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## **MENTORING FOR GLOBAL COMPETENCE: TEACHERS PREPARING THEIR PEERS FOR INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING**

### **Abstract**

This case study examines the understudied phenomenon of teacher mentoring for global competence and brings attention to the relationship between the self-identified secondary school teachers who participate in an international service-learning (ISL) project in Nicaragua and a Non-Government Organization (NGO) which facilitates these short, but intensive, ISL experiences. All of the participating schools are part of a publically-funded Catholic school district in the Canadian province of Ontario. The NGO, Canadian Youth Abroad (CYA), establishes the programmatic framework for the experience as they have staff and local partner agencies in Nicaragua. The teachers who travel with the students are mentored and accompanied on the trip by their more experienced peers – teachers who have prior experience in Nicaragua with the program. The “veteran” teachers have developed the administrative skills associated with organizing such trips and they reserve these duties to themselves. The mentoring process concentrates on imparting to the new teacher-participants the particular values of the program. These values challenge the dominant charitable “help the poor” model of north-south engagement. The teacher-mentors, following the CYA solidarity model, stress the values of reciprocity and solidarity between the Canadian and the Nicaraguan participants.

### **Introduction**

This study reviews an International Service Learning (ISL) programme facilitated by a Canadian Non-Government Organization, Canadian Youth Abroad (henceforth CYA)<sup>1</sup>. CYA was founded in 1992 by Canadian activists, most of whom were teachers who had been deeply engaged in the movement in solidarity with Nicaragua’s Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s. Following the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, these teacher-activists wanted to continue the solidarity work with Nicaragua. Consequently, when an order of Catholic priests decided to sell a house they owned in Managua, Nicaragua’s capital, two of these activists undertook to finance the purchase of the house to provide them with a local base of operations. They decided to establish two core programmes: one provides modest financial and technical support to small projects proposed by Nicaraguan community groups and the other one offers a unique ISL programme. The CYA ISL programme was established to facilitate working visits by Canadian students to learn about Nicaragua, to allow them to explore global north/south relations in general and to encourage them to take action on behalf of social change in Canada and globally. The particular ISL program under review in this study takes the form of collaboration between the CYA and a network of secondary school teachers who work for a publically funded Catholic District School Board (henceforth the DSB).

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<sup>1</sup> All names, both of persons or organizations, have been changed.

Teachers and students from the DSB have been involved with the CYA ISL programme since 1994.

CYA has promoted global citizenship education from the time of its founding. UNESCO (2013) defines global citizenship as creating “a sense of belonging to a global community and a common humanity, a feeling of global solidarity, identity and responsibility that generates actions based on and respect [for] universal values”. The two core initiatives – support for small community projects and the ISL programme – are inter-related. The financial contribution made by the visiting ISL participants constitutes an important percentage of the total funding of the projects and the participants engage in physical labour on those projects when they are in the host communities.

Over the years, CYA’s focus has remained largely the same although the organization has distanced itself from partisan support of the now governing Sandinistas. Today, the CYA educational programme stresses the pre 1990 revolutionary history of the Sandinista movement and the contemporary struggle of the Nicaraguan people at the local level to overcome poverty and social marginalization. Importantly, CYA also views Nicaragua as a case study of the difficulties confronting the nations of the global south to achieve sustainable socio-economic development and democracy (interview with CYA co-founder Tony Sorensen).

The trips taken by the DSB participants involve 12 to 14 day teacher-led student visits to Nicaragua. Typically the students are 16 – 17 year-old senior secondary school learners. The two weeks includes travel time, a day or two at the CYA’s Managua educational centre (i.e., the house purchased in 1992) before and after the time spent in the host community, and 6 to 8 days living with a host family and working on a project. Frequently, the groups stay in rural communities. While ISL is an increasingly common practice, the CYA model followed by these particular teachers is, we argue, unique. In the first place, as noted above, CYA arose out of the 1980s Nicaragua solidarity movement and the impact of this history is deeply infused into the organization’s approach to its ISL programme. Despite the central importance of this history to the CYA philosophy, many of the young teachers who now participate in the CYA ISL programme see the revolutionary period as ancient history; furthermore, they do not necessarily come to the programme with a critical perspective on the socio-economic and political issues of importance to CYA. Another unique feature is that the DSB, while it permits the CYA ISL programme to operate in its schools, is not officially involved with the programme. The student-participants receive no course credit and all activities related to the pre-trip departure and post-trip reflections are held after school hours or on weekends outside school property. This is to ensure the independence of the programme from outside influences including from officials of the DSB (interview with Steve O’Connor, the first teacher to lead a student group from the DSB).

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research is based on interviews conducted by the first author in late 2012 with a total of 9 teachers including CYA co-founder Tony Sorensen. Four of the interviewees were male and 5 were female. In this article we also make a reference to an interview conducted several years before within the context of a

previous research project (O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013) with Steve O'Connor a solidarity activist and teacher at the same DSB. At that time O'Connor provided important background information on the history of the programme in this particular DSB where he served as the founding mentor and, for 20 years, until his recent retirement, was an active participant. This purposeful sampling aligns with our intention to gain detailed insights from the specific group to understand the central phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2011). In addition, the first author has personally observed the engagement of CYA staff in Canada and during multiple field trips to Nicaragua. Descriptions of these interactions are based on these interviews and field observations.

All of the schools in which the teachers were interviewed were in close proximity to each other; several other participating schools were overlooked because of distance and time constraints. The teachers were chosen based on the fact that they had made multiple trips, not because of their particular perspective on the programme or the number of years they had been teaching. Consequently the group represented both those younger teachers relatively new to the programme and others with considerable experience leading student groups to Nicaragua.

The interviews, which ranged from 45 minutes to well over an hour, were audio-taped and then transcribed. Each interview consisted of 13 questions which formed the basis of a wider-ranging conversation. The questions ranged from inquiring about their history with the programme and their motivation for participating in it, to their ideas on what the community and the students get out of the programme to the mentoring process that they experienced and, in many cases, directed. For the purpose of this paper we report responses pertaining to the actual mentoring practice.

### **Mentoring for Global Competence**

The CYA model of ISL has two unique characteristics. It is explicitly based on a solidarity and not a charity model and, since none of the teachers who lead the student groups come to the experience with formal training in global education or in ISL, the new teacher-participants are mentored prior to, during, and after the trip to Nicaragua by their more experienced peers. Although the literature demonstrates the value of mentoring and the importance of mentors this mentoring is invariably associated with veteran teachers assisting new teachers in the first years of their professional lives (Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010). The literature has little to say about mentoring for global competence (Carano, 2013). This mentoring is designed to expose the new teacher-participants to the values and the critical perspective that underlies the CYA solidarity-based philosophy of ISL programming. The model presumes that the participating teachers practice, or are open to learning about, transformative pedagogies as found in the work of Paulo Freire (1970). This is understood to include teaching their students how to look at the world from a social justice perspective and encouraging them to think about how they might engage in activities that have social change as their objective. This model stresses the importance of establishing reciprocal relations between the visiting teachers and students and the host community that receives them. Establishing such reciprocity is far from simple proposition and requires the teachers and students to internalize the value that they are not going to the community to "help" their hosts. Rather, they are

seeking to learn about the lived reality of their Nicaraguan host families and to learn about the history and culture of their county. In addition, the teachers and the CYA hope that the students will also learn about the inequity of north/south relations as they collaborate with community members on a project chosen by the community and funded, at least partially, by the visiting students.

CYA recognizes that Freirian transformations in teacher practice will not happen overnight or even after a single trip (if at all). The success of the mentoring programme depends largely on the mentoring skills of the veteran participants and in the openness of the new teacher-participants to adopt the solidarity model upon which the programme is based. The mentoring teachers who are charged with imparting both the critical values and the organizational skills that are required of teacher-participants are not left entirely to their own devices as they prepare their colleagues for involvement in the programme. The Canadian-based CYA staff and volunteers are available to assist the mentors and support the student groups prior to their departure and to help with the all-important process of debriefing upon their return. Furthermore, the Nicaragua-based staff of CYA provide workshops to all of the participants, teachers and students alike, upon their arrival in Managua and again after they return from their placement in a host community. The CYA staff-led presentations reinforce the programme's pedagogical orientation, seek to explain the inadequacies of the charitable model of northern engagement with southern partners and stresses the centrality of reciprocity and solidarity to the programme. It is this process of instilling these values into the programme through the mentoring programme and the involvement of the CYA staff in Canada and, above all, in Nicaragua, that we refer to as mentoring for global competence.

### **The Fundamental Pedagogical Basis of the Programme: Challenging the Charitable Instinct**

The literature is replete with references to scholars and practitioners who are uncomfortable with ISL practices that reinforce dominant charitable notions of helping the poor (Crabtree, 2008; Dear, 2012; King, 2013). The CYA leadership fully recognizes that the distinction between solidarity and charity does not come easily for all of the teacher or student participants. The schools from which these participants are drawn are, after all, Catholic schools and charity is a central tenet of their faith. Asking Catholic teachers to challenge their peers with respect to problematizing charity is asking them to undertake an enormous task. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that many of the participating teachers come from the Catholic social justice tradition that arose in the post Vatican era. The CYA programme reflects their critical understanding of the social role of the church and resonates with their peers and their students even as it challenges the more conservative Catholic discourse around charity. The experience in Nicaragua serves to reinforce this critical stance. The very fact that a number of the teachers involved with the programme over the years are school chaplains or are teachers of religion underscores their level of comfort with the essential message contained in the CYA programme.

Consequently, the mentoring model, for the most part, achieves the CYA mandate to offer an ISL programme that challenges dominant modes of thinking about north/south relations. The mentoring teachers, even the younger ones, do, as a

group, constitute a reservoir of historical memory and critical understanding. Sarah, for example, who with her colleague Ian, leads the Nicaragua trips at their school, stresses the importance of making this distinction and the importance of teaching the students the value of solidarity. Sarah is a young teacher with an excellent sense of the CYA vision. She summarizes the distinction nicely. For her, charity involves going into a community to “save” the people from the conditions of poverty and marginalization in which they find themselves or to “change things according to what we think [they] should be”. The idea of solidarity, in contrast, she says, “is going in [to the community] with a sense of respect for what the people of Nicaragua have already been through, and supporting them side by side in continuing that struggle for independence, autonomy, and access to the good things in life” (interview with Sarah). Charity, CYA argues, deepens the structural dependency and reinforces the notion of northern superiority and the sense that the south can only solve its problems with the help of the north and of northerners (Crabtree, 2008; Gutentag, 2009; Gough, 2012; King, 2013). Solidarity, in contrast, assumes mutual respect and equality, the sense that all of us are in this together, and the understanding that both of the parties engaged in the ISL project have much to learn from each other. In some cases these benefits are tangible, such as the completed project, and in other cases the benefits are intangible and take the form of mutual learning and critical awareness.

### **Teacher-to-Teacher Mentoring**

The first characteristic of this mentoring process is that new teacher-participants are eased into the experience and do not find themselves taking on major tasks for which they have not been prepared. With the exception of having supervisory responsibilities while actually in Nicaragua, the new teacher-participants are treated very much like the students on the trip. The lead teacher handles the complex details of dealing with the school board's procedures that regulate taking students overseas, deals with parents, heads up the fundraising activities and, in consultation with CYA staff and volunteers, organizes the curricular component of the programme. As they gain experience, teachers who participate in subsequent trips take on more responsibility in collaboration with the lead teacher, although some, in fact, had full responsibility for leading a group thrust upon them rather quickly. Stan, a teacher from CYA co-founder Tony Sorensen's school accompanied Steve O'Connor on the first DSB trip. Stan led his own group the following year and Paula, who accompanied Stan, was transferred to a new school after only her second trip with Stan. She quickly went to work to establish the programme in her new school which led her, over many years, to mentor numerous teacher participants herself.

Paula commented on how Steve played the role of mentor to Stan who, in turn, mentored her and another teacher, James. She described the mentoring process as follows:

We were all new but what [Stan] did that first year is he went with [Steve's school] so that he could kind of shadow them for that year which was fabulous so that when we then went through it the next year ourselves, we had a guideline to help us. [Steve's school] became our role model and we followed that and then we added our own things to it (Interview with Paula).

Ian was one of the many teachers mentored by Paula over the years. Like Paula, he was mentored at one school, participated in that school's trips and then was transferred to a new school that did not have a Nicaragua programme. That provided him with the opportunity, like so many others, to establish a programme at his new school. He described the mentoring process that he experienced under Paula's guidance as follows:

The first year I was predominantly a teacher supervisor. I went to all the [weekly] meetings that we ran through the entire year [which form] part of the solidarity model ... My responsibility was just to be there in attendance, to watch the students, make sure that they're following the guidelines that we developed, and [do] whatever else that was asked of me, but it wasn't much (interview with Ian).

It is noteworthy that Ian specifically mentions the weekly pre-departure meetings focused on the solidarity model. He is now a keen supporter of that model and ensures that its values are infused into the experiences that he provides the students who he accompanies to Nicaragua.

Paula saw how serious Ian was during the actual trip to Nicaragua thus she asked him to become more deeply involved and "she started showing me things behind the scenes" by which he means "dealing with the board's travel policy, [working with] parents, and taking a much more active role in the organizational details of the trip". Ian noted that Paula did not ask him to become more deeply involved until he had completed the full cycle as a teacher-participant. He surmised that she was evaluating his seriousness and giving him the opportunity to make a decision about his continued involvement based on having observed the entire process (interview with Ian). Such high quality mentoring has ensured that while not all teachers have participated in multiple trips – the time and energy demands are significant – a core group in 8 schools do repeat and provide mentoring to those colleagues who choose to participate.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This is a case of an understudied phenomenon of teacher mentoring for global competence. We illustrate a successful partnership between secondary school teachers from one DSB who participate in an ISL project in Nicaragua and the NGO, CYA which established the project and facilitates these ISL experiences. We argue that the CYA model followed by the participants of this project is unique. Firstly, it introduces the participants, teachers and students, to inequalities that exist between the global north and south. CYA views Nicaragua as a case study of the difficulties confronting the nations of the global south to achieve sustainable socio-economic development and democracy. Secondly, the programmatic framework is explicitly based on a solidarity and not charity model. Given that the participating teachers and students come from Catholic schools where charity is a deeply engrained principle of their faith we are convinced for the reasons cited above related to the influence of progressive versions of Catholic social doctrine on the participants that overall this apparent contradiction does not compromise the integrity of the CYA programme.

Two critical elements seem to contribute to the success of the now 20 year old ISL programme in the DSB. First is the quality of the partnerships that CYA has with Nicaraguan organizations both at the national and the local level. These partnerships ensure that the experience provided to the students is grounded in the host community and that all necessary measures have been taken to ensure that the visits by the young Canadians are welcomed by the community and that the experience is safe and educative. Second, the mentoring process has been perfected over the years with the more experienced teachers having developed the ability to pass on the values and the skills associated with the programme. Furthermore, the mentors can count on CYA to support in terms of the mentoring process and the preparation of the students prior to, during, and following the trip. The new teacher-participants are eased into the experience and gradually introduced to various tasks. The effectiveness of this mentoring model is evident in the fact that, over time, a number of the less experienced teachers who were mentored have established programmes at their new schools and led their own groups to Nicaragua. We are convinced that the high level of participation at this DSB is largely explained by the simple fact that these two elements are well established and the opportunity to participate is readily available and attractive to teachers who might otherwise never consider such an option.

This case study of an ISL programme that is characterized by peer mentoring and a collaboration between the teachers and an NGO demonstrates the potential of the model. As we seek ways of enhancing teacher global competence and providing opportunities for meaningful and respectful ISL experiences, further study of this, and other, collaborative models would be helpful in the promotion and the expansion of the transformative educational experience represented by the CYA ISL programme.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Dr. Geraldine Balzar of the University of Saskatchewan (Canada) who participated in the conceptualization of this paper and gave us very helpful assistance in its early stages.

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