

Dissonance During International Service-Learning: “You can’t go back to the way you were before”

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated pre-occupational therapy students’ descriptions of dissonance during a two-week service-learning immersion program in Guatemala. Thirty-one students participated in student-led group reflections during two program iterations. Qualitative analysis of transcripts yielded three themes: context, experience, and outcome. The interconnectedness of all three themes illustrates the interdependence of intense, international service-learning experiences, critical reflection, and transformation. Findings suggest the impact of international service-learning experiences on student development.

Keywords: international service learning immersion, transformative learning, occupational therapy

Internationalization of Occupational Therapy Education

Incorporating global learning in occupational therapy education programs provides multicultural experiences and prepares occupational therapy students for practice (Aldrich & Grajo, 2017; Horton, 2009). Many avenues to internationalize the curriculum exist, such as incorporating diversity in course content, and offering collaborative online international learning (COIL) courses (Guth & Rubin, 2015), service-learning experiences, international immersion experiences, and international clinical fieldwork trainings. Specifically, international experiences requiring students to live in a culture different from their own have been powerful in occupational therapy student development (Crowe et al., 2016; Ekelman et al., 2003; Humbert et al., 2012; Mu et al., 2010; Simonelis et al., 2011; Sonn & Vermeulen, 2018).

International experiences facilitate the development of cultural competence, as they allow students to view the dominant culture as an outsider, and to share experiences, process

feelings, and apply learning to their future professional practice (Ceo-DiFrancesco, Dunn et al., 2020; Ekelman et al., 2003; Humbert et al., 2012). Students who completed an international fieldwork experience reported gaining practice skills through collaborative learning, cultural negotiations, and thinking independently (Simonelis et al., 2011). Furthermore, when students engaged in an international experience, they reported an increased openness in working with culturally diverse clients (Aldrich & Grajo, 2017; Crowe et al., 2016; Humbert et al., 2012; Sim & Mackenzie, 2016).

Specific benefits of an international immersive experience include developing empathy by being in the minority (Mu et al., 2010). Often, by being outside the dominant culture, students experience periods of dissonance, dealing with intense emotional reactions. Therefore, the importance of processing periods of dissonance in a safe space while engaged in an international immersion is foundational to the developmental process of cultural competence

(Ceo-DiFrancesco, Dunn et al., 2020). Processing the periods of dissonance can lead to perspective transformation.

Transformative Learning Theory

Namaste (2017) suggested a connection between transformative learning and the intercultural growth of university students during an international immersion program. Mezirow (1978) first proposed transformational learning theory to represent adult learning, and initially included 10 phases in his descriptions of the adult learning process. His theory underwent multiple revisions (Kitchenham, 2008), including the addition of an 11th phase pertaining to interaction with others (Mezirow, 2006). The theory describes two types of perspective transformation: one is an accumulation of experiences leading to transformation, and another is a singular challenging and deeply moving experience, prompting one to reorganize their current schemata (Mezirow, 1985). The singular experience is described as a disorienting dilemma, challenging students to consider new frames of reference, distinct perspectives, and different realities (Mezirow, 2000). Critical self-reflection was deemed as essential to shifting perspectives (Mezirow, 1998) and subsequent planned action based on new insights (Dirkx et al., 2006). Later iterations of the theoretical framework (Cranton, 2016; Taylor, 2000) have encouraged a multitude of research on the application of transformational learning theory to adult education (Kitchenham, 2008), while critics of the framework have suggested that it does not address the important role of affect or emotion in the learning process (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Kiely, 2005; Taylor, 2000).

Kiely (2005) proposed an empirically generated, transformational service-learning process model based on a longitudinal case study of an international service-learning program in Nicaragua. The model consists of five learning processes, including contextual border crossing (personal, structural, historical, programmatic factors), dissonance,

personalizing, processing, and connecting (2005). According to Kiely, this transformational service-learning process model can serve as a framework for promoting transformational learning during international service learning (2005). Finally, researchers and educators are cautioned against attributing transformational learning to the results of the traditional notion of culture shock.

Dissonance

The disorienting dilemma first described by Mezirow (2000), and elaborated by Taylor (2000) and Cranton (2016), as part of the transformative learning theory, has been utilized by researchers to examine its application to global service learning (Chwialkowska, 2020; Crabtree, 2008, 2011, 2013; Doerr, 2011; Ferranto, 2015; Kiely, 2005; Namaste, 2017; Taylor et al., 2018). Kiely's (2005) transformative service-learning process model under the context of research involved a longitudinal study of a global service service-learning program in Nicaragua. Kiely's process model, based on Mezirow's theoretical framework, includes a description of dissonance within the context of service learning, as an "incongruence between participants' prior frame of reference and aspects of the contextual factors that shape service-learning experience" (p. 8). Furthermore, Kiely distinguishes between low and high intensity levels of dissonances: low intensity refers to surface level adjustments to the environment; high intensity refers to witnesses to hardships, such as poverty, hunger, disabilities, etc. Additionally, Kiely proposes nine dissonance types: "historical, environmental, social physical, economic, political, cultural, spiritual, communicative and technological" (p. 8). Types of dissonance result in different types of reflection. Non-critical reflection focuses on content and process learning, while critical reflection requires an emotional response to integrate new learning into inner levels of student perspective (Jones, 2018). Recognizing the importance of emotional response to dissonance, Kiely (2005) calls for further

research on affect and emotion and their interconnectedness with context in service learning, which lead to its characteristic association with transformative learning.

Taylor et al. (2018) also noted that dissonance is more than strictly a cognitive phenomenon. Their longitudinal developmental case study of transformative learner readiness during a short-term, global service-learning program in Ecuador pointed to an expansion of dissonance to include both emotion and cognition, affirming Kiely (2005). O'Malley et al. (2019) studied the forms of dissonance in the context of agricultural education during a short-term study abroad program in Nicaragua to better understand preparation of students for the workforce. Through an analysis of participant individual reflections recorded on personal cell phones, four themes of dissonance of environmental, sociocultural, and intellectual, were considered to lead to a perspective change based on the one-week experience. Yet, it is shortsighted to compare student transformation across programs or courses of study. Different contexts paired with student individual perspectives provide different experiences of dissonance leading students on personalized paths of transformation (Shor et al, 2017).

The required dissonance for transformation (Adler, 1975) is easily provided by international immersion experiences by virtue of being outside one's familiar context. Crabtree (2008) identified psycho-emotional, ideological, and physiological aspects of these disruptions. Kiely (2005) identified the disrupting dilemma as contextual border crossing when immersed in a culture different from one's own. Yet, experiencing dissonance without reflection could lead to reinforcement of inaccurate stereotypes (Owen, 2016).

REFLECTION

According to Kitchenham (2008), critical reflection is at the core of transformative learning. Many have pointed to its

essential role in experiential learning in higher education, such as service learning, community-engaged learning, and global service learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Jacoby, 2015; Whitney & Clayton, 2011). This critical reflection may take place within the context of a variety of spheres of knowledge (Brookfield, 2000), yet learners must possess the curiosity and openness to examine their current values, perspectives, and points of view in relation to new knowledge and alternative perspectives (Cranton & Roy, 2003). It is through critical reflection that learners are prompted to question currently held assumptions and stereotypes, to reevaluate them in light of new knowledge and learning experiences (Mezirow, 2009), and, specifically, critical reflection has been recognized as paramount to the learning process, so as not to reinforce stereotypes (Owen, 2016).

Supporting the university's mission of cultivating students "in solidarity for and with others" (Graham, n.d.) and preparing occupational therapy students for practice with diverse populations, an enhanced curricular model of community engagement was implemented. The intention was to provide encounters involving ongoing engagement with marginalized populations experiencing occupational deprivation. In this way, the occupational therapy program hoped to more closely address the university mission as well as the need to prepare future practitioners who have experienced dissonance in cross-cultural learning contexts (Horton, 2009). With this in mind, the current study examined the experiences with dissonance of pre-professional occupational therapy undergraduate students during an international immersion and service-learning program in Guatemala that focused on developing increased cultural awareness to promote culturally responsive care in future practice. Therefore, the study sought to answer the following research question: How do pre-occupational therapy students describe periods of dissonance while immersed in a culture other than their own?

METHODOLOGY

To answer the above research question, a qualitative description method as described by Sandelowski (2000) was used to describe the experience of dissonance from student-led reflections that were previously collected in a university's Institutional-Review-Board-approved research protocol. The qualitative description method was chosen for its non-adherence to a theoretical foundation, resulting in a re-presentation of the data in an organized manner (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Students provided informed consent to participate, and transcripts of student-led reflections during a two-week immersive and community-engaged experience in Guatemala were de-identified prior to analysis. Data included transcripts from the 2018 and 2019 programs. After data analysis, the findings were compared with existing models, specifically Mezirow (1978) and Kiely (2005).

Using qualitative data allowed the researchers to analyze descriptions of dissonance as they unfolded during the two-week program, organizing and summarizing them in a cohesive re-presentation of descriptions.

Participants

The two-week international community-engaged learning experience over two years included 32 females. All students were required to participate in the nightly student-led reflections to meet course requirements but were able to decline participation in the research study. In 2018, there were 17 participants, and in 2019, 14 students participated in the study. Redaction of data occurred for one student who declined participation in the study, resulting in 31 participants in this study. All participants were senior, undergraduate, pre-occupational therapy majors at a small, Midwestern, Jesuit institution. Many students had some background in Spanish language prior to enrolling in the program, with the majority of their communicative competency ranging from novice to intermediate (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012).

Program Description

The interdisciplinary program involved the collaboration of both the Occupational Therapy and Spanish programs, interweaving the curricular threads of occupational justice, Spanish language, and Guatemalan culture with the university's mission of social justice and developing "people of learning and reflection, integrity and achievement, in solidarity for and with others" (Graham, n.d). All participants enrolled in two courses as part of a two-week international, immersive, community-engagement experience in Guatemala: Language and Culture in Guatemala, and Occupational Justice II. This program, offered annually during the summer to pre-occupational therapy undergraduate students, aimed to immerse students in the language and culture of Guatemala, engage students with Guatemalans from a variety of backgrounds, and provide opportunities to participate in service learning, with the goal of developing an increase in cultural competency and awareness of marginalized populations. Prior to the in-country immersion, students attended an intensive week of 20 hours of class sessions focused on equipping them with conversational Spanish, specific language for homestays and service-learning sites, and historical and cultural contexts of Guatemala. The Language and Culture in Guatemala course continued for a second week with the immersive activities while in-country. Students lived with families, participated in a market simulation to gain an understanding of typical expenses for a family of four, engaged with children at an elementary school for children with disabilities, worked alongside physiotherapy students in Guatemala at a home for elderly women, and witnessed testimonials of Guatemalans facing various adversities related to migration, poverty, impact of civil war, violence, and multiple disabilities. In addition, students witnessed extreme poverty during multiple home visits as they were exposed to new cultural experiences, such as a *temascal*, a traditional sauna healing practice, a Mayan spiritual

ceremony, a weaving cooperative, a coffee cooperative, and the sharing meals in the homes of these experiences. Course assignments included a photo reflection project, a research presentation on a social justice issue, readings, discussion board posts, and linguistic assessments of therapy simulations in Spanish.

The second week of the in-country portion of the program built on the immersion and service-learning experiences of the first week, and also included clinical work alongside U.S. and Guatemalan clinicians to provide occupational therapy services to individuals with disabilities. Student tasks included observation, assisting clinicians during consultations, documentation through notes and photos, creation of care plans, and engagement with clients while they waited for therapy sessions. Practice settings included a government-run residential facility for individuals with developmental disabilities, psychiatric diagnoses, or both. Most residents had been abandoned by their families due to innate cultural beliefs of disabilities or the inability to care for their family member. Other settings included privately owned children's homes and job training agencies for individuals transitioning out of children's homes or school. From the private children's homes, students accompanied clinicians on home visits, witnessing home environments with dirt floors, no running water, and without necessary medical equipment. Students also experienced the challenges of the geography when using a wheelchair or assistive device. Additionally, students participated in pop-up health clinics in remote mountainous regions.

As the culmination experience for two occupational justice courses, students explored critical principles of occupational justice, social justice, and occupational marginalization through service learning during an international immersion program. Course assignments included reflections, scholarship, and pragmatic application of learning to their future careers as an occupational therapist.

Data

During the two-week global, immersive, community-engaged experience, all participants took part in nightly student-led group oral reflections, with a duration between 33-78 minutes in length. Student reflection prompts included identifying cultural learnings, moments of consolation and desolation (highs and lows of the day), as well as moments of discomfort (Ceo-DiFrancesco, Dunn et al., 2020). Reflections were recorded and transcribed. Redaction of data occurred for any student who declined participation in the study. It is important to note the data was collected as part of a previously approved research protocol. The analysis of the current study focused on the student experience of dissonance.

Analysis

The researchers used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the student-led reflection transcripts from two consecutive years of the global, immersive, community-engagement experiences. Thematic analysis occurred to describe the student experience without adherence to a theoretical or conceptual perspective (Clarke & Braun, 2017), requiring minimal to no interpretation (Vaismoradi & Bondas, 2013).

Each author became familiar with the data through multiple readings and generated initial codes. All authors discussed the final code word list and drafted operational definitions. The second author coded all data according to the code list within HyperRESEARCH (4.0.3) (Researchware, Inc., 2019), a qualitative data analysis software program, and extracted data in an output report, identifying all data coded for each code word. Researchers then drafted descriptive memos describing the data organized by each code word. The researchers analyzed the data to search for relationships and patterns among the descriptive memos, forming categories with analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013). Another round of data reduction occurred, and ultimately, the final three themes emerged from the data and represented the student description of dissonance.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

There are inherent limitations of a qualitative approach; however, these were minimized through several strategies (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Krefting, 1991; Shenton, 2004). These strategies included triangulation of researchers, who practiced reflexivity throughout the analysis process. Triangulation of data sources included having 31 participants, preventing only one perspective being presented. Data consisted of nightly verbal focus group reflections throughout the two-week experience ensuring prolonged engagement (Krefting, 1991). Authenticity of responses was promoted by having a student lead the reflective group each time to start the discussion. Sharing may have influenced participant responses, as the focus group data collection method promotes a joint description of the phenomenon of study (Smithson, 2000). Additionally, participation was strictly voluntary and not a graded requirement of the course. The first and second authors have experience in qualitative inquiry of the pre-occupational therapy student experience in an international immersion in Guatemala.

RESULTS

Theme I: Context

The first theme, Context, pertains to participant descriptions of connecting with members of the local culture through shared activities, conversations, testimonials, and challenging, deep engagement. Such deep engagement revealed societal injustices, due to the effect of globalization, historical trauma, government corruption, and oppression. Participants were also exposed to visual, olfactory, and auditory differences in the physical environment, often producing sensory overload. Given that the program was immersive, participants were required to communicate in a language other than their own, presenting experiences of successful communication, as well as struggles to communicate. They often faced language barriers, yet they persisted with their intense desire to

connect to the local culture on a deeper level. As one participant shared:

I think one area of growth that I feel more comfortable and more willing to ask and not just surface level questions for my host mom, but deeper questions. For example, we talked about abuse with women and children, and she shared her personal stories with me which was really cool to hear. It was cool to break the barrier of surface level questions and going deeper with people. (Participant 5, 2018)

The contextual changes experienced by participants as they left behind their familiar ways of life, backgrounds, and perspectives created a need for reflection on cultural comparisons and the strong emotions they experienced due to discomfort and culture shock throughout their experience. Multiple participants noted differences between their U.S. culture and the Guatemalan culture, often expressing surprise at their newfound awareness. The following participant exemplifies the students' eye-opening experiences:

One of the biggest things I have learned these past two weeks is my knowledge of the global differences. I feel like all my life I have been in the bubble of the US and could never really know the social justice issues that were intertwined. I would never experience extreme poverty in the United States and with issues with immigration and especially living in Ohio the entire time, just being able to experience people's stories and the people I came in contact with really helped me open my eyes with all the differences that we don't see in the United States. (Participant 16, 2018)

In particular, participants noted the perspectives connected to Guatemalan culture that led to deeper cultural comparisons and awareness. As one participant shared:

... if my mom knows that we are having people over, it's like we have to clean the entire house and probably go buy a bunch of new stuff that we never actually had in our house and put on this whole show that this is how we actually live when it's not accurate at all, and kind of just put up a front that we're perfect. But everywhere here, there's just been such a different emphasis on that and I think at times, like just going into Vanessa's house, I was like, this is just so interesting and they live so differently than us but the emphasis is so much more on making everyone feel at home and the things that you are doing in that house and the way that you are making people feel rather than the house you are presenting to them has just been really interesting. (Participant 13, 2019)

The impact of experiential learning was noted by many, as the context of the immersive learning experience created the opportunity for more intense interactions with members of the local culture, as noted by the following participant:

... you're also applying things you learn in the classroom, but with this trip/program, it's like you learn more than you would, at least for me, I can take away so much more than some classes that I've taken at school for a semester, whereas this is [a] two-week program that we did and at the same time I am learning so much more about occupational therapy and culture and language and the list goes on of things that you're learning about, and you remember a lot better and it's a lot more vivid because it's a completely different setting; you are taking yourself out of the classroom but you're still learning. (Participant 1, 2019)

Although unsettling, the formation of cultural comparison often yielded greater cultural awareness and an appreciation for the

Guatemalan culture. Finally, participants recognized the immersive community engagement as authentic, providing personal engagement and connections that prompted new perspectives and viewpoints.

In summary, the first theme of Context provides descriptions of the context of the immersion program. Students described deep engagement with the local culture, connecting on an emotional level. Further, comparison of what students saw, heard, and did to their own contexts prompted recognition of cultural differences and social justice issues.

Theme II: Experience

The second theme, Experience, included instances of dissonance experiences shared by students during nightly reflections, and includes the reflection necessary to process their affective response to the context. Participants described dissonance as accompanied by intense emotional reactions and feelings of discomfort. The intensity of emotional reactions was far more negative in nature. These ranged from awareness, thought-provoking, and humbling to more intense dis-comfort and more extreme feelings of sadness, shock, heartbrokenness, difficulty, and frustration. The ranges of emotional reactions and the resulting dissonance are exemplified in the following quotes from participants:

It was the most uncomfortable I have felt this trip. Like after we saw the people digging through the trash, and myself included, walking into this dinner. (Participant 4, 2018)

Hearing repeatedly, stories about the civil war and it seems sometimes like we are hearing the same story again and again, but then taking a step back and saying, that's because it affected every single person instead of just being like, oh, I heard this many people died so many times, I'm like, every single person had people that they loved that died, and comprehending that has been hard and

for me the level of discomfort comes from me being like, I don't know what my response to this story could be except thank you so much for sharing that, like that's not something that is easy to share because I can't empathize with that; I have never felt pain like that, so I think that is a level of discomfort other than just being like, thank you for sharing. (Participant 13, 2019)

Said emotions even resulted in occasional negative judgments made by participants, indicating their discomfort with experiencing such high levels of dissonance. The foundation of dissonance included the participant's mindset and whether they welcomed or avoided dissonance. Several participants shared their struggle with the discomfort they experienced and with developing the courage to embrace that discomfort. For instance, one participant shared insights on acceptance and working through the dissonance:

There are times when some of us are uncomfortable and we're trying to get rid of that discomfort right away. And I think part of being a sojourner is to have that discomfort, and trying to be selfless and being present instead of making it about you. (Participant 3, 2018)

However, participants also expressed feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the social justice issues and the immersion in a new culture. As one participant shared:

I kind of wanted to numb it out a little bit, and not want to experience it with them and I wanted to internalize it, and I think sometimes unconsciously I was like trying to not listen and to not feel their trauma also, but I think that trauma really caused me to get back that numbing and that automatic desire to like numb out their trauma, so I really appreciated it for that reason. (Participant 2, 2018)

As participants experienced discomfort, they acknowledged and appreciated the time to reflect together. They recognized the time and reflection required to process the totality of their experience. Since there was no specific requirement for verbalizing reflections each night, participants were free to communicate their thoughts according to their own comfort level. They noted the usefulness of the student-led reflections to consider the perspectives of their peers. As one participant shared:

And as all of you have probably noticed, I am really quiet during all of these because I am the type of person that has to listen to everything and then I have to formulate some type of meaningful thing to say and that's just how I work, but I liked to do written reflection-so the journal I have been doing really well on, so I liked it, and I have been doing that instead of like reflecting out loud, but I think it's also good to hear from other people and verbalize your thoughts because it is a lot of the time it is a lot of like what am I saying, and verbalizing things is different, and bouncing ideas off of each other, and opinions about listening. (Participant 11, 2018)

Communication is essential for engagement and interaction with the local population. A participant's comfort level with dissonance was heavily influenced by their ability to communicate with the local community in Spanish. Such a struggle to communicate was brand new for the majority of participants, yet these struggles were met with a desire to connect, producing multiple cases of interpersonal engagement with individuals from the local culture. As one participant shared:

I was really one of those people that was really nervous mostly about running out of things to say. And I realized really the comfort of silence. And even if it was silent. I would just look at our host mom, and her name

was Monica. And if it was just silent, I would just look at her, and she would just smile, or she would come over and just hug me. (Participant 14, 2018)

As a result, students gauged the process of dissonance according to their emotional reactions and their personal level of interaction or engagement with the local community. Thus, their descriptions of dissonance seemed to relate to instances of deeper engagement and were impacted by their ability to connect personally with each other and with members of the local culture.

Theme III: Outcome

The final theme, Outcome, pertained to changes in perspectives as a result of dissonance. Participants heard the testimonies of Guatemalans, often prompting emotional reactions that led to awareness and appreciation for new (and different) viewpoints. From the participants' perspective, challenges led to change, described as follows:

When we hear the speaker, being challenged to take their perspective and empathize with them is really important and I feel like we have improved on that throughout the week by asking questions and stuff. (Participant 6, 2019)

Additionally, participants noted that their expectations were frequently destroyed, and they learned to embrace the experience of discomfort. Such personal development resulted in participants' use of the word "transformation" to emphasize the level of impact the experience had on them. One participant described preconceived ideas that were transformed:

I think the transformative learning came from, a lot of times, I had mentioned this before, but the even unconscious expectations of what things were supposed to be so that then just transformed the way I was seeing things when it wasn't what I expected it to be, so then, I guess going forward,

that would just teach me to not make so many assumptions or not have so many expectations and really one, just do research beforehand and really learn about interacting [with] another culture and really try to learn about it before going into it. (Participant 14, 2019)

The Outcome theme serves as a culmination of the previous two thematic findings on the student's transformative learning. This growth was frequently noted because of the dissonance that participants experienced as part of both the Context and Experience themes. As two participants shared:

A year ago I would have never thought about leaving the country, this is actually my first time going out of the United States, and I'm so grateful that I did, through this and these last two weeks I have felt a transformation and it has been from going outside of your comfort zone and feeling like you are at a place, and feeling like a minority. (Participant 12, 2018)

Transformative learning in I think the fact that all of us at least had some moment where like, seeing a child in the situation that they were in, or someone's house or living situation that just broke your heart, and I think once you see those things, you can't go back to the way you were before. And I think that transforms the way that you move on after that. (Participant 14, 2019)

Participants adjusted to a situation in which their expectations had to be completely set aside, allowing deeper connections with community members and a sense of love for others to organically develop. Furthermore, participants noted that they recognized their privileges, leading to feelings of both gratitude and sometimes guilt. Many students expressed their anticipation to return home with the new appreciation and understanding they shared for the local culture. Reflecting on how to

carry their new perspectives forward, one participant described:

I am scared to go home because I am scared that I am going to forget about the experiences I that I have learned and I just want to do something impactful with those experiences, and even for not a lot of people, even just person, would be like tremendous. And I'm scared to go home because I feel like I'm not going to be able to do anything more. (Participant 16, 2018)

Participants' movements toward transformation and growth were shared through the group reflections. They followed intense emotions and affective responses to dissonance, demonstrating an interconnectedness of all three themes. The Context theme established the infrastructure for participants to immerse themselves in a culture other than their own. The Context theme supported all themes, exposing participants to new environments, perspectives and new ways of being and learning. Given the multisensory characteristics of the program, participants welcomed opportunities to process uncomfortable moments during group reflections. Such moments of dissonance, including a range of emotional reactions, were central to the Experience theme, and bridged the Context and Outcome themes. The result of experiencing dissonance within an international immersion service-learning program was an opportunity for transformative learning. Our Outcome theme illustrated how students were able to change their mindset and was fully dependent upon the existing foundation and the culmination of immersive experiences shared in the Context and Experience themes. Together, all three themes—Experience, Context, and Outcome—work to depict the interconnectedness of dissonance, critical reflection, and transformative learning.

DISCUSSION

Furthering Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (2009) and similar to

Kiely's (2005) *Transformative Service Learning Process Model*, our results showed how students describe periods of dissonance according to the context, experience, and outcome of an international immersive program. The first theme, Context, focused on the depth of the language and cultural immersion experience. Both Kiely (2005) and Shor et al. (2017) recognized the influence of the context on students' experiences of dissonance. Similar to other investigations of dissonance related to community-based global learning (Chwialkowska, 2020; Doerr, 2011; Ferranto, 2015), participants in our study were immersed in an unfamiliar context, and, as a result, experienced an overwhelming feeling of "disequilibrium," (Ferranto, 2015 p. 97). However, a close examination of the theme of Context reveals descriptions that provide deeper insights into the possible impact of the context on participants' learning experience. For example, participants describe their engagement with the Guatemalan culture as a total sensorial experience. Furthermore, the context represented, at times, an overload of input that included auditory linguistic sounds of the second language, as well as environmental sounds, bright colors and visuals, both pleasant and unpleasant smells, new and unfamiliar foods to taste, and new fabrics and cultural products to touch and to hold.

In addition, the integration of curricular elements tied to social justice issues provided further context for critical global service learning (Hartman et al., 2018). The examination of topics such as access to health care and potable water, education, discrimination, challenges of the disabled, and stories of migration were organically woven into the experience. Participants witnessed testimonials highlighting the impact of the country's 30-year civil war on the emotional and economic well-being of its citizens. Residing with supportive host families provided further context for both successful and challenging linguistic interactions. Due to the inextricable connections of language and culture, participants' deep engagement with Guatemalans from diverse backgrounds provided the

opportunity for accompaniment, solidarity, greater awareness of privilege, and acknowledgement of systemic challenges within our global society (Larkin, 2015).

The second theme, Experience, focused on the students' description of periods of dissonance. While Mezirow (1978) did not emphasize the emotional response to periods of dissonance, Kiely noted its importance (2005). Processing emotions associated with periods of dissonance is necessary for transformative learning (Chwialkowska, 2020; Namaste, 2017) and integration of new perspectives. Participants in this study described high levels of dissonance as they witnessed the extreme living conditions of Guatemalans, and provided companionship to Guatemalans suffering trauma, lacking basic services, and experiencing discrimination due to disabilities. This intense dissonance concurs with Kiely's description of high-intensity dissonance, described as "shocking and overwhelming," often accompanied by strong emotional reactions leading to a reexamination of current knowledge and beliefs (p. 11).

To process these reactions, supported critical reflection is necessary for developing autonomy and competence (Owen, 2016). Namaste (2017) recommended assignments for international immersive programs to focus on the readings in preparation for the experience, reflection on the experience in real time, and reflection on comparison of the experience to one's personal history and situation. Reflection has also been recommended as a means of examining critical awareness of global justice (Hartman & Kiely, 2014).

Student participants in this study seemed to welcome dissonance rather than avoid it, knowing there was scheduled time for processing their feelings within their peer group. This schedule time was voluntary and not required for the course. Participants' anticipation of the safe space of the daily student-led group reflections to share vulnerable moments of uncertainty, emotion, and discomfort led also to their recognition of the importance of these daily sessions for

processing emotional reactions. Furthermore, the two-week immersion program allowed critical reflection past the non-critical level of processing content and problem-solving strategies as presented by Jones (2018). Naudé (2015) stated deeper transformation requires time and reflection as initial interactions with the local culture require non-critical reflection to make sense of the new context before a student can dig deeper into their perspectives. Without reflection, the emotional reactions remain suppressed or unaddressed.

The final theme of Outcomes focused on the participants' descriptions of their changed perspectives due to the international immersive service-learning program. As described by Mezirow (2000) and Cranton (2016), the changes and growth that participants shared were the result of intense contextualized and disorienting situations and experiences. Participants described how the daily group reflections reorganized their viewpoints, beliefs, and values (Mezirow 1998), and prompted their desire to continue their transformation upon their return to the United States. Additionally, participants looked toward future actions to connect their learning to both local and global community partners.

More intense and sustained dissonance can lead to more persistent transformation over time (Kiely, 2005). The intensity of the experience within a culture distinct from their own strongly influenced the participants' experiences of affective reactions of dissonance, and consequently their transformation. Yet, the encounters that participants experienced with local individuals led to solidarity and accompaniment, while developing a robust sense of mutuality of human experiences across cultures. This mutuality, supported by ongoing critical reflection, developed a desire to continue to address social justice issues in the future.

Building upon Kiely's (2005) model, our findings connect dissonance with reflection as the experience of dissonance. Without reflection, the emotional reaction to dissonance is a raw event without resolution. While Kiely (2005) separated context,

dissonance, emotional reactions, reflection, and connections with community as themes of the model, our findings point to the integration of these themes in a manner distinct from the Kiely model. Participants' descriptions of dissonance during student-led reflections included all five themes of the model. Context includes connections with the local community and culture. Experience includes dissonance, emotional reactions, intense experiences with social justice issues facing the local community, and critical reflection. Outcomes often indicate a change in perspective and plans for future actions. Results indicate alterations and further development of Kiely's (2005) theoretical model, by connecting the integrated themes of Context, Experience, and Outcomes, while offering a strong argument for use of student-led reflections.

These results expand the understanding of dissonance during a global immersion experience. The intensity of the experience, including strong sensorial components and emotional reactions points to the need for supportive reflection in a non-judgmental manner in which processing can occur. As a result of their global service-learning experience and the daily opportunities for critically reflection in a safe environment, participants cited an increased commitment to the social justice issues they witnessed, and an increased desire to serve as an advocate for local communities and situations of injustice upon their return.

IMPLICATIONS

Our results indicated ways in which students in an international immersive program experience dissonance and transformative learning. The international aspect of the experience placed students in an unfamiliar context, prompting periods of dissonance ranging across sensory, physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects. A focus on promoting depth of connections with the local culture maximizes opportunities to experience periods of dissonance. The depth of connect-

ions was impacted by hearing uncomfortable and eye-opening testimonials, communication successes and struggles in another language, and intense desires to engage authentically with the local culture. Having scheduled student-led reflections encouraged participants to analyze their experiences, process their dissonance, and form new perspectives within a safe place.

However, with the impact of the global pandemic, educators will have to be creative to provide other opportunities for experiencing a culture different from one's own. Opportunities such as virtual exchange, virtual service learning, virtual immersive learning, and others may provide experiences that prompt dissonance and transformative learning (Ceo-DiFrancesco, Marturet de Paris et al., 2020; Guth & Helm, 2017; O'Dowd, 2021). Some may perceive the degree of dissonance experienced in a virtual setting to be less profound as students enter and exit the unfamiliar context rather than live within the unfamiliar context for longer periods of time. Living within the unfamiliar context can provide a greater depth and breadth of the experience. Despite these limitations, periods of dissonance can still occur and must be supported through opportunities for reflections and sharing.

CONCLUSION

Students described their immersion program through a total sensorial context, specifically highlighting the dissonance they experienced within a distinct culture and language. Their emotional reactions were processed in a safe space. Changed perspectives noted by participants led them to consider future actions based on the immersion.

These results illustrated the interconnectedness of dissonance and reflection as essential components of international immersive service learning. Throughout the experience, students compared their personal experiences to those in the unfamiliar context, often reacting with emotional responses to shattered perspectives or assumptions. These periods of

dissonance required support through opportunities to reflect and process their new learning within an expected and scheduled safe space. By doing so, students were able to welcome dissonance knowing there would be an opportunity to process with their peers. Student-led group reflections provided a comfortable space for students to share their personal challenges and for reorganization of perspectives to demonstrate growth. Supporting students during their reflection opportunities has the potential for students to continue their transformation into their future education and to influence their future role as culturally responsive health care professionals.

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