

Cultural Immersion for Teacher Educators: Stimulus for Growth

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Abstract

If future teachers are to be agents of change for a more just and loving world, teacher educators need to bring their hearts as well as their minds to the process of facilitating cultural competence. Pre-service teachers and teacher educators traveled to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago for a two-week home stay. The focus of the experience was the development of the pre-service teachers and their cultural competence. Following the immersion experience, the faculty participants were surprised to discover their personal and professional journeys were also significantly enhanced. The four teacher educators, two white and two black, respond to common prompts and their responses are analyzed in terms of racial identity development. This self-study examines the potential of cultural immersion as an impetus for personal and professional growth.

Keywords: cultural competence, racial identity development, teacher education, study-abroad, multicultural education

Teacher educators are in a strong position to be able to influence the societal equity and social justice agenda. Each year teacher educators touch the lives of thousands of future teachers, who in turn, will touch the lives of countless students throughout their careers. If teacher educators are successful in developing multicultural competence in the pre-service teachers they teach, they have the potential to be transformative agents of societal change.

This study examines the teacher educator's personal journey of racial identity development as a precursor for being able to teach and model multicultural competence. Diller and Moule (2005) describe cultural competence as a "developmental process that depends on the continual acquisition of knowledge, the development of new and more advanced skills, and ongoing reflective self-evaluation of progress." This study explores the developmental nature of the process and the reflective self-evaluative aspect for teacher educators. It probes the issue of the need for cognitively well-informed and well-intentioned teacher educators who are aware of and willing to work toward the stage of autonomy in racial identity (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1995).

1. Significance of Study

The development of cultural competence for teachers culminates in the ability to be successful at teaching students who are from cultures different from the teacher's (Diller & Moule, 2005). The increasingly diverse classrooms in which today's teacher candidates will serve make it critical that teacher education programs find effective ways to prepare culturally competent teachers (Capella-Santana, 2003; Sleeter, 2001).

Multicultural competence is serious in its implications. Multicultural competence for teachers and pre-service teachers would mean that they are equipped to help all students learn and reach their full potential. Bassey (2016) argues that within a democracy, an important part of a teachers' work is social justice and this is achieved through culturally responsive teaching, and "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective" (p. 1). Teachers who successfully teach in this way see a student's culture as a vehicle for learning, maintain a strong focus on student learning, and develop their own cultural competences (Bassey, 2016). Their own cultural competence as educators is of extreme importance in culturally responsive teaching. Thus, preservice teachers must grow and develop their own multicultural competence.

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If teacher education programs hope to develop teachers with multicultural competence, program goals must go far beyond tolerance of diversity, far beyond showcasing superficial characteristics of non-dominant cultures, and far beyond the celebration of diversity. Multicultural competence would allow teachers to actually bring action in line with rhetoric, to use teaching as a mechanism for advancing an equity and social justice agenda, to move beyond being a passive “friend” to a position of being an active “ally” for the cause of equity and social justice (Wong, 2008).

Studies of cultural immersion programs have reported positive effects on various elements of the cultural competence of teacher education students (Moule, 2007; Smolcic&Katunich, 2017; Sleeter, 2001). This study examines the potential of cultural immersion programs as a catalyst for the personal growth of teacher educators in their own journey of racial identity development and cultural competence. The study is offered in response to a concern for the impact of multicultural programs and teachings led by teacher educators who see the teaching of multicultural competence as simply a cognitive exercise and who do not see the need for personal introspection on their own personal “journey.”

2. Theoretical Framework: Racial Interaction Development

As a theoretical framework, we use a simplified version of racial identity development, termed “racial interaction development” based on the theories of Cross (1971), for Black racial identity development, and Helms (1990), for White racial identity development. In this framework, described by Diller and Moule (2005), stage one is called *I'm OK; You're OK*. This corresponds to the pre-encounter stage found in many racial identity development theories. It is analogous to the *color-blind* or “let's just ignore race” stance. Hammer (2009) refers to this as the “denial” stage in his Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC). In this stage, Individuals of Color and White individuals must “maintain the fiction that race and racial indoctrination have nothing to do with how he or she lives life” (Helms, 1990, p. 23). The second stage is called *Something is not OK*. This stage corresponds to the encounter/disintegration stages found in Cross (1971) and Helms (1990). This is a confusing stage in which individuals begin to question their previously unexamined racial identities and the ways in which race matters as a result of some startling encounter shaking their previously held worldview.

The next stage is called *I'm OK, I'm not so sure about you*. This stage encompasses stages from Cross (1971) Hammer (2009) and Helms (1990) including anger, denial, pseudo-independence, polarization, immersion, and emersion. Reflections in this stage uncover complex issues of cultural identity that are difficult to acknowledge or discuss. The very nature of commenting on race-related, emotionally charged issues between a White person and a person of color, especially two colleagues who must maintain some kind of working relationship, seems like a “lose-lose” situation. We believe the very nature of our research may help insert voices into this silence and lead to better communication all around. Over time and depending on the situation, this stage is divided into sub-categories.

A last stage is called *I'm OK, You're OK, We're OK*. Similar to the “acceptance” stage of Hammer’s (2009) Continuum, this stage is equivalent to the autonomy or independent stage. People are ready to work for change in a more fully integrated manner with little or no judgement.

3. Methodology

Twelve college students and four teacher educators representing two different universities participated in a cultural immersion experience in Trinidad and Tobago. All participants stayed in homes of local hosts and engaged in the daily life and culture of the village. Because the experience was designed for students from a mid-sized predominantly white Midwestern university, the original intent was to study these pre-service teachers and their response to the two-week cultural immersion experience. When faculty participants in the immersion experience met several months after the trip to discuss our work and plan our analysis of the student responses, the conversation instead focused on our own growth and journeys. Two of the educators are White (L. and A.) and two are Individuals of Color (D. and J.) J. hails from a university on the west coast. D. is native to Trinidad but, has lived in a midwestern region for more than half of his life. This cultural mix provided a variety of perceptions and reflections of shared experiences.

Following this discussion, we planned our self-study. We decided to approach the study from our individual responses to ten prompts which required us to reflect on our personal experiences, ideas, and perceptions from before, during, and after the cultural immersion experience:

1. What was the start of my “journey” re: this trip?
2. What prompted me to be involved in a cultural immersion program?

3. What were my expectations?
4. What were my concerns prior to the immersion experience?
5. What were key moments on this trip? What events impacted me?
6. Was there anything that made me feel uncomfortable?
7. What were the critical incidents and what was their impact on my growth?
8. What surprised me most?
9. How did I surprise myself?
 - I didn't know that I would:
 - feel the way I did when...
 - do what I did when...
10. How did this experience affect my life post-trip? What has had a lasting effect, personally and professionally?

4. Results

The first result of our study was the startling recognition that we already had in process a self-study of teacher educators' cultural competence journeys when we met to discuss our students' racial interaction development. In retrospect, our study was initiated from the very moments we began to discuss our own individual and collective growth during the experience itself. This is testimony to the fact that embedded in our shared experience of a cultural immersion trip was a shared process of self-reflection about our personal racial identity growth, and ultimately our own progress toward cultural competence. Later, in preliminary analysis, the following themes emerged in comments from faculty members reflecting on the cultural immersion experience as an impetus for forward movement in the journey toward ever higher stages in our own racial interaction development.

4.1 Journey with Colleagues

The first theme observed from faculty member reflections is the importance of being on a cultural journey with colleagues and having space to navigate and reflect on the journey as a collective group. This interaction with others on the journey provided important stimulation and support for faculty members' work on their personal cultural competence. In commentary, participants point to explicit interactions they had with colleagues that were transformative in understanding their own cultural competence.

D. relays that a high point of his trip was "a discussion I had with L. on the boat back from Tobago when she told me about her coming to understand and acknowledge white privilege." This conversation among two faculty members of different cultures allowed both individuals to openly process realizations they were having about their own assumptions and cultural baggage. D. could gain perspective as he was a witness to L.'s progress in understanding his culture, and L. was able to process and more deeply understand the Trinidadian culture by speaking to a companion of that culture. Additionally, L. noted that "key moments on the trip were those spent "getting to know J. and having her give me permission to ask all the questions about Persons of Color that were on my mind". Likewise, J. recorded, "my moments both talking with L. and watching/listening to her questions and the responses she elicited from others were the highlight of the trip for me." Teacher educators could ask one another questions, supply different perspectives, and engage one another in processing their own cultural competence. Even more, faculty members were able to learn and grow in competence by simply listening to other faculty members ask questions and receive answers. Teacher educators grew in cultural competence by bearing witness to cohorts' growth.

Having colleagues to navigate the journey as a collective group was important in the teacher educators' personal growth. In addition, growth occurred while navigating their role as an educator as they supervised students, on a cultural journey of their own, who were seeking wisdom from their professors. A. informs that "there were many instances where I needed to process events with a colleague in order to focus on my personal growth. One such occurrence was when I was uncertain how to approach a student regarding her reactions to events. If I had not had my colleague to remind me it was about my own growth, I would have handled the situation much differently and would not have made as much personal progress" By processing their reactions to students' intercultural experiences, the teacher educators experienced even further growth toward their own cultural competence.

Additionally, by engaging in conversation that would not be otherwise had in the workplace, the teacher educators were able to reflect on their own cultural competence which opened the door for further communication when they returned to the workplace. D. and A. note that "we talk more than ever about cultural competence and our journeys. Some of this is due to the understanding that we are both on this journey and are helping each other. We seem to be on the same page when talking about these issues, ideas, and our students.

It is so nice to have a colleague who understands”. The teacher educators’ growth toward cultural competence did not stop when they left the immersion environment; rather it continued as they stepped back into the work environment together with new perspectives and more to process. As a result of this growth, an upper-level course in Multicultural Understanding was developed by D. and A.

Without this dialogue and interaction with one another as peers, the teacher educators would have had more difficulty processing and reflecting on their own experiences, and therefore would have missed out on opportunities to grow in their own cultural competence. The rich discussions referred to in this section probably would never have taken place in a normal academic setting on campus, and of course they could not have taken place had the cultural immersion experience been led by only one teacher educator. The luxury of unstructured schedules, travel time, and even wait time promoted opportunities for discussions on meaningful race topics which were related to the purpose of the immersion experience. We see the dialogues discussed above as our awakenings to our need to move out of our advanced, but still unquestioned, “I’m OK, you’re OK,” stage as we moved deeper into our encounter with the Trinidadian culture. Our “something is not OK” thoughts allowed us to open up to these interactions with others.

4.2 Powerful Interactions

A second notable theme derived from participant reflections is the depth at which teacher educators were impacted by interactions with persons from the Trinidadian culture. A. reflects that she became “close” to her host family immediately upon arrival and ends the reflection stating, “I have family and friends in Trinidad and Tobago.” Her language selection describing the people as “friends” and “family” is a clear indication of the depth of relationship formed during the immersion experience. Her host Trinidadians moved from individuals of the “other” culture to “family”, clear evidence of movement toward cultural competence.

The effects of these interactions were present independent of that faculty member’s conscious effort and intention. Interactions produced progress on the faculty members’ journeys in a way that was effortless, unintentional, and often left the teacher educators surprised. This surprise is evidenced in J.’s statement that she “did not expect to become so attached to the people...”. A. cites as her greatest surprise “the outpouring of love. Everyone I met welcomed me with open arms and few expectations”.

Further evidence of the value of interaction between both fellow teacher educators and the people of the Trinidadian culture can be found in D.’s experiences. Having moved from Trinidad to America, D. has been affected by American culture. Returning to Trinidad for this immersion experience, his perceptions of cultural differences and assumptions were a bit different than those who had never been to Trinidad. His cultural perspective was affected by his experiences growing up in Trinidad, then living in America and finding his cultural identity there. D. describes where he stood in his journey for cultural competence: “I was still at that place where me, I was not ok as a Trinidadian, and my fellow Trininis were not ok. But my white colleagues from the dominant culture were ok.” D. wrestled with his own assumptions about both of his own cultures and how they fit together to shape his own cultural identity.

Interactions with both Trinidadians and fellow teacher educators played an integral role in processing his journey. D. remarked, “The reconnection with them at the professional and personal levels moved me along to recognizing that we’re ok and you are also ok”. Underneath these statements is a subtle sense that each individual did not think the Trinidadians would be as friendly, warm or as open as they were. This is an example of “I’m ok, I’m not so sure about you.” It’s also important to note that the teacher educators did not expect a “*we’re ok and you’re also ok*”, cross-cultural relationship to be so quickly formed. Differences in culture were less of a relational barrier than the teacher educators somehow came to assume.

4.3 Unexamined Assumptions

A third major theme underlying faculty member reflections is the questioning of unexamined assumptions. This cultural immersion experience made faculty members aware of cultural assumptions, forcing them to both question, confront, and redefine their ideas of the culture. Having lived in Hawaii, A. approached the Trinidadian culture with assumptions related to island culture. A. states, “I didn’t realize that I had assumed the Trinidadians were most like the Hawaiians I had grown up with simply because they too lived on an island.”

One commonly-evaluated assumption in this immersion experience was the cultural idea of time. In Trinidad, time is seen as much more flexible. In contrast, Americans have a very rigid idea of time and hold punctuality in high regard. As a member of both the Trinidadian and American cultures, D. reports experiencing moments of contradiction while traveling with American cohorts.

D. said, “the issue related to time was a concern. My awareness was that for Americans time is money. So, when events were scheduled (in Trinidad) they were not only going to be there on time, but early, and with critical judgement of my Trinidadian community.” D. also noted his expectations regarding navigating the relaxed pace of life with his American cohorts. “My awareness was that I would have to meet the needs of the group as though we were in the States. Instead of planning only 1 or 2 things a day, I was trying to plan 5 or 6 things, which was not effective in the Trinidad/Dalley Village culture.”

Socioeconomic status was also a subject of unexamined assumption in teacher educators’ reflections. L. reported being surprised by the “impact the petroleum industry has had on the economy and the country in general.” J. was surprised “by the wealth of the country and the vast number of Trinidadians who have been to the United States”. She had arrived with the assumption that wealth enough to visit the States would be a rarity. Both of these comments reveal preconceived assumptions about Trinidad and Tobago that were not founded in fact and were uprooted as they learned first-hand about the country.

For A., the unexamined assumptions of socioeconomic status revealed less about assumptions of the Trinidadian culture and more of her own personal baggage. A. stated, “I didn’t realize the difference in socioeconomic status would pull so many feelings. When we were invited to the pool party/class reunion in Trinidad, I assumed the appropriate attire was swim wear, shorts and a t-shirt. I will never forget the extreme feelings of embarrassment arriving and realizing a dress would have been a better choice. I was taught it was always better to be over-dressed than under-dressed. I didn’t realize I had engrained such strong “upper-class” standards of beliefs.” As an individual who held particular upper-class standards of dress, A. felt notably out of place at the gathering; not because of the Trinidadian culture, but rather from the rules of socioeconomic class on which she was raised.

The teacher educators even reflected on assumptions they had made about the immersion experience and students’ experiences. J. admits to having been skeptical that a two-week immersion experience could have any discernable impact on students’ development of cultural competence. In fact, however, she reports that “watching the students interact with the people and children in the community, particularly the time with the preschool, was just so amazing.” She assumed the students would simply be spectators to a new culture without the deep level of engagement.

One of the student participants was African American and another was a White female who was dating an African American boy back home. As the teacher educators were witness to the developing cultural competence of these students, L. was “surprised that an African American student and a white student dating an African American student were not at advanced levels of racial identity development.” She assumed that Persons of Color or a White person who dated a Person of Color would function at a more advanced level of racial identity development than Whites or Whites who did not have a close relationship with a Person of Color. L. became more aware of assumptions she had made about the cultural competence of other individuals based on what she had gathered about their background.

While these examples of our assumptions were outside of our “personal journey,” they are illustrative of our unexamined perspectives. These reflections help us understand the complexity of the journey and the difficulty for all, regardless of their own racial heritage and experience, to move toward cultural competence. These recognitions indicate the move into an “I’m ok, you’re ok, we’re ok” stage where the individuals are more ready to work together while understanding the difficulty and complexity of the work to be done.

5. Implications of the Study

We believe that self-evaluation of racial identity development is critical for us and for others charged with helping pre-service teachers develop cultural competence. We believe our study emphasizes how our collective and personal needs to facilitate such self-evaluation is enhanced through dialogue in a climate of collectivity, reciprocity, and support. Such interactions only occurred because of the dynamics of this immersion program.

We hope that our experiences will cause others to consider the potential of cultural immersion programs for pre-service teachers as an approach to stimulating racial identity development and progressing toward cultural competence through personal “journey.” We further hope that our examples of how this cultural immersion program spurred our own growth in racial identity development will inspire more teacher education faculty to likewise participate, reflect and further their journey for cultural competence. The progression of such growth is a means for advancing an equity and social justice agenda in our institutions based on personal and intentional work.

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