

Examining the Practice of Critical Reflection for Developing  
Pre-Service Teachers' Multicultural Competencies:  
Findings from a Study Abroad Program in Honduras

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In response to a critical need in teacher preparation, study abroad programs aimed at developing multicultural competencies in pre-service teachers have proliferated across the United States (Kitsantas, 2004). Multicultural competencies constitute the ability to challenge misconceptions that lead to discrimination based on cultural difference, reflect on one's assumptions and biases, and create a classroom environment sensitive to the cultural background and academic needs of all students (Nieto & Bode, 2008). There is evidence that when pre-service teachers return from studying abroad they bring back new perspectives about the world and are more willing to engage with cultural difference (Garii, 2009). As important as study abroad programs are for preparing pre-service teachers, research suggests that studying abroad does not guarantee multicultural competencies (Phillion, Malewski, Rodriguez, Shirley, Kulago, & Bulington 2008). On the other hand, research does suggest that critical reflection as a disciplined practice of systematic inquiry promotes multicultural competencies for teaching and learning (Husu, Toom, & Patrikainen 2008).

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Research has shown that a majority of pre-service teachers are White, middle class, and monolingual speakers of English with little or no exposure to the diverse backgrounds and cultural knowledge of non-White students (Sleeter, 2008). Most of these pre-service teachers do not examine or challenge their own knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives toward themselves (self) and diverse cultural groups (other) (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Further, many pre-service teachers do not engage in the social, historical, and political issues that relate directly to inequality and lack of opportunities among different cultural groups in schools and society (Jennings, 2002). Consequently, teacher preparation for multicultural education attempts to address these issues by bringing a change in pre-service teachers' perceptions of self and other by providing opportunities for critical reflection through course work, cross-cultural field experiences, and study abroad programs (Sharma, 2009).

In this article we examine how critical reflection during a study abroad program to Honduras facilitates pre-service teachers' multicultural competencies for personal and professional growth. We position this study within teacher education literature with a focus on multicultural education, study abroad, and critical reflection. Next, we draw from Dewey's notion of critical reflection to provide the conceptual framework for the study. Subsequently, we highlight a specific study abroad program to Honduras as the context of the study. We follow this with an outline of the basic qualitative research design and report findings from the study. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of our study for teacher preparation and teacher educators invested in developing multicultural competencies in pre-service teachers.

### Literature Review

Scholars have approached multicultural education in different ways targeted toward different ideals ranging from traditional multicultural education aimed at assimilation (Ravitch, 1990) to recognizing cultural excellence (D'Souza, 1991), from the politics of identity such as race, class, and gender differences (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009) to cultural hybridity (Wang, 2010). In theory and practice each conceptualization of multicultural education is different in ideology; however, there is strong agreement among teacher educators that the aim of multicultural teacher education is to develop pre-service teachers' multicultural competencies for teaching and learning. Specifically, it is considered important that pre-service teachers develop multicultural competencies such as the ability to question their own

beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions; identify practices that are biased; and change their perceptions of self and other (Keengwe, 2010).

There is also strong agreement among teacher educators that contexts such as study abroad offer rich cross-cultural experiences that expose pre-service teachers to diverse classrooms (Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009). Research on the impact of study abroad on pre-service teachers note that studying abroad promotes a deeper understanding of the role of culture and language on teaching and learning (Quezada, 2005); recognition that the cultural background and personal knowledge of teachers affect student learning (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008); and that after studying abroad pre-service teachers were more willing to work in diverse classrooms (Cushner, 2009). A few studies note study abroad fosters greater confidence, open-mindedness, ability to see the local and global in context, and evokes self-critique and critical reflection (Cushner & Mahon, 2009).

What is critical reflection? Critical reflection as a study of self includes one's culture, histories, worldview, and lived experiences that impact one's personal knowledge and professional practice (Husu, Toom, & Patrikainan, 2008). Critical reflection brings about awareness of the self by calling into question one's prior knowledge or taken-for-granted frames of references which include beliefs, assumptions, values, and cultural norms of thinking and acting (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). These norms and socialized ways of thinking and acting shape one's responses toward difference affecting how self and other are understood (Shoffner, 2008). In the context of teaching and learning such relationships include how teachers frame minority students through biases against cultural differences, stereotyping of cultural groups, and exclusion of specific groups of students by virtue of what is considered the norm.

The above literature review suggests that pre-service teachers benefited from some form of reflection; however, critical reflection for developing multicultural competencies in pre-service teachers during a study abroad program remains understudied and undertheorized. Our study seeks to address this gap by examining the following question: How does the practice of critical reflection promote multicultural competencies in pre-service teachers during a study abroad program to Honduras?

### Conceptual Framework

Critical reflection is related to Dewey's notion of reflective practice: experiencing, reflecting, and acting upon experience to transform how we perceive ourselves and others. For Dewey (1933), critical reflection as a meaning-making process is the basis of all teaching and learning.

Dewey informs us that experience does not guarantee change or learning. What lends change or learning to experience is the ability to be able to make meaning of experience or the perceived meaning constructed from experience. According to Dewey, the goal of critical reflection is to make meaning of one's experience that brings change into one's understanding of the self and the world—self-awareness and awareness of the other.

Applied to educational experience, Dewey's notion of critical reflection is a dialectical interaction between the self and the world. Without this interaction there is no understanding of the self, the world, or experience, nor is there change in one's awareness or learning. Dewey (1933) defines reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). Dewey enumerates six steps to reflective thought as a disciplined practice of "systematic and protracted inquiry" critical to teaching and learning. These are:

1. An experience.
2. Making inferences from the experience.
3. A state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt.
4. Multiple hypothesis.
5. Reconstructing experience to create a hypothesis.
6. Putting the hypothesis to test or taking action.

We draw from Dewey's six steps for critical reflection to provide the conceptual framework for this study. Specifically, we examine how pre-service teachers interpret experience based on personal knowledge; identify experiences that create conflict; interpret issues from multiple perspectives; generate questions that lead to change in perceptions of self and other; and recognize that perceptions must undergo constant transformation.

## Research Methodology

### ***Background for the Study***

In this section we provide the background for our study and the research design for the Honduras study abroad program. Developed by two faculty members at a mid-Western university in 2003, the Honduras study abroad for pre-service teachers is organized each year as a five-week summer program aimed at developing multicultural competencies through a reflective approach. Pre-service teachers attend pre-trip orientation on campus, spend three weeks in Honduras, and attend post-trip interviews and discussions. The program constitutes course work on content and pedagogical knowledge; field observations in multiple

educational settings; service learning projects; informal social events, and cultural tours.

As part of the program pre-service teachers are enrolled in two courses, "Exploring Teaching as a Career" and "Multiculturalism and Education." In the former course, pre-service teachers explore their perceptions of what it means to teach diverse students the social, historical, and political nature of schools. The latter course, "Multiculturalism and Education," aims at developing pre-service teachers' multicultural competencies by questioning their own beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives toward cultural difference, and critically reflecting on the implications of their perceptions for classroom practice. Written assignments for the two courses include autobiographical reflections and journal entries in which students are encouraged to make connections between course work, multicultural experiences in Honduras, and field observations in various school settings. An important component of coursework is field observations either in an elementary school in Zamorano or a secondary school in Tegucigalpa and visits to three rural schools where they participate in project learning activities.

### ***Research Design***

The qualitative methodology for this study is positioned within critical research. According to Merriam (2009), critical research like other forms of qualitative research is interpretive as researchers explore a phenomenon in which participants make meaning of the world. However, unlike basic qualitative studies, critical research seeks not just to explore and understand but to examine, challenge, and transform participants' perceptions of the self and other. Thus our research examined:

1. How participants interpret experience within a given context,
2. How participants construct the self,
3. What meaning participants attribute to their experiences with the other,
4. How participants analyze these perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward self and other, and
5. What kind of reflection and transformative action their meaning-making evokes.

### ***Participants***

We engaged in research with 49 preservice teachers aged 18-to-24 years who participated in the Honduras study abroad program between 2003 and 2010. All participants were full-time students, identified as

U.S. American, most were elementary or secondary education majors; 33 had little experience with international travel; 37 identified as female, while the remaining 12 identified as male; 47 identified as White, one as bi-racial White/Asian female, and one as Latino male. Five pre-service teachers were fluent in Spanish; six had a working knowledge of Spanish; and the remainder had to rely on translators or English speaking members of the host community.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected in three phases. In the pre-trip phase a demographic chart was drawn for each year's participants listing names, subject major, years in the teacher education program, international travel, age, race, gender, and languages spoken. During this phase, in an hour-long pre-trip interview each participant was asked about their perceptions of Honduran culture and schooling, cross-cultural challenges they anticipate, and what study abroad in Honduras might offer them in terms of personal and professional growth.

In the next phase of the data collection, on-site individual and focus interviews were held. The on-site focus interviews were held weekly and for one hour each, aimed at letting participants share experiences, and discuss their unique perspectives. The individual interviews focused on participants' study abroad experiences, and how they were negotiating a different culture and language. During the post-trip phase, each pre-service teacher was asked about the impact of their experiences studying abroad. Subsequently, after becoming classroom teachers, two of the participants were asked to revisit their study abroad experience and speak about its impact on their teaching practices.

Other forms of data consisted of participants' course assignments and reflective journals, and researchers' field notes. In course assignments, reflective journals, and class discussions participants were asked to think in terms of what they were observing in the classroom; how events related to their previous knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives; what conflicts or doubts were experienced; and how they made meaning of their experiences.

### ***Analysis of Data***

In the study analysis was an ongoing and emerging process. We followed Merriam's (2009) six analytical steps to make sense of the data. The six steps of analysis are:

1. Searching for categories and themes,
2. Linking of themes to propositions in the literature,

3. Deductions of themes aligned with conceptual framework,
4. Interpretation of data,
5. Checking for trustworthiness of data and analysis, and
6. Reporting the findings.

Accordingly, we categorized data from interviews, assignments, journal reflections, discussions, and field notes; sorted themes that supported propositions from the literature and conceptual framework; compared themes emergent themes across data; interpreted the data; and conducted a member-check to verify interpretations of data. During the interpretation we looked for transformative changes in preservice teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. Several themes emerged, however, we report on six major themes drawn from Dewey's steps of critical reflection.

### Findings

We organized the findings to provide examples from the data that illustrate each step of critical reflection drawn from Dewey's conceptual framework followed by our interpretation of the data to show how each step in the practice of critical reflection advances multicultural competencies in pre-service teachers.

#### ***Theme 1: Preconceived Notions Based on Taken-for-Granted Frames of Reference***

In pre-trip interviews, many pre-service teachers spoke about their expectations and prior knowledge of Honduras. Below is an excerpt from a pre-trip interview with a 21-year-old White pre-service teacher who had never travelled outside the U.S. Her response to the interviewer's questions is representative of many of the pre-service teachers who had little experience outside their own culture and, therefore, described their prior knowledge of Honduran culture from what they had previously assumed, rather than learned firsthand:

*Interviewer:* What do you expect Honduras to be like?

*Gladys:* I expect that people are different, very poor, crowded streets, not so clean, hardly anyone speaking English.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any idea about the schools in Honduras?

*Gladys:* Yes, I have heard that a number of children don't go to school as they work in sweatshops. I know that people are poor so children have to work.

*Interviewer:* As a future teacher, are you comfortable with the idea that children have to work rather than go to school?



*Gladys:* I guess. If that is the rule or the culture then it is their decision. If parents are happy and schools don't mind then I suppose it's ok.

Gladys' responses are in keeping with the previous literature reporting on the beliefs and assumptions that constitute pre-service teachers' prior knowledge of a culture different from their own and their misconceptions based on perceptions of self and other. When Gladys anticipates poverty and uncleanliness she shows a common taken-for-granted assumption about Honduran culture, and a lack of reflection in not questioning the foundations of personal knowledge or how she has constructed the other. Her acceptance of Honduran children not attending school evidences her preconceived notions about Honduras, and her lack of self-awareness reinforces the need for transformation in her perception of self and other through Dewey's notion of critical reflection.

***Theme 2: Identify Experiences  
that Create Conflict between Self and Other***

The excerpt below is taken from a recorded discussion among a group of three White pre-service teachers, Rita aged 20, John aged 24, and Sabrina aged 21, who have had little cross-cultural exposure in the past. The discussion takes place after their first week of field observation in Honduran schools and engages pre-service teachers in the Deweyan notion of conflict and doubt as generative of critical reflection on one's personal beliefs.

*Rita:* In the P.E. class I felt as if the teacher was only asking the boys to play while the girls were just sitting. Besides, not knowing Spanish makes me a little nervous when I step outside. And the teacher's attitude doesn't help either.

*John:* I know. Girls were not expected to participate in any sport.

*Sabrina:* I asked the P.E. teacher to let me join the game. Instead he called for a break.

*John:* That's just the way things are here. During my home stay last night, I saw the family dynamics. The three girls and the mom served dinner, washed dishes, and ate in the kitchen. The dad and the son ate at the table and chatted with us.

*Sabrina:* The girls are treated differently and it does not feel right. I kind of feel bad for the girls here.

*John:* Think again! It happens in the U.S. too. We just don't talk about it.

In the above discussion, John and Sabrina identify gender issues bringing conflict into their experiences. Although both preservice teachers



grapple with coming to terms with gendered roles in Honduran society, Sabrina accepts gendered roles in Honduran culture but is blind to its enactment in U.S. society. John seems to imply that if such discriminatory practices exist in the U.S., he is willing to accept the practice in Honduras. John challenges Sabrina to rethink her beliefs when viewing other cultural practices provoking her to look closer to home, yet closes the discussion without a deeper examination of the conflict.

***Theme 3: Interpret the Experience  
to Connect to Broader Construction of Meaning***

Discussions, guided questions prompted by the researchers, and reflections in journals provide examples of how pre-service teachers were challenging their own perspectives that lead to new understandings of self, other, and the world. In their journals, many pre-service teachers reflected that their previous notions of students in Honduras classrooms had been misconceived. For example, after two weeks of field observation in a private school in Honduras, Andrew, a White, 20-year-old pre-service teacher writes in his journal:

*Andrew:* Wow! Talk about being wrong. I was in the computer science class for my observations and the eleventh graders were the smartest I have come across. I thought I would be teaching and explaining to them. I had even checked out all the terms in Spanish I would need to teach them. But the students were teaching me. Forget computer science, they knew more about the U.S. than I knew about Honduras. I thought the schools would not be well-equipped, being a poor country, and students would not be academic because they lacked resources. I was so wrong. The school had a lot of technology and other resources and the students asked so many questions, I was impressed. Makes me wonder why we think America is number one in everything. Really? All false! The kids were all so disciplined and their teacher had a double M.A. and was doing his Ph.D.

Andrew's reflections are directed at questioning his own taken-for-granted assumptions that students in Honduras might not be the "smartest" or that "a poor country" implies poor academic performance. Challenged by the experience, Andrew practices what Dewey calls a necessary step in critical reflection—connecting personal experience to a broader construction of meaning that leads to questioning the social, historical, and political construction of knowledge about U.S. vis-a-vis the rest of the world. Andrew also interprets teaching and learning as an ongoing relationship organized around complex social, global, and cultural understanding of self and the other.

***Theme 4: Examining One's Own Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perspectives***

In the second week of field observation, all the pre-service teachers visit community schools where they participate in art and craft projects. The excerpt below is taken from a recorded group discussion in which two of the pre-service teachers, Ash and Lynne, share their thoughts with the rest of the group as they struggle to make meaning of a specific classroom experience. Both Ash and Lynne identify as White, are 22 years old, and have never travelled abroad.

*Ash:* I was really struggling to make the kids understand how to cut the paper plates for making a mask.

*Lynne:* The kids were struggling with simple things like paper, glue, and scissors.

*Ash:* I wanted to help but the kids just didn't get it. They kept messing the glue.

*Lynne:* I cut holes in the mask and showed it to them.

*Ash:* Maybe the kids were special education or something? Or they didn't understand English. I don't know. Or I wasn't explaining properly.

*Lynne:* There's something else going on here—because when we told them to play outside they were running and yelling like normal kids.

*Ash:* True. Maybe the kids have never used a pair of scissors or glue or paper plates for crafts?

*Lynne:* Never thought that was possible. Now I feel horrible because I was getting so frustrated with them. We take so much for granted—our kids in the U.S. have so much that things like glue and pair of scissors is common stuff. I wish the Honduran teacher had said something.

*Ash:* Think of all the kids who come into class and the things we assume as teachers.

*Lynne:* Then we expect kids to follow instructions when we assume so much of the instruction.

*Ash:* It is not the kids who are missing information. It is us; we have so much to learn about the kids. Learn from kids.

Sharing their experiences with each other offered Ash and Lynne an opportunity to talk through and connect their experience of studying abroad to prior assumptions about teaching and learning. Ash and Lynne connect experience through insightful and systematic inquiry to realize that multicultural competency is not about changing the other but about challenging their own certainties and transforming their

understanding of the other rather than transforming the other. This examination is what Dewey calls that critical moment of uncertainty that opens beliefs to other ways of knowing.

***Theme 5: Transformation  
in Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perspectives***

In the course of studying abroad, many pre-service teachers questioned personal and professional knowledge, reduced biases, and began to think about equity, privilege, and deprivation. The following excerpt from Mary, a 20-year-old pre-service teacher's journal is representative of many pre-service teachers' transformed perspectives as they engaged in Dewey's practice of critical reflection as a systematic and generative process.

*Mary:* The students knew more about U.S. geography than their own. How odd. Maybe the teacher is forced to teach that way. Maybe students want to learn. Maybe teachers don't have any idea what to teach? Or am I jumping to conclusions about other classrooms? About other teachers? And students? How would I feel about teaching Honduras geography instead of U.S. geography? What does that mean for teaching social studies, or language?

The context of a Honduras classroom provided Mary the opportunity to reflect on her classroom beliefs, pushing her past those beliefs to suggest the broader implications of how content is organized and the politics of teaching objectives and choices. Reflecting on the geography class, Mary was surprised that the students in Honduras were not studying the geography of Honduras. Mary's systematic questioning moves from choice of content, to the classroom teacher and students, to examining her own feelings and attitudes and looking for alternative explanations.

***Theme 6: Recognition that Perceptions  
Must Undergo Constant Transformation***

Comments in pre-service teachers' journals indicate prominent patterns of analysis showing a change in perceptions. As pre-service teachers took ownership of their changing beliefs and perspectives vis-à-vis the self and other they recognized the implications of these changes, the place of studying abroad for facilitating change, and the educational significance of critical reflection in promoting multicultural competencies. Revisiting his study abroad experiences Jay addresses preservice teachers who have not traveled to Honduras.

*Jay:* Now when I face a challenging or complex situation in the class-

room, I think about my study abroad experiences and the kids I met in Honduras, particularly one special kid who touched me deeply. And I think, how can I think about this situation differently? How can I act in the interest of all the kids in my classroom? Just think, every kid in your classroom is that special kid asking you to rethink Who am I? Who is this kid? What is the kid's culture? What is mine? What needs to change here?

In this follow-up presentation after becoming a certified classroom teacher, Jay indicates positive changes had occurred during and after his study abroad experience. Jay speaks about his own transformation, particularly with respect to diverse students, as he continues to practice critical reflection for multicultural education.

### Discussion on Educational Significance

We offer a few concluding comments on the educational significance of our study for developing pre-service teachers' multicultural competencies through ongoing critical reflection. Viewed as a framework, Dewey's six steps for critical reflection offers a starting point from where pre-service teachers can begin to develop multicultural competencies for teaching and learning. As a form of systematic inquiry, critical reflection engages preservice teachers in examining their beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives toward self and other and deepens their understanding of how personal knowledge is related to educational issues and the broader construction of meaning. Critical reflection for multicultural competencies helps pre-service teachers to identify and build upon the strengths of different cultures rather than view minority students as a problem that needs to be fixed. As an ongoing personal and professional practice, critical reflection positions teacher education students to take ownership of their beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives and develop new interpretations for multicultural teaching and learning.

Therefore, this study advocates a combination of two registers when preparing teacher education students for multicultural classrooms through study abroad programs. The first register, critical reflection, provides a general framework for teacher education students to develop multicultural competencies by examining their beliefs and perceptions and questioning how their beliefs and perceptions shape their worldview toward self and other. The second register looks toward transformative ways for framing multicultural experiences, constructing multiple perspectives, and reconceptualizing self and other as a continuous and systematic educational practice. A strategy that combines both registers

can serve as a powerful vehicle for preparing teacher education students for multicultural classrooms.

In conclusion we summarize the educational significance of our study for multicultural teacher education:

- First, critical reflection for developing multicultural competencies in teacher education students is necessary if teachers in U.S. American schools are to succeed with teaching diverse students.
- Second, participating in well-organized and structured programs such as study abroad infused with opportunities for critical reflection is one way of preparing multicultural teachers.
- Third, exposure to diverse cultural knowledge and pedagogical practices enacted in diverse educational settings offers teacher education students opportunities for developing multicultural competencies.
- Finally, universities and colleges around the world attentive to diversity will benefit from promoting critical reflection as a framework in teacher education programs for developing multicultural competencies in future teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators.

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