

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE ON STUDENT TEACHERS FROM SPAIN AND ENGLAND

María Herrera

Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool (UK)

This paper will present the findings of an investigation of student teachers and their mentors' changing perceptions of educational practice and the associated impact on their own emerging professional identity and values following a teaching placement exchange between Spain and England. Data has been collected from over 150 student teachers of Primary Languages and their host teachers from both England and Spain over three years. Research questions identified:

Whether the experience of teaching in a different national context caused a shift in student teacher participants' educational beliefs and values and whether their mentors articulated shared characteristics when evaluating the impact of the experience on their professional learning? Whether, through reflection and analysis of the differences and commonalities in the two diverse cultural contexts, participants develop a more expansive and nuanced insight into primary pedagogy? Whether the experience enables participants to develop their capacity for critical intercultural awareness and has the potential to transform attitudes and pedagogic practices?

Stepping outside one's cultural context can be a catalyst for what Mezirow (1991, 2000) describes as "transformative learning". Mezirow's conceptual framework, which begins with a "disorientating dilemma" and may lead adults to experience "perspective transformation", a shifting of their "world view", informed the analysis of data. The research also draws on Byram's conceptual framework for intercultural citizenship, particularly the notion of tertiary socialisation which is described as; "offering learners the challenge that will make them rethink and unlearn...to de-familiarise and de-centre, so that questions can be raised about one's own culturally-determined assumptions" (2008 : 31). Findings demonstrate that the teaching exchange programme enabled participants to experience "otherness" and thus learn to critique the surreptitious ideologies manifest in culturally situated educational practices. Participants were enabled to tentatively form their own cross-cultural ideology, based on their comparative experience. Brock et al. (2006) highlight the importance of "displacement spaces" as sites of critical reflection. In the case of our participants, this displacement space is both within a different cultural context and within an educational setting; this unique "vantage point" enabled them to expand their cultural script and to question the dominance of any particular educational discourse.

Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) call for more attention to be paid to the role of context in professional identity formation; to "the professional landscape" within which teachers train, as the ecology of the classroom has been identified as having a major impact on teacher socialization (Zeichner and Gore, 1990; Sachs, 2001), yet few teaching professionals are enabled to step outside their normative environment. The study thus underscores the work of Alexander (2000:27) who emphasises that by "making the strange familiar" we "make the familiar strange" and highlights the

importance of a global and comparative experience and an “explicit comparative consciousness” in teacher education.

The study draws from data gathered over 3 years from over 150 student teachers and their host teachers at Liverpool Hope University and the University of Seville. The study involves a mixed method research design, which draws on qualitative and quantitative research methods. During their four week placement abroad, students were required to complete reflective journals which probed their emerging understanding of pedagogic practices within a contrasting cultural context and their response to the differences that they perceived. Five themes consistently emerged from the analysis of the data drawn from students’ comments within the reflective journals. These themes were examined in more depth through the distribution of a questionnaire to the participants from both England and Spain. The questionnaire used Likert items and students were prompted to expand their responses in the spaces provided for qualitative comments. In order to add further validity to the findings, semi-structured interviews and discussions were organised with small focus groups of students, to explore the five themes in more depth. Participants’ comments are therefore drawn from overlapping questionnaire, focus groups, and reflective journal data which were triangulated to confirm hypotheses. Huberman and Miles (1994) informed the analysis with a framework of frequency of occurrence, clustering of themes, plausibility, chain of evidence and identifying relations between variables.

The findings show that through reflection and analysis of the differences and commonalities in the diverse cultural contexts, participants involved in the exchange teaching placement displayed shifting educational values and beliefs. Five themes consistently emerged from the analysis of their reflections. These were: ‘effective’ pedagogy; the role of the teacher; differentiation of learning; motivation for learning and “safe guarding” and attitudes towards children. By comparing two distinct national systems participants articulated the culturally situated connections that exist between practice, policy and theoretical principles. This paper will argue that the programme provides a unique opportunity, through a lived experience of juxtaposition and comparison, to re-evaluate and question taken-for-granted practices and theoretical positions and to develop a capacity for critical intercultural awareness. Findings will analyse to what extent the experience met the criteria of a “transformational learning experience” that may reverberate throughout teachers’ professional lives. It is our contention that through experiencing ‘otherness’ participants learnt to critique the ideologies manifest in educational practices and tentatively form their own ideology, based on their comparative experience, resulting in an emerging “Anglo-Spanish” teacher identity.

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