

Cross-Cultural Immersion: A Catalyst for Influencing Teacher Identity and World-views

Introduction

The development of our authentic teaching-self is journey of continued learning and self-discovery. This processual event has been described as a transformative experience; and thus, requires accommodation, exchange and reconstruction of familiar knowledge and beliefs for alternative ones (Orland, 2000). The breadth and depth of this transformative experience has been echoed in the writings of numerous researchers including; Beattie (1995), Calderhead (1991), Carter (1993), Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 1994, 2000), Kagan (1992), Knowles (1991), and Lampert (1999). All have described this transformative process as being rooted in the personal histories, personalities, and reflective introspections of pre-service or novice teachers. Specifically, Kagan (1992) portrayed the passage as “a journey into the deepest recesses of one’s self-awareness, where failures, fears, and hopes are hidden” (p. 164).

In spite of the scope of research on the process of becoming a teacher, comparatively little research has been conducted on the impact of geographic location on this transformation. Although much of the research references the influence of social context, it is generally viewed as the school environment, local community or the process of socialization into the teaching culture. However, physical ‘place’ or geographic location plays an important role in the learning process. Specifically, Orr asserted that “knowledge of a place – where you are and where you come from – is intertwined with knowledge of who you are” (Orr, 1992, as cited in Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004, p. 388). Dillard (2002) also contends the central role of ‘place’ in critical self-development. She stresses that through her teaching experiences in Africa, she not only developed a more spiritual sense of her own heritage and ancestry, but she became “more aware of who [she was] ... and of [her] life as a teacher, leader, and researcher” (Dillard, 2002, p. 386).

Given the impact of cultural experiences and social context on teacher development, this paper provides an alternative exploration of the transformative journey of teacher development viewed through the lens of novice international teachers as they begin to understand the influence of place on their personal – professional development. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the stories and cultural learning experiences with a group of nine teachers that began their careers within an international teaching context. The teachers have now been living and teaching internationally for up to 10 years, thus they provide a retrospective analysis of their earlier cultural learning experiences. The following questions are explored: What learning themes emerge from the experiences of expatriate teachers? What paradigm shifts occurred as result of immersion into an unfamiliar cultural? How does culture immersion influence one’s view the world, view of self and view of others? What are the essential competencies for a successful expatriation experience?

International Teaching and Cultural Immersion

Empirical studies exploring international teaching or cross-cultural teacher development have become an emergent arena for inquiry over the past fifteen years. The available research encompasses both autobiographical narratives (Dillard, 2002; Kennedy, 1992; McKay, Montgomery & Quinn, 1994; Palmer, Cartford, de Vargas, Tierney, & Reyes, 1980; Quinn,

1995) and qualitative investigations highlighting the affective outcomes of teaching abroad on pre-service (Clement & Outlaw, 2002; Stachowski & Visconti, 1998) and experienced educators (Joslin, 2002; Author, 1999; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Richardson, 2002; Willis & Enloe, 1990). Specifically, McKay, Montgomery and Quinn (1994) concluded that one of the outcomes of “living abroad is an opportunity to see our culture, ourselves, and others from a new prospective. [Thus, through] confronting the issue of diversity, we come face to face with our own world view” (p. 20). This assertion was shared by the British expatriate academics in Richardson and McKenna’s study, whereby they concluded that “virtually all [thirty] participants ... had experienced some sort of personal change during expatriation. ... [such that] they now viewed the world and indeed themselves very differently” (Richardson & McKenna, 2002, p. 75).

Current research affirms that individuals who opt to live abroad become more reflective, personally and professionally, because they are continuously confronting and coping with the diversities and challenges that accompany immersion into an unfamiliar culture and context (Joslin, 2002; LeSage, 1999; Merryfield, 1995; Quinn, 1995; Richardson, 2002; Stachowski, Visconti & Dimmett, 2000; Stachowski & Brantmeier, 2002; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998). A similar conclusion was asserted by Palmer and colleagues, who stated that their own overseas teaching experiences had forced them to critically examine “not only the more dominant trends and practices in U.S. education but ... personal beliefs, habits, and values as well” (Palmer, et. al., 1980, p. 38). A decade later, Kennedy (1992) supported the professional benefits of international teaching for providing alternative perspectives to educators. She affirmed that from her own experiences, she believed that international teaching may provide educators with the opportunity to critique and reflect upon their pedagogic beliefs. She stated that she was forced to re-examine her beliefs as she learned “a different view about how learning occurs” (p. 30) through being immersed in another country’s educational system.

In addition to the studies focusing on the experiences of international educator, there have been a number of studies which explore the experiences of pre-service teachers completing placements in culturally different settings (Clement & Outlaw, 2002; Hill & Thomas, 2005; Richardson, 2002; Stachowski, Visconti & Dimmett, 2000; Stachowski & Brantmeier, 2002; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998). All of the studies acknowledged the personal and professional benefits of an international student placement, focusing predominantly on students’ expanded views of teaching, culture and self. For example, Barr (1995) examined the perspectives of New Zealand student teachers involved in an exchange program with the United States. Barr concluded that the international experience demonstrated to students that there were alternative ways of doing things. He stated that “the experience provided [the pre-service teachers] with new exemplars of educational practice which became a basis for comparison with procedures and techniques they already [knew]” (p. 14). McKay, Montgomery and Quinn (1994) completed a similar study with American student teachers completing placements abroad. They, similarly concluded that the “student teaching experiences in international settings have the potential to change the way beginning US teachers think about themselves, curriculum design, and teaching strategies” (p. 18). Palmer et al. recommended “an overseas teaching experience as invaluable in that it provides an environment for examining trends and practices in US education and also an opportunity for students to examine their beliefs, habits and values” (p. 5).

More recently Stachowski and colleagues from Indiana University explored students’ conceptual and cultural development through immersion in international and Navajo land teaching placements. The authors contend that through the immersion experience, students

develop new interpersonal skills and acquire insights that “can impact profoundly upon classrooms of children ‘back home’ for years to come” (Stachowski & Visconti, 1997, p. 5). Stachowski and Brantmeier (2002) reaffirmed the critical outcomes of an international student placement to include students’ emergent understanding of “the cultural backgrounds and characteristics of children in non-mainstream and non-U.S. settings, while enhancing understanding of [their] own cultural make-up, belief systems, and ways of operating” (p. 5). Given the potential influence of a cross-cultural placement on future teaching practices, the researchers and their student participants stress the importance of including these opportunities in all teacher education programs, as it prepares the students “to become culturally responsive educators who will embrace the diversity in schools and communities” (Stachowski, Richardson & Henderson, 2003, p. 63). Clement and Hill (2002) support this assertion stating that, “learning to teach is a process, and student teaching is a meaningful part. Adding the dimension of going abroad ... may make the experience even more thorough and valuable” (p. 183).

Regardless of the participants, many of the studies support immersive cross-culture experiences for all educators: pre-service, in-service and professors alike. Specifically, Dillard (2002) concluded that “international experiences are absolutely critical for the life and work of teachers and teacher educators. *Everyone* who is a teacher ought to have opportunities to engage in the world” (p. 391). Similarly, Merryfield (1995) supported the assertion that pre-service teachers and their education professors required personal cultural immersion experiences in order to authentically teach from a multicultural perspective. She advocated that all teacher education programs “provide opportunities for extended travel, study, or living in other parts of the world” (p. 25). Finally, Quinn (1995) believed that all individuals, irrespective of profession, benefit from international experience; as such “experiences are often cited as making powerful contributions to an individual’s knowledge and perceptions of the world” (p. 30).

Given the evidence from previous research, it may be reasonable to conclude that as teachers, both experienced and neophyte, move beyond the physical and emotional borders of their home culture, personal and educational assumptions are forcibly re-examined. Through the re-examination process, new perspectives emerge and, perhaps, one may begin to develop “empathy to understand the experiences of individuals in other cultures, [and] move beyond egocentrism and ethnocentrism” (Hill, 2005, p. 199) to embrace and celebrate multiculturalism and ethno-cultural diversity. Thus, international teaching experiences may provide educators with the opportunity to adopt an ethnorelativist view of the world; which is defined as “an awareness of [one’s] own cultural heritage, [and] sensitivity and respect for different cultures” (Joslin, 2002, p. 52).

Methodology

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of nine international educators (eight females and one male) at various stages of their international teaching careers (up to 10 years of international experience). Due to the pragmatic issues of time and geographic location, data were collected through electronic mail. Participants were sent interview questions and asked to respond as honestly and thoroughly as possible. Any confusion concerning the question phrasing or the participants’ responses were resolved through further email dialogue.

My interpretations were guided by the research questions. The qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti) was used to process collected data, create and manage codes, categorize

segments of data, and analyze and interpret codes through searching for common words, phrases and themes in the data.

Discussion

In August 1998, I was given a book titled: *Intercultural Interacting* (Tyler, 1987) which focused on encouraging personal and professional cultural reflection. The author emphasized that successful intercultural interaction “requires us to learn carefully about, and to deal well with both our own and others’ values, perspectives, predispositions, expectations, and activities” (p. 1). Tyler underscored the importance of “taking a good look at yourself ... [and determining] ... who you are and why” (p. 6). This development of personal and professional identity; the “who we are and why”; is an inherent part of one’s cultural and life experiences. Thus, through immersion into foreign cultures, one is often forced to confront, re-examine and re-form cultural assumptions and identities.

For me, the re-examination of cultural identity emerged as a direct result of working as a foreigner in other countries. For example, my experiences in the United Arab Emirates forced me to question my perspectives on various moral, ethical and religious issues. Specifically, I began to explore my Judeo-Christian beliefs and reflect upon their origin. Regrettably, I discovered that many of my ideologies were grounded in blind adherence to the cultural norms of a Western Christian society. At that point, I began to consider the possibility that other cultures could provide an alternative lens to examine and understand the world in which we live. Thus, these experiences provided me with the opportunity to re-form and re-evaluate my existing cultural assumptions as well as reinforce and strengthen my identity. I become more self-aware, and ultimately, developed a stronger sense of identity as a Western, single, professional female. The learning outcomes of my expatriation experiences are echoed in the work of other expatriate researchers (Dillard, 2002; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Joslin, 2002; Merryfield, 1995; Quinn, 1995) who have indicated that perspectives about self and culture were “radically transformed” (Dillard, 2002) through cross-cultural immersions.

Although I have offered only a glimpse into my expatriation learning outcomes, my experiences are not unique. As previous researchers attest, there is a vast array of cultural, professional and personal learning experiences accessible to international educators. However, there are only a few studies that explore, beyond an autobiographical perspective, and with any degree of specificity, what these learning experiences are, and how individuals make sense of their experiences of expatriation (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Richardson & McKenna, 2002). Moreover, discussion of the essential competencies of successful international educators is generally absent in the research, though some researchers have alluded to these characteristics based on personal experiences (Joslin, 2002). The remainder of this paper will focus on exploring these issues with nine expatriate educators.

Essential Competencies: Pre-departure Qualities or Nurtured through Expatriation?

Tyler (1987) described three essential competencies for a successful international experience:

- 1. Awareness of and flexibility with self:* ... a positive self-image and the ability to adapt ... in situations that challenge personal feelings. Self-motivation allows you to *act* positively, rather than to *react* negatively, to strange environments.

2. Awareness of and flexibility with others: ... tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty makes it easier to understand, learn from, and work with people who are from different cultures.
3. Awareness of and flexibility with circumstances: ... sensitivity to circumstances allows you to pick up behavior patterns more quickly. If you look, listen, and imitate appropriately, you can communicate more effectively with people around you. (p. 44)

The themes of openness to uncertainty, vulnerability, and ambiguity are readily apparent in Tyler's text. Through expatriation, one's learning experiences can be intensified because feelings of helplessness, frustration, and anxiety seem to be more commonplace when living within an unfamiliar cultural context. However through possessing awareness and flexibility with self and others, frustrating experiences can result in personal and professional growth. Expatriation, therefore, can provide opportunities for broadening cultural lenses and altering personal and professional perspectives, if one is open to personal development.

More recently, Joslin (2002) offered reflections from her own expatriation experiences as she explored the essential qualities for "successful cultural adaptation" (p. 33). Similar to Tyler, Joslin highlighted the centrality of developing an in-depth awareness of "one's own culture, beliefs and values" (p. 33) through "unpacking one's own cultural assumptions" (p. 49). Additionally, she emphasized adaptation and flexibility as necessary qualities, stating that, international teachers must be willing to "challenge their own ways of thinking ... [as well as, be] flexible, [able] to reframe fields of reference and ... adapt behavior according to the cultural context" (p. 52). Joslin proposed nine essential qualities of successful international teachers. Specifically, she stated that "in addition to technical and professional expertise; ... knowledge of education in an international context; ... [and] an attitude conducive to self-development ..." (p. 52), successful international teachers espouse the following, "MEASURE UP" competencies:

- M** – Mental flexibility to reframe fields of reference
- E** – Ethnorelativist view of the world
- A** – Awareness of one's own cultural heritage
- S** – Sensitivity to different cultures
- U** – Understanding of the nature of the range of international schools
- R** – Respect for other cultures (not just tolerance)
- E** – Emotional balance
- U** – Understanding of education in an international context
- P** – Professional / technical expertise (Joslin, 2002, p. 52)

It is important to note, however, that Joslin presented these characteristics, not a list of competencies to be mastered, rather as a "basis for stimulating further inquiry" on the subject (p. 53), which is one goal of this paper. Through comparing the work of Tyler and Joslin, common themes emerge from their "lists" which provide a foundation for further exploration of the essential competencies of international educators. Specifically, the competencies include emotional and cognitive awareness and flexibility for one's self and others; sensitivity to and a willingness to explore one's own culture and the culture of others; and openness to uncertainty, vulnerability, and ambiguity.

In the following sections, the development of these characteristics will be explored with nine international educators. Through exploring their expatriation experiences and the learning which

emerged from these experiences, it may be possible to verify or modify the list of essential characteristics offered by Tyler (1987) and Joslin (2002).

The Transformative Experiences of Expatriation

Findings from this study support the assertion that essential competencies for a successful international experience include emotional and cognitive awareness and flexibility; sensitivity and willingness to explore cultural differences; and openness to uncertainty, vulnerability, and ambiguity. These fundamental attributes were common themes embedded in the reflections of the nine participants in this study. The participants cited the significance of these ‘essential competencies’, however they emphasized that these competencies were developed as a direct result of *lessons in the field*; lessons learned directly from their expatriation experiences. The participants identified many of these characteristics as being nurtured through exposure to other cultures and other ways of life, not necessarily characteristics they espoused prior to their international experiences. Similar to Richardson and McKenna’s (2002) study of British expatriate educators, the participants in this study identified the transformative experience as positively impacting their cultural perspectives and development of their ‘authentic self’. They described their experiences as a combination of ‘letting go’ of old ways of thinking, while beginning to embrace new characteristics which defined their emerging ‘revised’ identities:

I have learned how to know myself better. When you remove yourself from the familiar, you learn a lot about your hidden assumptions and behaviors. (Marianne, 32, American)

My biggest lesson: Tolerance and acceptance. I learned that just because people do things differently from how people in my culture do things, it doesn’t mean they’re wrong. (Jackie, 35, Jamaican – Canadian)

Living abroad instils acceptance and understanding of other cultures and customs through direct interactions. It also instils open – mindedness: my way is not necessarily the best way. (Caroline, 34, Canadian)

Now, I feel that I can look at anyone and any place with a more open mind. I will hesitate to assume things about people and countries based on stereotypes. I know this will help me in any job that I choose in the future. (Dave, 26, American)

This theme of personal transformation and perceived positive change through expatriation was also identified by virtually all the participants in Richardson and McKenna’s (2002) study. Their participants described personal changes to include “becoming more patient, tolerant and confident ... [while developing] ... a broader perspective on the world” (p. 75).

Although international educators seem to espouse a particular set of ‘essential competencies’ which are generally aligned with a more liberal perspective of the world and a willingness to embrace and learn from diversity; these characteristics do not seem to be prerequisite pre-departure qualities. All of the participants in this study and the thirty participants from Richardson and McKenna’s (2002) study described the expatriation experience as providing them with the opportunity to nurture these attributes and celebrate the positive consequences these experiences had on their personal and professional identities.

However, the specific learning outcomes and essential competencies realized by the study participants were inconsistent. The learning outcomes seem to be directly related to each participant's particular cultural experience; that is, the 'place' of their expatriation. Thus, similar to Elbaz-Luwisch's (2004) study, the issue of place was a salient factor influencing both the learning and character of the international teachers in this study. This finding should not be unexpected if we contextualize it within the framework of curriculum and learning. Specifically, Fantini (1985) described education as "the total community context, relating all of the learning environments in which and through which people progress" (p. 46). Schubert (1986) added that, "curriculum thoughts, decisions, and practices are socially, politically, and culturally constructed" (p. 93). Given the contextual nature of curriculum and learning, it is feasible to conclude that one may learn dramatically different lessons from the same experience, depending upon the context in which it transpired. This issue of culturally dependent learning is explored further in the following sections.

Beyond the Essential Competencies: Culturally Dependent Expatriation Experiences

The nine participants in this study were grouped into three categories based on their expatriation experiences: (1) living solely in Colombia; (2) living solely in the UAE; and (3) multiple country experiences. The learning articulated by the participants varied depending upon the country/countries in which they had lived. For example, the experiences of those individuals living exclusively in Colombia or the UAE were markedly different from each other primarily due to the contrasting political and socio-economic conditions of the two countries. By contrast, the participants, who have lived in four or more countries, articulated a broader scope of learning, often comparing their past expatriation experience to how they currently experience repatriated life in North America.

The Colombian Expatriation Experience

The three participants whose expatriation experiences were solely Colombian-based highlighted two distinct learning outcomes: language acquisition and communication; and coping with violence and corruption. All participants emphasized the central issue of communication as a barrier to a successful Colombian experience. Although the participants recognized their personal growth as a result of their language acquisition, they acknowledged the prevailing communication barriers that dominated their daily lives. For example, Dave stated, "we are constantly surrounded by small and large cultural differences and a mighty language barrier that makes us second guess our every move in doing things that would be no more than robotic in the States." Specifically, he cited frustrations in completing routine tasks: "It is not easy to get mental rest, even at home. [For example], when doing something as simple as ordering a pizza by phone" becomes a complex undertaking in communication.

Although language acquisition and cultural communication were salient themes in the learning narratives of the Colombian expatriation experience, the pinnacle learning experiences centered on the violence and corruption inherent in Colombian life. Interesting, however the participants' narratives were not focused solely on feelings of fear and instability. By contrast, although the participants acknowledged the violence and corruption, they often tempered their remarks with a positive perspective. Consider, for example, the Washington Post's comments concerning the political situation in Cali:

If Colombia is the world's kidnap capital, then Cali is one of its most troubled neighborhoods. Last year, the ELN (the most powerful guerrilla group in this area) seized more than 500 people over a busy three-month period. At any given time, hundreds of area residents are in captivity. (November, 2000)

Although these facts are indisputable, reactions to this article vary depending upon the experiences of the reader. For example, I was in Cali during this three-month period referenced in the article, and admittedly life was difficult, although not impossible. However, the learning experiences of my family and friends outside of Colombia were vastly different because their context was different. They were fearful of possible outcomes of the situation and fearful for my safety. As a result, they embrace negative views of Colombia and Colombians. Conversely, those of us who experienced this period of "captivity" emerged with different learning outcomes:

I had many preconceived ideas about Latin America: drugs, torture, and poverty. While these are all prevalent, there are many wonderful citizens who are completely devoted to peace in Colombia. [Through living these experiences] I have learned to accept other people and feel compassion, instead of anger and frustration. (Jackie, 35, Jamaican – Canadian)

In spite of the political difficulties, I love Colombia and the Colombian people. (Jodi, 23, American)

Jackie and Jodi's sentiments were not isolated, all of the participants who had experiences in Colombia held similar sentiments. The participants were disheartened by the situation and felt a sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Moreover, because they embraced the Colombian people, culture and country, they expressed feelings of loss for the Colombians, as well as for their own freedom and their sense of innocence.

It is a beautiful country, and the fact that I can't get to know all of this beauty serves as a constant slap in the face, a wake up call that all is not well here and that my position as a 'gringo' representative makes me all that more vulnerable to the conflict that is wrenching apart this country. (Dave, 26, American)

The violence in Colombia is nothing I've ever been witness to or ever want to again. Kidnappings, bombings and shootings. In the three years I was there, it got closer and more relevant to me as a resident who loved the people and the country. One of my student's parents was shot, a bomb exploded a block away from my apartment, and three [of our high school students] were kidnapped. (Jodi, 23, American)

Finally, Jackie expressed her frustration with the "apparent disorganization" which seemed to pervade many of the institutions within Colombia. She rationalized the disorganization as follows: "in the context of a country at war, people feel powerless, so they just accept things and live day-to-day." Jackie referenced powerlessness as a phenomenon experienced by "them", the Colombian people, however, throughout her reflections and those of her fellow expatriates, this theme of subjection permeated the totality of their expatriation experience. Foreign teachers residing in Colombia seemed to apathetically accept powerlessness in order to survive each day with some degree of normality.

The United Arab Emirates Expatriation Experience

The three participants whose expatriation experiences were based solely in the UAE highlighted vastly different learning experiences than their expatriate colleagues residing in Colombia. In contrast to Colombia, the participants described the UAE as county of pervasive wealth where personal safety was never a concern. The three female participants focused principally on three facets of their expatriation experience: camaraderie; the Indian-Pakistani subculture; and corruption.

The theme of comradeship pervaded the UAE expatriation experience. All of the participants cited the development of strong friendships as an outcome of their experience. This theme was echoed in the experiences of Richardson and McKenna's (2002) participants who resided in the United Arab Emirates. Although their participants generally befriended only expatriates within their own cultural community, "usually other British expatriates" (p. 74), the participants in this study seemed to embrace a more culturally diverse circle of friends.

Friendships form easily with all different nationalities. Normally you would not get this opportunity if you stayed in your own little home-town. (Pam, 38, British)

This lifestyle has given me an enormous opportunity to participate in different cultures. My group of friends is very diverse culturally; ranging from Australian, Lebanese, British, East Indian/Canadian, Scottish, American, Yemeni, Emirati, French, and many, many more. (Kelly, 34, Canadian)

Similar to the participants in Richardson and McKenna's research, the expatriates in this study acknowledged that the friendships between expatriates "developed easily and reached levels of intimacy very quickly" (p. 74). Specifically, Kate stated that "friends become a substitute for family and we have formed very strong bonds" (Kate, 39, American). Thus, through expatriation the UAE participants learned to adapt and create intimate support systems that could function as temporary surrogate families.

In sharp contrast to the positive experiences of comradeship, the UAE expatriates were the only participants to reference exposure to cultural segregation. Each of the participants cited frustration and repugnance with the overt prejudices against the Indian-Pakistani subculture within the country. Prior to arrival in the Gulf, the participants were oblivious to the human derogation which regularly occurred. Thus, upon repeatedly witnessing such acts, they were disturbed by the naive world views they espoused prior to their expatriation experiences. Specifically, Pam a British expatriate states, "I was appalled to discover the way in which people treated the Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans ... Like cattle or worse!". However, in spite of exposure to similar cultural immersion experiences, two vastly different learning themes emerged from the data: empathy versus apathy. Two of the participants developed empathy for the Indian-Pakistani people and endeavoured to treat them with greater dignity than was the norm within the UAE culture. Kelly also developed a new sense of respect for the perseverance and strength of new Canadian immigrants, stating:

For me, being over here has really given me insight into the desperation that they [Indian – Pakistani people] were able to escape and also how difficult it is for

them to have made the move to Canada, leaving most of their family behind and venturing into a very, very difficult society. (Kelly, 34, Canadian)

Alternatively, exposure to cultural prejudice seemed to insight learning of another kind: apathetic acceptance of the behaviours. Specifically, although Kate identified the development of broader world views through the expatriation experience, some of her comments were inundated with contradictions and prejudice. For example, when referring to the learning experiences availed her children, Kate stated:

Over the past nine years, my children have been afforded a wonderful education, exposed to many different nationalities and have friends from all over the world. They have no bias toward any different race. Well, maybe toward Indians and Pakistanis. (Kate, 39, American)

This paradoxical learning was also cited by Richardson and McKenna (2002). Specifically, their participants asserted that “they had developed a ‘broader world view’ whilst simultaneously becoming more ‘intolerant’” (p. 75). Specifically, the authors draw attention to Barry, a British expatriate residing in Turkey. Although Barry believed he was “more worldly and developing a greater awareness of cross-cultural differences, he felt he had also become less tolerant”:

I don’t know, they say travel broadens the mind, I think it’s the opposite. I think the more places you have been and the more you see, you start to get more and more irritable. I am less tolerant of little things going wrong than I would have been when I was younger. (Richardson & McKenna, 2002, p. 75)

The third theme to emerge from the UAE expatriation experience was that of corruption and instability. Although the outcomes of political and corporate corruption in the UAE were insignificant compared to Colombia, they permeated many facets of expatriate life. This theme of the “precariousness of expatriation” (Richardson & McKenna, 2002, p. 74) was also commonly referenced by the participants in Richardson and McKenna’s study. Specifically, the expatriates residing in Singapore, United Arab Emirates and Turkey felt that “their lives had a high element of risk” (p. 74). However, the risk element was not one of personal safety as in the Colombian experience; rather it focused on issues of job security and the general absence of civil liberties as an expatriate residing in a foreign land. For example, Pam, a British expatriate from this study, stated that one must always be cognizant of “who you do business with and who you trust [because] bribery and corruption are wide-spread within the police and law enforcement”. While Kelly, a Canadian expatriate, highlighted, what she perceived to be, widespread corruption and deceitfulness, stating, “I have learned a lot about how this part of the world works. It is very corrupt and is based on excuses, lying, and finger-pointing.” Both women, similar to Richardson and McKenna’s participants, alluded to issues of vigilance; the importance of constant attention, “both inside and outside of [the] work environment ... [and awareness that] the smallest mistake [could mark the end of your] career in the host country” (Richardson & McKenna, 2002, p. 74).

Multiple Country Expatriation Experiences

The remaining three participants have had the privilege of residing in four or more countries during their expatriation experiences. As a brief introduction; Karin (30, American) has taught in the UAE, India, Kuwait, and Japan; Caroline (33, Canadian) has taught in Canada, China, Colombia, and Singapore; and Marianne (32, American) has taught in the United States,

England, Japan, Turkey, Botswana, and Colombia. The women presented their learning experiences through a variety of cultural filters, thus when asked to comment on their international experiences they were able to provide broader generalizations than the other six participants. Although the three women cited specific examples of their learning through referencing different circumstances, they were generally non-country specific. Marianne encapsulated the dominant theme to emerge from the learning experiences of the three women, stating: “I have learned ... the interconnectedness of all things. The more you see, the more you see how it all fits together.” Caroline expressed similar sentiments as she emphasized the interconnectedness of her expatriation experiences with her goals as an elementary teacher:

Looking over this list [describing the essential qualities of a successful international educator]; I realize that it contains everything I want for children in my kindergarten classroom – independence, acceptance, understanding, and open-mindedness. I’m striving to teach the traits that I am developing through living overseas. I also, therefore, teach *through* these traits. (Caroline, 33, Canadian)

Dillard’s (2002) autobiographical narrative also highlighted an appreciation for global interconnectedness. She asserted that all people are “intimately and absolutely connected” and that this “human diversity is our strength” (p. 385). She concluded that it is essential, particularly for educators, to understand that “our unity with others – whether our students, colleagues, society, the world – is influenced deeply by the ways in which we are in unity with ourselves and ... others” (Dillard, 2002, p. 385).

In addition to the theme of connectedness to personal and global issues, the women cited learning about their home country through the eyes of another culture as a positive learning outcome of their multiple country experiences. Karin, at age 30, having spent 10 years of her adult life teaching internationally, asserted that virtually all her knowledge of world issues and America, has been learned through her expatriation experiences. She explains,

Pretty much everything I know about Hinduism, Islam, Asian geography, the metric system, cricket, major holidays like Diwali, Eid and Guy Fawkes Day, I learned from living abroad. ... [However,] more surprising is what I have learned about my own country and Canada... and the extremes of how others view us and our military. (Karin, 30, American)

Although the three women embarked on a journey of self-discovery and cultural adaptation, Karin and Marianne, both American, seem to have developed a more critical perspective of their homeland based on their expatriation experiences. Through immersion in multiple cross – cultural experiences outside of America, they interacted with individuals and experienced situations unlike those encountered in their home culture. Both women began to question the actions of their political leaders. For Marianne, this resulted in frustration with the “seemingly inherent rightness” (Joslin, 2002, p. 58) perspective in the cultural and ethical beliefs of the American leadership. Marianne lamented:

I am far more critical of my own government, which results in *me* being more critical than I ever would have been staying in the States under the influence of *the great propaganda machine*. I am much better informed about the other sides of the stories and have seen contradictions and bias in US press reports that go counter to my personal experience abroad. For example, by living in Turkey, I

know the effects on [Turkey] from the Gulf War, an indisputable victory according to American press reports. Not one mentioned that the *most powerful nation on Earth* could not have done much without the cooperation of Turkey and the air-force base in Incerlik. No one mentioned the danger that country was in merely because it supported the US.

In spite of Marianne's apparent political frustrations, upon her return to teaching in the United States, she brought with her an enlightened perspective regarding humanity, patience and tolerance. She offered her reflection on how her expatriation experiences have assisted her in withholding judgement in her teaching practice:

I have learned to suspend judgement until things start playing out. That has come in very handy now that I teach in a Youth Center. If I judged by appearances I could have made all kinds of negative judgements. ... The students and I have a good working relationship – maybe because I did not walk into the class with assumptions, so they did not have to go on the defensive.

Similar to the other six study participants, Marianne, Karin and Caroline acknowledged the positive transformations that emerged as a direct result of their expatriation experiences. Moreover, like Richardson and McKenna's (2002) participants, they recognized that the transformative experience was not immediate; rather it was processual in nature. However, data presented in this study seems to indicate a direct correlation between variation in expatriation experiences and the degree of transformation, including broader world views. Thus, through multiple cultural immersions, the participants were forced to re-examine not only their original, entrenched assumptions and beliefs, but also the beliefs they had more recently assimilated through each cultural experience. This assertion is viable if considered from a social constructivist perspective. Specifically, the social constructivist philosophy is based on the assumption that learners actively construct knowledge in a social environment. Through interpreting new information in relation to what they already know, the learner develops new constructs in order to store this information as acquired knowledge. Thus, it is feasible to conclude that the participants' identities and world views transformed gradually within each social – cultural learning environment. Moreover, the participants' beliefs and revised identities were a consequence of both varied cultural encounters and continued commitment to self-reflection and re-examination of existing and developing beliefs.

Affective and Life Enhancing Experiences

Although the nine participants in this study encountered different expatriation experiences, all reaffirmed that such experiences were both life enhancing and transformative. Through the participants' reflections, four prevailing themes emerged that encapsulate the 'essential competencies' developed through expatriation:

- Tolerance, acceptance, and patience with self, others, and circumstances;
- Acknowledgment of personal growth, transformation and a renewed awareness of identity;
- Appreciation and celebration of one's own culture and the cultures of others;
- Openness to learning through comparative cross-cultural experiences.

I support the conclusions of previous researchers who attest that awareness of and flexibility with self, with others, and with circumstances is essential criterion for a successful expatriation experience. Three of the four themes which emerged from this study support this supposition. Although the experiences of the participants were unique, they resulted in similar learning outcomes which can be described as life enhancing and transformative. The fourth theme evident in the experiences of this study's participants was learning through comparative cross-cultural experiences. The data presented in this study indicates a direct relationship between variation in expatriation experiences and the degree of personal and professional transformation. The three participants with multiple country expatriation experiences seemed to have developed world-views that are more inclusive and connected. They embraced a vision of global interconnectedness; a deeper, more complex understanding of culture and "culturally and politically constructed realities/phenomena" (Dillard, 2002, p. 391).

Concluding Comments

Although intercultural competence, broader world views, cultural tolerance and empathy are outcomes of cultural immersion, they do not simply emerge as a by-product of expatriation. As revealed through the experiences of the study participants, given the same or similar expatriation circumstances, individuals interpret situations in a variety of ways, and thus emerge with different learning outcomes. This parallels social constructivist learning theory in that learners construct their own knowledge based on currently held assumptions, beliefs and experience. Thus, the expatriation experience is not unlike any new learning experience: context is important and thus influences learning outcomes. Moreover, it is feasible to conclude that expatriation experiences, like all learning experiences, are filtered through personal and professional lenses which are influenced both temporally and contextually.

The participants in this study were, generally, able to cope with and learn from the cultural contradictions they encountered through continued self-reflection and re-examination of their own cultural assumptions and experiences. The participants described their expatriation experiences as positively influencing their personal and professional lives, both in their homeland and overseas. They met with success through expatriation, not only because they possessed, or were able to develop, many of the essential competencies discussed previously, but because they willingly embraced the challenges and committed themselves to the "pursuit of cultural understanding" (Joslin, 2002, p. 59).

In closing, I believe that all teachers: pre-service, in-service and teacher educators should embrace and value cross-cultural immersion experiences. In the course of teaching internationally, educators are provided with opportunities for in-depth self reflection by examining themselves and their beliefs through the eyes of another culture. Through uniting cultural immersion with critical introspection, it may be possible to nurture broader world views that recognize global interconnectedness. Through embracing a range of cross-cultural experiences we expand our personal realities and perspectives, and are thus able to include these learning experiences in our own teaching practices.

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