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Rebecca A. Addleman
George Fox University

Carol Jo Brazo
George Fox University

Tatiana Cevallos
George Fox University

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Transformative Learning Through Cultural Immersion

Rebecca A. Addleman, Carol Jo Brazo, and Tatiana Cevallos
George Fox University

Abstract

This qualitative study explored avenues to increase students' intercultural competence through transformative learning. School of Education graduate students and faculty from a small, private university traveled to Ecuador to participate in a cultural immersion practicum. In addition to these primary goals, the trip was designed to facilitate transformative learning about cultural conceptions, diversity, and the dynamics of student differences with the goal of understanding one's own cultural framework and adapting to another culture to develop empathy towards culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States.

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Harper Lee (1960) wrote “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (p. 30). In the classroom, professors employ a variety of methods—books, critical analysis of research and literature, reflective writing, and small group discussions—to help students consider things from multiple perspectives (King, 2004; Whitney, 2008; Saavedra, 1996; Mezirow, 1997). In a cultural immersion experience, professors are not bound to a physical classroom—expanding the opportunities for facilitating transformational learning.

Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students and faculty from a small, private university travelled to Ecuador to participate in a three-week teaching practicum to experience cultural immersion while working with school-age students. The trip was designed to facilitate analysis of cultural conceptions, diversity, and the dynamics of student differences with the goal of understanding one's own cultural framework and adapting to another culture to develop empathy towards culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States. In the university's MAT program, students complete three practicums; the first is a 30-hour experience where the students are not members of the "majority culture," in order to help them better understand the culturally and linguistically diverse students whom they will teach.

Over the past fifteen years, schools in the United States have experienced an increase in the population of culturally and linguistically diverse students. There are over five million students whose primary language is not English and who do not have sufficient English proficiency to be successful in school without additional support; these students constitute approximately 10% of public school enrollment and most are born in the United States (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2005; NCELA). Demographers predict that in twenty years, one in every four students will fall into this category (Goldenberg, 2008). Preservice teachers must be prepared to meet the needs of these students.

In the following pages we will explore the literature in three areas related to intercultural competence: funds of knowledge, internationalizing teacher education, and transformative learning. We will then discuss the themes that emerged from the data collection through the lens of transformative learning theory. Finally, we will share our direction for future research:

scaffolding the elements of critical discourse in transformative learning.

Literature Review

As we become a more global society, teachers encounter greater diversity in their classrooms (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). A primary goal of internationalizing teacher education is to enhance students' intercultural competence. Bennett (1998) defined culture, when used in this sense, as "the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people" (p. 3), and he defined competence as "the potential for enactment of culturally sensitive feeling into appropriate and effective behavior in another cultural context" (2009, p. 5). We chose to examine the facets of intercultural competence that shared common elements with Gay's (2002) culturally responsive teaching and Quezada's (2004) summary of the internationalizing teacher education literature.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2008) addressed this goal in unit standard four: "This goal requires educators who can reflect multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences, and representations of students and families from diverse populations . . . to understand diversity and equity in the teaching and learning process" (p. 36). Gay (2002) stated that preservice education programs must prepare teachers who have the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to be "culturally responsive." She defined culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" and listed the following five elements as essential components for accomplishing this task (p. 106):

1. Developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity
2. Including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum
3. Demonstrating caring and building learning communities
4. Communicating with ethnically diverse students
5. Responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction

Gay (2002) stated that this could be accomplished, in part, through coursework on multicultural education and the contributions of ethnic groups to specific content areas. However, cognitive knowledge alone is not sufficient for achieving intercultural competence. Research suggests that experiential learning is a necessary piece of the competence puzzle (Dantas, 2007; Davis & Mello, 2003; Quezada, 2004) and that the benefits of cultural immersion are numerous (Alfaro, 2008; Dantas, 2007; Quezada & Alfaro, 2007; Rios, Montecinos, & van Olphen, 2007).

Quezada summarized the literature into three themes: instructional pedagogy, multicultural sensitivity, and self-efficacy. The MAT cultural immersion project was established to take advantage of these benefits as we equip preservice educators to teach students from diverse backgrounds.

We chose Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory as a framework to explore MAT student learning during the Ecuador cultural immersion experience.

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference.

Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. (p. 5)

Mezirow stated that the goal of adult education is not merely to help students acquire information but rather to facilitate a critical thinking process that analyzes assumptions.

Funds of Knowledge

“Funds of knowledge” refers to the body of experiences, skills and abilities that individuals acquire throughout their life experiences. Funds of knowledge are accumulated over time and can be captured through interactions with students, their families, and community members because they are manifested through social and linguistic practices (McIntyre, Rosebery & González, 2001). Several studies have engaged teachers in participant observation, such as home visits, to explore students’ funds of knowledge in order to validate and include them in the school curriculum (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; McIntyre, Rosebery & González, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992). These home visits are different from traditional home visits during which the teacher comes to report misconduct or to follow-up on interventions. Instead, the teacher goes to the student’s home with a desire to learn from the family and to gain insight into the life, skills, resources and knowledge that enrich and shape the student’s life and schema. The teachers assume a teacher-researcher role that allows for respectful interactions where both parties can mutually engage in constructive conversation (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992). By recognizing and using funds of knowledge in the classroom, teachers can support student learning by linking prior experience and knowledge to the new content and learning students encounter in school. This is an important skill given that schools often ignore traditionally marginalized students’ funds of knowledge and favor those of the mainstream culture (Bruner, 1996; McIntyre, Rosebery & González, 2001).

Internationalizing Student Teaching

Providing students with cultural immersion experiences furnishes a unique classroom setting for cultivating intercultural competence. Mahon and Cushner (2007) categorized the personal and professional benefits of immersion into cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements. Quezada (2004) summarized the literature into three themes: instructional pedagogy, multicultural sensitivity, and self-efficacy. The researchers stated that these benefits are the result of cultural engagement and not cultural tourism. Many overseas tourism opportunities offer the chance to study, appreciate, and learn from a culture. Scholars argue that the deeper benefits of intercultural competence result from the difficulties and disequilibrium that students experience in their practicum and community placements; when students participate in many of the typical study abroad programs, they remain cultural tourists because they stay in dorm housing with a support system to help them navigate the challenges of living in another culture (Cushner, 2004, 2007; Dantas, 2007; Quezada, 2004). A more effective setting results from staying with host families and becoming involved in the community as well as the school—situations where the students experience disequilibrium due to factors like homesickness, lack of a support system, and adjusting to cultural differences (Mahon & Espinetti, 2007).

There is no agreement on the ideal amount of time that is required to develop intercultural competence (Dantas, 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2007). One study included four preparation classes, one follow up class, and only eight days overseas, while longer programs typically place student teachers in the host country for one semester. To promote cultural engagement researchers encourage programs to incorporate preparation courses, reflective journals, and debriefing sessions that help students to assess their own culture, to become aware of possible difficulties that they will encounter upon entering another culture, and to learn to see

culture as “an answer and not a label” (Dantas, 2007; Mahon & Espinetti, 2007; Stachowski, 2007; Wilson & Flournoy, 2007).

Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory the goal of adult education is not merely to help students acquire information but rather to facilitate critical reflection and analysis of assumptions through discourse. Transformative learning differs from traditional learning in that it reinterprets past experiences from a new perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Students are given more responsibility for their learning in a transformative environment. They are actively engaged in critical reflection and dialogue as they question and evaluate their assumptions and thought patterns. This process is not often experienced when students are living comfortably in the status quo because assumptions are often transparent. Cranton (2008) wrote:

We can only see the world through our own eyes, and our way of seeing includes distortions, prejudices, stereotypes, and unquestioned belief systems. Transformative learning happens when we encounter an event that calls into question what we believe and we revise our perspective. (p. 34)

In traditional learning, students view new content through a lens that has been established by years of experience, dialogue, teaching, and cultural modeling. In transformative learning, students evaluate the lens itself and look at their experiences through new glasses.

Mezirow (2001) theorized that transformative learning occurs as a result of critical thinking and discourse, triggered by a disorienting dilemma. Whitney (2008) suggested that the triggering issues bring to light “sites of tension where existing meaning schemes were not working to account for and deal with situations” (p. 157). The events can be either dramatic or gradual and cumulative (Cranton, 2008). These experiences are necessary for transformative learning according to Saavedra (1996).

Teacher transformation occurs through the creation of critical and reflective social contexts that place teachers at the center of their own learning. These contexts must provide occasions in which teachers can confront their own cultural, social, and political identities and the situations that have shaped and continually shape the expressions of those identities. (p. 272)

Transformative learning is not an immediate solution for a critical incident, rather a new framework for interpreting similar triggering events.

There are multiple approaches to transformative learning. This constructivist theory shares commonalities with Friere’s emancipatory approach; both value empowerment as a desired result of adult education, but where Friere’s progression moved toward social justice, Mezirow’s led to cognitive transformation (Baumgartner, 2001). Friere discussed three stages of consciousness growth: intransitive thought, semitransitive, and critical transitivity (Kitchenham, 2008). This continuum of growth moves from feeling hopeless and disempowered to solving individual problems to seeing and acting on the need for change at a societal level. Kitchenham stated, “The highest level of ‘critical transitivity’ is reflected in individuals who think globally and critically about their present conditions and who decide to take action for change . . . it is this last stage of critical consciousness that clearly influenced Mezirow” (p. 108). The theories of Kuhn and Habermas are also cited as influential in Mezirow’s thinking about transformative learning (Cranton, 2011; Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow’s theory has evolved based on growing research: the process of transformative learning is now seen as recursive rather than linear, a

triggering event can be defined as a single experience or a cumulative process, the importance of relationships is foundational to the process, and a person's context and culture impacts his/her tendency to experience transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2001; Taylor, 2000).

In one study, King (2004) considered the effects of a graduate course as a triggering event for educators. The professor designed the course based on the theory of transformative learning and students reported multiple benefits including a greater depth of knowledge and self-efficacy. For example, "A bright woman with little confidence gained a new perspective of herself as a learner and began to take risks and make choices" (King, 2004, p.163). Many of the students who cited increased knowledge, clarified that it was in an area that "they thought they already knew."

In another study, Saavedra (1996) worked with small groups of teachers as they discussed educational issues, achieving transformation through a cycle of inquiry. Saavedra identified specific conditions that facilitated transformative learning: exploratory discussions where all voices were heard, situations where the learners were responsible for their own learning, conflict, consensus-building collaboration that promotes new interpretations from differing perspectives, reflection, self-assessment, and continuing reflective practice.

Whitney (2008) examined the experiences of seven teachers at the National Writing Project's Summer Institute through the lens of transformative learning. Based on recursive data analysis, Whitney suggested an eight-part model for transformative learning: triggering event, accepting the invitation to write and share, self-examination, a critical assessment of assumptions, resolving to reorient, trying new roles, building competence and confidence, and living in the new frame. In the "resolve to reorient" step, Whitney contrasted her findings to Mezirow's theory, "I did not observe the formation of distinct action plans. Instead, I found that teachers consistently 'resolved to reorient' future actions according to changed perspectives" (p. 169). Whitney also emphasized the pattern of increased teacher self-efficacy as a result of transformative learning. The teachers "reported gaining specific competence to fit their reframed perspectives . . . this gain in competence was accompanied by an explicitly named gain in confidence as well" (Whitney, p. 173).

Conclusion

Reaching toward the goal of intercultural competence involves increasing knowledge, implementing new approaches to curriculum and instruction, building caring learning communities and effectively communicating with diverse students (Gay, 2002). Transformative learning theory suggests that reflection and discussion about critical incidents is a possible means to this end. Cultural immersion provides a brief opportunity to view the world from a different perspective—to increase empathy for students from diverse backgrounds and improve our ability to scaffold their learning.

Methods

Setting and Participants

The study followed 18 MAT students through a three-week practicum in Quito, Ecuador. Four students were in their second semester of a four-semester program. Fourteen students were within weeks of graduation. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to early forties. There were three males and fifteen females. One student was Hispanic, the rest Caucasian.

Four of the students were bilingual or had advanced understanding of Spanish. Nine students tested at an intermediate understanding of Spanish and six were just beginning their study of Spanish. Twenty-nine percent of the participants had lived in another country or traveled to multiple continents. Thirty-five percent had traveled to another continent, eighteen percent within North America; an additional eighteen percent had never traveled outside of the United States.

All students were placed in home-stays with middle class Ecuadorian families. Participants worked in a K-12 private school in Quito where they volunteered in classrooms devoted to the teaching of English. Students were placed at the appropriate authorization level although content area endorsements were not always matched. Participants spent mornings in the classrooms assisting teachers as they taught English to classes of approximately eighteen to twenty-two children. Students spent their afternoons at a language institute where they received Spanish instruction two hours a day. Two weekend trips took the group to locations in the Andes to broaden their view of Ecuador and to enjoy the culture of smaller towns.

Data Collection

This qualitative study explored through reflective thought the transformative learning process of graduate preservice teachers in an international practicum. Faculty organized preparation workshops, on-site reflections, discussions, and debriefing focus groups to explore the areas of critical thinking, transforming practice, and promoting justice. The data that were collected, coded, and qualitatively analyzed in this study included student applications, blogs, reflections, and focus groups. Participants wrote three reflections while in Ecuador. In the first reflection, students were asked to compare what they were seeing and experiencing in Ecuador with their lives back in the U.S. They delineated the adaptations they were making and their cognitive and affective responses to those adaptations. The second reflection occurred around day ten of the twenty-one days. Students were directed to deconstruct a critical incident in the first ten days and to discuss it in light of cultural adaptation. During the final week, students reflected on their teaching experiences at the private school and the differences in strategies and methodology. They considered how those differences might be used in their classrooms in the U.S. Ten to twelve days after returning to the U.S., the students participated in a focus group discussion, which was recorded and transcribed. Two focus group discussions were held to accommodate the two geographical locations of participants.

Data Analysis

After organizing the student applications, reflections, blog postings, and focus group transcriptions, the data were analyzed using a recursive approach of initial coding, focused coding, memoing, creating visual representations and determining themes (Bailey, 2007). During initial coding, we noted key phrases, words, and topics while recording thoughts and insights. We labeled sections of text, phrases to paragraphs in length. During focused coding, the initial labels were grouped into larger categories. Then, we read the data again and coded for these categories. Throughout this process the researchers kept memos to record possible links between concepts, visually depict ideas and themes, further define categories and raise questions. After categorizing and coding the data, the researchers suggested possible themes that were evidenced throughout the student data.

One of the student application codes was based on the extent of past travel experiences. Students who had lived outside the United States or traveled to multiple continents shared themes of disequilibrium resulting in transformative learning. On the opposite end of the continuum, students who had never left the United States shared only positive comments about the hope of becoming a better teacher through authentic experience. The most common patterns from the initial coding of reflections, blogs, and focus groups included community, positive and negative emotions, challenges and disequilibrium. Less frequent patterns included differences from home, metacognition, connections to school and teaching, the value of experiential learning, self-efficacy, and learning about one's self and own culture. These codes were organized into three larger categories: disequilibrium, community, and self-efficacy.

Results and Discussion

Intercultural Competence Themes

Student growth mirrored the benefits described in the cultural immersion literature: multicultural sensitivity, self-efficacy, and instructional pedagogy (Quezada, 2004). The following student quotes represent common patterns from the student reflections, blogs, and focus groups.

Multicultural sensitivity. Many of the students' reflections demonstrated multicultural sensitivity, particularly as a result of critical incidents. Challenges related to language learning, isolation, miscommunication, poverty, and culture shock provided opportunities for critical reflection.

I learned many, many things from this experience! I learned what it feels like to be a second language learner in a new environment where I was forced to speak my "second" language. I had the shut down feelings after too much processing. I decoded language. I looked for contextual clues. I used my dictionary all of the time. I now have a glimpse into how my ELL students will feel sometimes in my classroom I will be able to relate to them so much better now. Ecuador did this for me (Reana).

Self-efficacy. Students noted increased self-efficacy in many areas including Spanish, teaching, intercultural competence, and the ability to confront and resolve problems. In response to the immersion experience, Reana stated, "I feel more confident in my ability to teach. I also feel much more confident in my ability to help my ELL students in the future." Kristie alluded to the increased self-efficacy she had experienced in Ecuador as she reflected on the many life-changes she would encounter upon returning home, "It made achievements and dreams seem to be more realistic and within reach."

Instructional pedagogy. Students reflected on the importance of relevant, hands-on, experiential, and community building instruction to better meet student needs. After describing her perspective shift from learning Spanish for college credit to learning for survival, Laura created a plan of action based on a new point of view, "This is how I want to present my subject material in my classroom. I want students to feel the desire, see the need, feel the 'want' to learn. This understanding of relevance is what leads to success." Many students also addressed the lack of cultural balance in U.S. classrooms. Sydney discussed this through the lens of the classroom environment:

What I take from this experience is an awareness of how "American" classroom culture rewards some personalities, but discourages others. As teachers, no matter what culture

we are from, we must continually look at our students and ask ourselves if we are providing the best learning environment for each student.

Culturally responsive teaching. At first, the data patterns also reflected Gay's (2002) elements of culturally responsive teaching: increasing knowledge, implementing new approaches to curriculum and instruction, building caring learning communities and effectively communicating with diverse students. On closer inspection, however, the student data only supported initial steps toward these outcomes. For example, student reflections did not demonstrate a pattern of growth for the first element, "developing a cultural diversity knowledge base," as described by Gay (2002):

Developing a knowledge base for culturally responsive teaching is acquiring detailed factual information about the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups. . . . knowledge about the contributions of different ethnic groups to a wide variety of disciplines and a deeper understanding of multicultural education theory, research, and scholarship. (p. 107)

The participants in the Ecuador study took initial steps toward this goal by learning about one ethnic group as a result of experience rather than curriculum and instruction. There was less overlap with the remaining elements, which focused on skills such as analyzing textbooks, revising curriculum, deconstructing mass media portrayals, connecting appropriate instructional strategies to diverse students, and accommodating students' interaction styles based on "knowledge about the linguistic structures of various ethnic communication styles as well as contextual factors, cultural nuances, discourse features, logic and rhythm, delivery, vocabulary usage, role relationships of speakers and listeners, intonation, gestures, and body movements" (p. 111). This framework of goals seems to be more closely related to classroom instruction outcomes rather than experiential learning outcomes. Although university coursework is the path to many of these goals, cultural immersion sets the stage for culturally responsive teaching through gains in multicultural sensitivity, self-efficacy, and instructional pedagogy.

Transformative Learning Themes: Critical Incidents and Disequilibrium

The students described a variety of events and conversations that demonstrated different levels of transformative change but travel itself does not guarantee transformative learning. Two people can embark on the same trip and experience very different results. What are the necessary elements for transformation to occur? Mezirow stated that the opportunity for students to critically reflect on their experiences, assumptions, and critical incidents is necessary for transformative learning. Baumgartner (2001) summarized Mezirow's learning approach in four steps:

1. Experience a disorienting event or personal crisis
2. Reflect critically and evaluate assumptions
3. Dialogue about process and perspective
4. Take action based on a new perspective

Reflecting on critical incidents and wrestling with the resulting disequilibrium were repeated patterns in the data. Most of the preservice teachers experienced different levels of disorienting events and critical reflection; fewer reported that they had evaluated their assumptions, dialogued about the process, or planned a course of action, the latter steps in Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory.

As we analyzed the preservice teachers' applications to the Ecuador program, a common

thread appeared between the students who had traveled outside of the United States: disequilibrium. Although one typically associates disequilibrium with negative emotions, the following example from a student application painted disequilibrium in a positive light, “Being exposed to these different cultures certainly threw off my equilibrium, but in an exciting way, and I developed an open-mindedness which has allowed me to embrace and respect other cultures” (Heather). Many of these students talked about “embracing” disequilibrium.

These thoughts from Ann, who had travelled extensively, beautifully portray the need for the disequilibrium that travel can provide.

Most of us spend a great deal of our lives trying to avoid discomfort at all costs. . . . It is not a life of comfort, but an experience of disequilibrium, that I crave. Because it is in those moments of profound discomfort that I am challenged to act with the kind of conviction a life of simplicity and contentedness could never require of me. It is in those experiences that I am required to see myself though someone else’s lens, that the most terrible parts of myself are revealed, and that I am confronted with the opportunity to change. It is in those moments that I am asked, not simply to allow others to hold a different perspective from my own, but also to challenge myself to stand in a different place entirely, and to know what that soil feels like between my toes.

Mezirow suggested that the disequilibrium that students experience as a result of a critical incident is a necessary step in transformative learning. “A critical incident, which by its very nature cannot be planned, can serve as a catalyst for transformative learning” (Grabove, 1997, p. 94). During the middle of the second week in Ecuador, the students were asked to describe a positive or negative experience that they had been thinking about for hours or days. They described the emotions that they connected to these incidents, compared U.S. and Ecuadorian cultures, asked questions, named assumptions, and analyzed the experiences through the lens of theory. For some students this process led to enhanced funds of knowledge, a plan of action, or change in point of view.

The critical incident reflections followed a pattern that included both description and reflection. The students would typically begin by describing an incident followed by their feelings and response to the incident. Every critical incident reflection included one or more emotional responses with a negative to positive ratio of approximately 2:1. Fear, loneliness, confidence and empathy were repeated responses. The reflections then moved to a more analytical stage as the students compared the incidents or their thoughts about the incidents to their own culture and pondered questions that were often left unanswered. Many of the students concluded their journal reflections by connecting something that they had learned to their own practice in the classroom.

Positive critical incidents included hiking in the mountains, a scenic drive, and words of approval about language acquisition. Eight students described disorienting dilemmas including topics like communication struggles, loneliness, poverty, language challenges, and safety. Charles, Terrie, and Susie reflected on different aspects of the same critical incident: a mugging. Charles wrote about safety issues from a position of shock and self-recrimination as he told of being mugged while walking with a friend. Terrie reflected on the fear and anger that result from being violated and pondered the effects of those who “live in fear of [their] safety every day.” She also shared her reaction to the host culture’s view on the incident:

It was interesting how Diego spoke with the group and alluded to the fact that, ‘this is the way it is,’ and that he had warned us. I realize he can only speak from his situation, his information and his life journey; however, considering we are a part of a cultural

immersion program I would expect more understanding of our needs and reactions. As Susie processed the mugging, she reflected on the different cultural views of “being approached for money,” the assumptions that led to her response, and the difficulty of reconciling the two. Susie’s reflection provided an example of Mezirow’s transformative learning stage, “Transform a habit of mind”—A student becomes aware of his/her habitual ways of thinking and analyzes them through critical reflection. The next three quotations represent her steps through transforming a habit of mind: describing the critical incident, reflecting on her reaction and emotions, and analyzing her assumptions through critical reflection.

Different cultural views. I keep thinking about the second talk that Diego had with our group. His perspective about being approached for money (robbed) is so much different than my own. When two members of our group were robbed I think we all felt violated; this is the extent to which our culture condemns and fears robbery. And yet, Diego seems to look at it as simply a way to meet a need. (Susie). Mezirow (1998) defined basic reflection as “turning back” on experience, “simple awareness of an object, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or of one’s habits of doing these things. It can also mean letting one’s thoughts wander over something, taking something into consideration, or imagining alternatives” (p. 185). He differentiated between reflection and critical reflection by adding assessment as an integral component of the latter. All three students reflected on the critical incident but Susie moved from reflection to critical reflection through the process of evaluating her assumptions.

Personal assumptions. Knowing that the law in Ecuador says that stealing is only a crime if you hurt someone in the process, I find myself somewhat divided. My feelings, which dictate my immediate response, are that stealing something from someone else is wrong and should be punished. I am, admittedly, from a ‘pick yourself up by the bootstraps’ family. My father was self-employed and worked hard; still, we never had more than just what was necessary. From the perspective I was raised in, even taking money from the government instead of doing whatever work it takes to provide for the family is stealing from one’s neighbors who pay taxes. I have thought to myself many times that this is a position of pride in self-sufficiency and perhaps some selfishness in wanting to keep everything that is worked for. (Susie)

Susie’s reflection demonstrated an ability to assess her experience and assumptions logically. Mezirow (1998) stated that the analysis of assumptions provide “the emancipatory dimensions of adult learning, the function of thought and language that frees the learner from frames of reference, paradigms, or cultural canon (frames of reference held in common) that limit or distort communication and understanding” (Mezirow, p. 192). She did not settle for an easy answer but rather continued to wrestle with the inequity.

Difficulty reconciling opposing views. Despite my ability to look at the beliefs I was raised with and be critical; my emotional side does not seem to be able to get past the cultural belief that is widely accepted in the States, that stealing is a crime. On the other side, my analytical mind is able to understand Diego’s point of view. I have seen so much need here in Ecuador. Everywhere we have gone I have seen people living in conditions which I could not imagine; I have seen beggars everywhere and in Quito there are even children as young as 4 or 5 selling and begging on the streets. . . . I do not have answers. (Susie)

Future Directions

In future research, we hope to explore longitudinal data from the participants about their instructional pedagogy, specifically related to diversity. We would also like to explore the connections between MAT coursework and the cultural immersion experience in order to enhance student growth toward Gay's (2002) definition of culturally responsive teaching. Finally, we will examine ways to provide structured opportunities for students to experience the reflective discourse step in Mezirow's transformative learning process. In the current study, students often mentioned that they talked with family or friends about their critical incidents. The responses that they received and recorded were often in the form of advice, condemning or affirming opinions, and suggested solutions. We would like to introduce a discourse framework that includes open questioning in order to assist students with critical reflection and analysis of their assumptions without the presence of outside solutions or advice. Mezirow stated that the necessary components of discourse are "a focused, critically self-reflective, collaborative inquiry into how one's own habits of mind have framed his or her points of view. Little is known about such programs and there is a great need for research on this model of adult education" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 196). Cultural immersion offers the context for disorienting dilemmas but without critical reflection and discourse, they often lead to anxiety instead of transformation. Students reflected on their critical incidents in written reflections but did not all have a framework for discussing the events to validate their own perspectives and explore new ones.

Conclusion

Travel is often promoted as life changing, illustrated in this quote from a *Travel & Leisure* article, "Some travel to change their lives, others the world. But, a truly transformative trip has the power to do both" (Kelso, 2010). If students travel as cultural tourists, they will return home with a wealth of stories and new experiences to enhance their teaching. When they travel for the purpose of cultural engagement, they return with new understandings and perspectives—the result of climbing into another's skin and walking around in it.

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