signified deeper levels of reflection on how this opportunity would challenge their beliefs and values. However, Jack's response stood out from the rest and could be considered the exemplary growth mindset necessary to develop transformative learning:

> I expect to learn something that I am not expecting. I expect to develop my skills of adaption, as I do not totally know what to expect from the children I will be working with. I expect this experience to broaden my potential role as an educator. I expect to learn the ways in which we as Candidates from a privileged country are to conduct ourselves in a classroom full of Haitian and Dominican children. While I expect that we will all be more than welcomed, there is a problematic relationship between the "Good Intentions" of western missionaries, international development agencies, and educators and people and governments of undeveloped countries. Perhaps these intentions are too reminiscent of previous colonial practices.

The insightfulness of Jack's response may be due to a combination of factors: he was slightly older than the other candidates, had previous life experiences where he travelled and worked in remote places, and was able to question his own position and privilege.

Overall, the candidates' responses to the pre-questionnaire indicated that challenging and reevaluating their beliefs and value systems was not (yet) at the forefront of their thinking. This demonstrated to us that we needed to guide, support, and focus on ways to disrupt and expand discussions toward intentional interruptions.

Willingness (or Lack Thereof) to Embrace Vulnerability

Another contextual factor for transformative learning was unfamiliarity. Leaving one's familiar places and culture behind and travelling to the unknown can be an intense experience. The outcome may be "a form of culture shock and behaviors can emerge in surprising ways with unpredictable outcomes as our shared system of values and beliefs, which give us a sense of belonging or identity" (Weaver, 2000, p. 151) are compromised. This is the goal of many teach abroad programs: To disrupt this sense of belonging and create distortions that force participants to question their beliefs and values. One of our main findings was that these disruptions and distortions made participants feel vulnerable (Brown, 2006, 2015), which resulted in various behaviors and emotional reactions. Being in their host classrooms where they did not speak the language created the three conditions that Brown (2018) connected to vulnerability: risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure. As a result, participants were able, and many for the first time, to see and experience the world from a different perspective. In these moments, participants reacted differently: some candidates leaned into the vulnerability and sought innovative ways to increase their communication with the students, while others became uncomfortable, disengaged, and withdrawn. We often witnessed the candidates in the latter category sitting alone in the classroom.

During the two weeks, we observed participants' reactions to vulnerability. The participants who were willing to lean into vulnerability behaved as outsiders when they first arrived at the school—they sat in the classes not knowing what to do. Then, they began taking risks, problem-solving, and being creative and innovative to increase their level of engagement with students. For example, they searched for an off-line translator app to help with communication; they started teaching with small groups of students; they organized a painting class. Some participants used the experience of feeling vulnerable to push themselves into being more innovative teachers while others did not; those candidates who embraced vulnerability as a prerequisite to change (Brown, 2006, 2015, 2018) were the ones who engaged in the transformative learning process. We further unpacked this finding in the focus groups: More than half of the candidates embraced vulnerability and pushed themselves to become more culturally responsive, while about one quarter of them withdrew into themselves and away from the transformative learning process. This was also demonstrated in their demeanor during the focus groups.

The participants who did not embrace vulnerability were quiet, unengaged, and unable to express any learning connections.

Comparisons Can Lead to Deficit Thinking

Throughout the program, the candidates frequently made comments on the similarities and differences between Ontario and the Dominican Republic. During the first few days, in the moments when participants were feeling most vulnerable, we noticed two observable outcomes: (a) there was an increase in deficit thinking and (b) there were opportunities to provoke a conversation about the assets and positives found in differences between the two contexts. Comments that indicated a deficit lens included, "They don't even have a proper chalk board, the students are far below the grade level, the teachers don't have good classroom management skills." Although these comments were not necessarily factually false, they indicated that the candidates lacked the ability to see difference as a strength rather than a weakness. For some of the candidates, engaging in deficit thinking prevented them from unpacking the limited nature of their frames of reference.

Based on these observations, we purposefully discussed and introduced more positive frames of reference, thought-provoking questions, and intentional interruptions (Katz & Dack, 2013) designed "to unsettle and inspire, unleash curiosity and hope" (Freire, 1997b, p. 106). We also drew from Villegas and Lucas' (2002) six salient characteristics of CRTs. We asked the candidates to reflect on and consider deeper understandings of their observations and experiences with the aim to be "socioculturally conscious by recognizing that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality" (p. 21). We talked through some of the lives and cultures of the students, and we emphasized that the comparisons they were making were influenced by their previous experiences in home classrooms and their privileged backgrounds. We encouraged them to see the students using an affirming lens by "seeking to know more about their lives, how they learn, and see their strengths for learning rather than viewing them as in a deficit" (p. 21), and then conceptualize how they could be responsible for and capable of bringing about positive changes now and later in their future classrooms through their teaching. Some of the candidates accepted the challenge and discomfort of seeing the world through someone else's eyes. As Mezirow (2006) explained, the ones who are willing to do this work are the ones who engage in deep, transformative learning.

Evidence of Transformative Learning

As we continued to discuss and unpack the six salient characteristics of CRTs (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), we noticed the candidates' responses were mixed: Most of the participates were engaged while a few became increasingly disengaged. Those candidates who moved beyond the deficit lens commented more on the social and emotional aspects of the classroom rather than the lack of materials, while those who continued to compare eventually became more disengaged and withdrawn in both the school and the focus group discussions. For example, one student said, "Regardless of a poor classroom materials and resources, the students are so happy, the teachers give such love and care to the students, no one seemed stressed out, it is a much more relaxing school and classroom environment." The candidates who were able to deconstruct their deficit lenses also demonstrated an increased eagerness and an ability to comment on and make connections between the program and how they could work toward becoming a CRT by the end of the program. We concluded that many of these candidates demonstrated evidence of transformative learning. Maria's comment was indicative of this type of learning:

> Wow! Our Western school system is so privileged, yet we don't seem happy, and we have such limitations. I noticed in my home placement that the students always seem so stressed and so concerned with everything. Even the teachers are stressed. School is not a fun place. As well, as I look back on the lessons, I can see how students who were ELL learners and come from a different culture would be so lost in the lesson. The content is foreign to them.

It also became clear that some participants could not grasp these deeper levels of reflection. They displayed limited evidence of transformative learning. We noticed three of the candidates were uniformly quiet in the focus groups, were unable to contribute to the conversation, and became more and more withdrawn at the school and with the other candidates outside of school time. As well, it should be noted here that these same three candidates did not complete the post-survey after multiple reminders.

Overall, we concluded that most of the candidates demonstrated evidence of transformative learning in three key areas: (a) making personal connections regardless of language barriers, (b) understanding their social and

cultural experiences, and (c) finding a balance between Ontarian and Dominican approaches to education.

Making Personal Connections Regardless of Language Barriers

Participants who engaged in transformative learning used different strategies to make personal connections with students regardless of the language barrier. Most used Google Translate to help them communicate. They learned that language could function as an excuse for barriers to making connections and actively worked to creatively circumvent communication issues. They commented on the connections that they made with the students in their respective classes and how much they felt welcomed by the whole school community. When asked if they thought these connections would be different from the ones they form with students in Canada, the participants felt that the connections in Canada would be different given that the students in the program were very eager to get to know them. They noticed that the students had no inhibitions about hugging them, holding their hands, or trying to communicate with them, whereas in Canada such physical touching would not be encouraged. We probed participants to consider how they would interact with students in Canada who are nonverbal or for whom English would be minimal. They commented that they now understood that they had to unlearn using spoken language as their main tool for communication. Most participants realized that the experience of being immersed in a context where they did not know the language would be exactly how students in their classes would feel. They felt that these personal experiences enabled them to relate to students more easily and to teach in more culturally responsive ways.

Understanding Their Social and Cultural Experiences

The second evidential area of transformative learning was the candidates' ability to understand student behaviors within context, which required them to understand the culture of the students. For example, participants noticed that students were prone to physically hitting each other for any reason. At first, they thought this was shocking but as they saw it happen more, even outside of school, they realized that this was a way of dealing with anger or aggression and is widely practiced. They did not condone the behavior but were able to understand it through the lens of the students' social experiences and cultural norms. We asked participants to make a connection between how this same scenario could happen in their classrooms in Canada

and what they learned from this observation. Participants felt that they should not judge behaviors of children until they understood more of the context of the behavior. They unlearned the impulse to make quick and possibly uninformed judgments, which gives them the time they need to learn what is "normal" or culturally acceptable for that student.

Finding a Balance Between the Ontario and the Dominican Approaches to Education

Participants noted that, based on their experiences in the Ontario school system both as a student and now in the teacher candidate role, there was a stark difference between the two approaches to education, schooling, and teaching. Participants described the Dominican school system as "laid back," specifically in terms of teaching styles; in contrast, they felt Ontario classrooms are rigid and strict. They commented that finding a balance between the two could be their aim in their future teaching careers: finding the sweet spot of laid-back accountability. The candidates learned that it is possible to create a classroom where students are held accountable for their learning, and they unlearned that accountability is the only goal of education—students feeling happy in their classes, school, and lives will achieve much more. As well, participants noted that the teachers and students seemed to have less judgmental attitudes and were overall more accepting and embracing of imperfections and differences. Participants expressed that such a space is a positive and safe area to learn and one that they should strive to achieve in their future classrooms.

Project Leader's Role and Influence

An important finding is the importance of the supervisor or program leader role. This importance cannot be overstated. Project leaders must be culturally responsive otherwise they may not be capable of identifying or providing the necessary thought-provoking opportunities for their participants. We came to understand that our interactions and constant mentoring were vital to the candidates' transformative learning. For example, when participants first arrived at the school, they commented on the high level of negative physical interactions among the students. Even though there was no correct response, we asked them to reframe their observation with a new lens and consider how this action might be a part of the students' normal culture and suggested to participants that was an opportunity to challenge their beliefs and values. *Why*

did they notice these actions and why did the level of physicality among students seem more acceptable in this context? It was these types of thought-provoking questions invited candidates to challenge their underlying beliefs and deficit thinking; however, these questions would not be posed if the project leader could not identify and conceptualize them. In some form, our role could be regarded as that of an intermediary: We guided the candidates to the questions they needed to consider; we provided background information when needed about the school, community, the students, or the teachers to give them a deeper level of understanding; and we provided the intentional interruptions necessary to disrupt their thinking when they were leaning toward deficit thinking.

Discussion

Influencing Transformative Learning

In response to our research question—*whether participating in a teach abroad program increases the cultural responsiveness of candidates and whether they are better prepared to teach in a diverse classroom*—We recognized that, throughout the program, it was imperative that we facilitated and monitored the candidates' levels of vulnerability. We found that, consistent with Brené Brown's (2015) articulation of vulnerability, when challenged and experiencing feelings of vulnerability, participants either chose to lean into the situation (take on the challenge) or withdrew from it. We concluded that candidates needed just the right amount of discomfort and provoking challenges, otherwise too much vulnerability could impede their transformative learning. We wondered if the three withdrawn participants were overly challenged or whether their reactions were a result of their unwillingness to be vulnerable. We also concluded that maintaining a balance that supports the intended outcome (i.e., transformative learning to increase cultural responsiveness) requires constant monitoring based on the facilitator's knowledge of each candidate, the relationships between each candidate and the facilitator, and each candidate and the group. Not unlike Vygotsky's (1978) approach of finding the learner's magic middle—not too difficult while providing a level of acceptable challenge—the facilitator must constantly adjust the challenge and support levels to maintain learning within each candidate's zone of proximal development. The challenge was causing just enough discomfort for students to grow within an unfamiliar setting far from their usual supports. Regardless, there were participants who clung to their privilege while others began to

demonstrate evidence of transformative learning. For example, Chrissy commented:

> Understanding and relating to a different way of life and accepting different teaching styles instead of comparing to it or judging it. I will always look back to this experience and remember the concept of acceptance and always being accepting of others.

Similarly, Monica stated, "I recognized that my knowledge about the students' lives outside of school motivated me to examine my own privilege in life." Vicky expressed her frustration that she experienced while dealing with her peers during her transformative learning process:

> I realized that the language barrier was not as big of an obstacle as I had previously thought. One of my greatest challenges that I did not anticipate is dealing with and realizing how judgmental and uncomfortable privileged individuals are when they encounter diversity and other cultures face to face.

These comments revealed the differences among the candidates as they processed their reactions to vulnerability. In her post-survey comments, Vicky captured the essence of transformative learning and confirmed to us that the program had indeed encouraged her learning and unlearning needed for critical self-reflection:

> I learned that to be successful teachers in diverse settings we need to first, really know ourselves and realize the biases that we carry. Being aware of our limitations allows us to provide a more authentic learning experience to our students. I think the way human beings perceive reality is determined by your social order first and foremost. What also became clear to me was that most individuals do not realize the extent to which they are affected by their perceptions and are not aware of what they are either. Recognizing your own perceptions allows for you to begin to understand and appreciate the varieties of perceptions that exist. This experience strengthened my awareness of the perceptions I possess and was a good reminder that passing judgment is something that should never be done, I should rather try to understand different perceptions that may exist.

Jack similarly commented that:

I think the view of the children in the DR for some candidates was one of poverty, first and foremost. It is also difficult to avoid the savior/saved dichotomy that arises with development work like this and interactions between white westerners and non-whites in the developing world. However, a white teacher cannot change that they are white and perhaps grew up in a privileged environment. What they can change is the level of understanding they have of their students in their classroom.

Based on these comments – it shed light on our second question: *How should—and could—teacher development programs design short-term teach abroad experiences to increase teachers' cultural competencies in ways that lead to culturally responsive pedagogies in their future classrooms?* We concluded that short-term TAPs can be beneficial for developing cultural competence among candidates if—and only if—purposeful and specific emphasis on intentionally interrupting and challenging their beliefs is involved. For the research team in this study, the most striking finding that emerged from our data was whether the candidates embraced or rejected the challenges of being vulnerable in an unfamiliar environment, which we argue can give insight into how many non-White students feel in Eurocentric dominant school environments with majority White teachers. Without embracing the challenges of vulnerability, candidates' previously held and unrecognized cognitive biases may be uninterrupted and remain. Some teachers developed intercultural competence, while others strengthened their privilege and confirmed their deficit thinking. We asked ourselves what accounted for this divide and why were some students willing embrace vulnerability as an opportunity for learning and growth while others clung to their privilege and deficit thinking; most importantly, we asked ourselves how teacher development programs could break down these barriers so that all teachers can engage in transformative learning. According to our findings, for transformative learning among participants in TAPs, the programs must involve opportunities for the learners to challenge their underlying beliefs and values associated with privilege and deficit thinking. As well, program coordinators must ensure there are appropriate supports for participants who withdraw from the challenge. Therefore, TAPs are a potential opportunity for teacher candidates to increase their cultural responsiveness, which in turn can prepare them to effectively teach in diverse school settings.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, (and to provoke answers to whether our teacher education programs challenge or perpetuate unearned privilege, the status quo, and/or Eurocentric frames of learning) we formulated two questions for educators in teacher education programs: *Can educational course work, practicum placements, and international experiences be combined in ways that encourage candidates to value difference? How can facilitators support candidates through the necessary and hard feeling of being vulnerable?* These questions, informed by our data, allowed us to develop several recommendations for teacher preparation programs to: (a) increase candidates' cultural competencies with the expectation that culturally responsive teachers can positively influence academic achievement for all students within their classrooms and (b) incorporate transformative learning as a prerequisite for teaching in contemporary classrooms. Furthermore, we as educators and facilitators must acknowledge and work against the ways in which our identities, epistemological standpoints, and/or cultural experiences are privileged (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016; Soria & Troisi, 2014). We can do so by actively seeking experiences, or as Brown (2015) states, lean into experiences that provide us with alternative perspectives. These recommendations are designed to be practical and actionable rather than purely theoretical. We have organized the recommendations into two categories: (a) for teacher education programs and faculty and (b) for teach abroad organizers and facilitators.

Teacher Education Programs and Faculty

- Based on our findings regarding participants background and experience, revisions to the admission requirements for potential teachers could include prerequisites that demonstrate previous participation with diverse populations, as well as prompts for applicants to describe how understand cultural responsiveness as a teaching philosophy. This may help ensure that candidates have a better understanding of their future role as a culturally responsive teacher.
- Place more emphasis on transformative learning within the teacher education program—specifically on learning processes that challenges candidates' beliefs and values throughout their program (i.e., mandatory requirements such as participating in community programs, volunteer

experiences, short-term teach abroad, etc.). Develop specific programs that encourage candidates to be vulnerable, such as poverty simulations.

TAP Organizers and Facilitators

- Begin the TAP preparations well before the travel date. Mediate the experience for participants before, during, and after the program. Provide readings and materials that participants can hold and reference.
- Purposeful structure will better support the transformative nature of the program. Facilitators must be prepared to meaningfully address stereotypes, work through differences, learn to understand varying perspectives, and facilitate ongoing dialogue.
- Intentionally design programs that challenge candidates' beliefs rather than validate prior ones and that go beyond knowledge and skill acquisition. These approaches are also meaningful within localized contexts (Anderson, 2017; Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016; Osfield, 2008; Soria & Troisi, 2014) such as grow your own programs (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Sleeter et al., 2014).

Limitations

This study had some limitations. First, teach abroad programs are limited to those students who are financially privileged (Anderson, 2017; Shaftel et al., 2007; Soria & Troisi, 2014). Second, although the programs may present meaningful opportunities for candidates (Walters et al., 2017), the time of engagement is bound to relatively short periods. Third, it is difficult to measure the long-term effects. A longitudinal study would yield more reliable information about the further stages of transformative learning and its relationship to culturally responsive teaching. As well, continuing the study beyond the program would offer insights into how the candidates applied their learning by reviewing the teaching pedagogies in the classroom and assessing how their beliefs and values may have changed.

Conclusion

With growing global diversity, teacher education programs are evolving to better prepare teacher candidates for their classrooms. One way to support this goal is to increase the cultural responsiveness of candidates by offering experiential learning. Our findings demonstrate that teach abroad programs can increase candidates' cultural awareness; however, we concur with past

research (Merryfield, 2000) that the experience alone is not enough and must be intentionally designed and provide personal support for candidates in this process. Ultimately, teacher education programs must better promote and support candidates in the process of improving their cultural responsiveness and based on this research, we suggest adopting the theory of transformative learning. As Brown (2016) advised, we need to "encourage educators to normalize the discomfort of learning and reframe failure as learning" (p. 3) to prepare candidates for their future classrooms.

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Appendix: Post-study Questionnaire

1. Reflect on your responses that you provided in the pre-study questionnaire prior to the Teach Abroad Program:
    1. What do you expect to learn from this Short Term Teach Abroad program?
    2. What challenges do you expect to experience?
    3. What do you think will be the most rewarding experience from your Teach Abroad?
    4. Specific to teaching practices, what do you expect to learn?
    5. Specific to your teaching beliefs, what do you expect to learn?
    6. Specific to cultural competence (knowing how to navigate in diversity settings), what do you expect to learn?

How has your thinking changed based on your previous responses or what would you add?

2. What would you say were the two most positive aspects you gained from the Teach Abroad Opportunity?

3. What would you say were the two most challenging aspects you gained from the Teach Abroad Opportunity?

4. Describe in detail the most significant learning you experienced in the Teach Abroad Program and how do you think it will influence your capacity to teach in diverse setting?

5. In our final focus group, we discussed six salient characteristics that define the culturally responsive teacher (*Villegas & Lucas, 2014)*. They are:
    1. recognizes that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one's location in the social order.
    2. has affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, seeing resources for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to be overcome.
    3. sees himself or herself as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students.
    4. understands how learners construct knowledge and is capable of promoting learners' knowledge construction.
    5. knows about the lives of his or her students.
    6. uses his or her knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar (p.21).

Could you comment on each of these related to your personal feelings and growth.

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