

Article 57

Counselor Educators' Preparedness to Lead International Cultural Immersion: Walking the Talk

Shirlene Smith-Augustine, LaCheata Hall,
Angel Riddick Dowden, and Lee Belton Tobin

Smith-Augustine, Shirlene D. A., is an Assistant Professor and the School Counseling Program Coordinator at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. Dr. Smith-Augustine's research interests include international counseling, multicultural and social justice issues, and spirituality in counseling.

Hall, LaCheata, is an Associate Professor at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University.

Riddick Dowden, Angel M., is an Assistant Professor at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. Dr. Riddick Dowden served as a school counselor and educational consultant before joining the faculty at North Carolina A&T State University. Dr. Riddick Dowden's research interests include multicultural and social justice issues in counseling, and school counseling.

Tobin, Lee Belton, is a school counseling student and graduate assistant at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. Mr. Tobin's research interests includes the impact that race plays in the academic achievement of children and the impact that imprisoned fathers have on the behavior and academic achievement of African American males.

Abstract

International cultural immersion has emerged as an experiential strategy with great potential to develop and enhance counseling students' multicultural competence. Counselor educators, as immersion leaders, play an integral role in planning and executing successful international cultural immersions; however, counselor educators' experiences and the corresponding impact of cultural immersion on their multicultural competence have received little focus in the literature. This article describes two counselor educators' experiences as they led a group of ethnic minority graduate students in an international immersion, discusses the importance of faculty preparedness in facilitating the immersion, and highlights the impact of the international immersion on faculty's multicultural competence.

Key words: international immersion, cultural competence

Counselor education programs are charged with preparing culturally competent counseling practitioners. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) identifies social and cultural diversity as one of the eight core areas in the requirements for the preparation of counselors. Therefore, counselor educator programs are expected to provide opportunities for students to

understand multiculturalism and develop multicultural competencies (CACREP, 2009). Professional counseling standards of practice, such as the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) *Code of Ethics*, also emphasize multicultural/diversity competence and stress that counselor educators are responsible to “actively train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practice” (p. 15). With mandates such as these, counselor educators are challenged to develop and utilize innovative pedagogical methodologies that will effectively teach students to become culturally competent. Sequential didactic and experiential strategies that ideally occur over the life of the students’ program have been espoused (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Robinson-Wood, 2013). Counseling students are exposed to multicultural concepts and theories early in their program of study. Once cultural foundation knowledge is acquired, subsequent theoretical and experiential learning activities that reinforce and expand students’ developing competencies are integrated throughout their matriculation. Counselor educators are explicitly expected to incorporate multiculturalism in all courses (ACA, 2014).

International immersion has emerged as an experiential strategy with great potential to develop and enhance counseling students’ multicultural competence. Counselor educators, as immersion leaders, play an integral role in the success of international immersion as a strategy to increase students’ multicultural competence. The impact of immersion on students’ cultural competence continues to receive significant focus in the literature; however, there are gaps as it relates to faculty leader’s preparedness and readiness to facilitate these intercultural experiences. Concomitantly, the direct impact that international cultural immersion has on counselor educators’ multicultural competence as they simultaneously participate in the immersion has not been fully explored.

Cultural competence is a primary and ongoing goal for counselor educators and practitioners. Once developed, cultural competence must be sustained and practitioners need to actively pursue professional development experiences that continue to advance them on their multicultural competence journey (Shallcross, 2013). International immersion provides a unique experiential opportunity for counselor educators to not only model cultural competence, but also step outside their comfort zone and enhance their competence. DeRicco and Sciarra (2005) viewed professional counselors’ participation in immersion as a reflection of their willingness to maintain cultural competence.

This article presents a synopsis of key literature on international immersion, “the talk,” and describes two counselor educators’ experiences as they “walked the talk” of facilitating multicultural competence by developing and leading an international cultural immersion for a group of African American graduate students. This article posits two broad areas of faculty preparation for successful immersions: knowledge and skills in developing and executing a comprehensive international immersion experience; and multicultural competence. It also highlights significant lessons in faculty’s experience “walking the talk” in developing multicultural competence.

The Talk

With the thrust of globalization and increasingly diverse communities in the United States, counselor educators continue to explore innovative and creative instructional methods that expand students' cultural awareness, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. Among experiential approaches, students' immersion in diverse cultures and communities has been widely used. Immersion hinges on the development of relationships and dialogues with persons in the host communities (Platt, 2012) whereby participants directly interact with persons in cultures that are different from their own (Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994). While immersions vary in length and scope of activities, they are geared towards the overall goal of increasing participants' cultural competence through intense cultural interactions. International cultural immersion has been endorsed as an experiential strategy that increases students' cultural sensitivity, awareness, knowledge, counseling skills, and reduces bias and racism (Alexander et al., 2005; Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009; Platt, 2012; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Additionally, international experiences provide opportunities for students to become "more critically conscious of global and societal dynamics of power and privilege" (McDowell, Goessling, & Melendez, 2012, p. 366).

Comprehensive immersions are strategically designed to achieve the desired learning outcomes. The importance of a structured cultural immersion plan has been emphasized (Streets, 2011) and can include preparation, implementation, and evaluation phases (Alexander et al., 2005). The immersion's duration, cultural activities, self-reflection, journaling, processing, and debriefing are factors conducive to a successful cross-cultural experience (Alexander et al., 2005; Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii et al., 2009). Participants need to have sufficient time to adjust to the new environment, culture, and participate in multiple activities to facilitate the desired cultural growth (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). While the length of immersion varies, Ishii et al. (2009) surmised that 1 week may be an insufficient amount of time for students to fully benefit from the experience. Articles that support immersion as a multicultural competence strategy described experiences that were at least 2 weeks (Hipolito-Delgado, Cook, Avrus, & Bonham, 2011; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004).

Students are able to experience the lived culture of the country through active engagement in diverse cultural activities and interactions with numerous segments of the community. Nieto (2006) described activities in which individuals have direct contact with persons outside of their cultural groups that facilitate students' understanding of their own values, biases, and assumptions as cultural plunges. These activities may include the following: cultural tours, visits to cultural monuments, cultural presentations, and attendance at religious services (Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004; Nieto, 2006). Additionally, the inclusion of a service learning component increases the depth of the immersion as participants work collaboratively with a host community (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004). Participants interface with residents in informal settings, provide a rich opportunity for students to experience multiple aspects of the culture. Local communities become classrooms as participants learn in non-traditional settings and from indigenous experts in formal and informal contexts (Platt, 2012). Immersion in cultures that differ significantly from the participant's seems to have the most profound impact on increasing

cultural self-awareness, sensitivity, and empathy (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Walters, Green, Wang, & Walters, 2011).

Interactions with diverse cultural groups can trigger various emotional reactions in participants. “For many it is as if the experience acts as a mirror in which an increasing awareness of one’s own self and one’s own cultural context takes place” (Platt, 2012, p. 354). Therefore there must be mechanisms for self-reflection whereby students can safely process their affective, cognitive, and behavioral experience during the immersion (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Ishii et al., 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Debriefing, group sessions, and journaling provide avenues for students to process their experience and integrate it into their developing cultural competence (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Post immersion debriefing also helps students understand the full impact of the intercultural experience (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010).

The success of international cultural immersion as a cross-cultural strategy rests on students’ willingness to participate in an authentic, self-reflective, intense cultural experience (Pope-Davis, Breaux, & Liu, 1997), faculty’s preparedness to develop and facilitate a comprehensive experience, and host communities/agencies that are willing to have outsiders share their lived experiences. Counselor preparedness hinges not only on the faculty leaders’ multicultural competence, leadership and group facilitation skills, and ability to manage cultural dissonance (Barden & Cashwell, 2013), but also faculty’s readiness to participate in an extended cross-cultural experience with students and another faculty member. Counselor educators must be advanced on their multicultural journey, and their level of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills must reflect this expertise. They must be cognizant of their own multiple identities, biases, and blind spots, as well as their comfort level in groups, and being in close proximity with others on a sustained basis. Furthermore, faculty must be comfortable with international travel and willing to embrace an extension of the traditional faculty role.

Counselor educators’ skills in fostering students’ cultural development in an unfamiliar international setting require a unique twist on the skill set used in the traditional classroom. Central to the development of this skill set is faculty’s knowledge about racial identity development, culture specific knowledge of the group of students, process of cultural adjustment, and culture shock. Counselor educators need to be prepared to motivate their students during the immersion (Hipolito-Delgado, Cook, Avrus, & Bonham, 2013) and support students as they adjust to unfamiliar environments (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005) where they are perceived as outsiders. Faculty must be willing to assume a mentorship role as they guide students on their cultural journey. Likewise, faculty must be adept at considering multiple perspectives simultaneously and demonstrating this skill to students. Counselor educators’ skill in balancing their leadership roles while managing their own cultural experience is paramount for an authentic immersion.

Walking the Talk

The first and second authors led the 3 week international cultural immersion to Belize, Central America. The faculty leaders are both ethnic minority counselor educators in the counseling department at a southeastern university in the United States with a

predominantly minority student population. The faculty leaders have extensive experience teaching multicultural courses, working with diverse populations, and participating in international travel. Furthermore, they recognize the pivotal role that cultural immersion can play in the development of multicultural and global competence in counseling. They also share a passion for the development of culturally competent practitioners and exploration of creative pedagogical strategies to meet this goal.

Seven African-American students participated in the international experience course; therefore, it was imperative that faculty leaders possessed requisite knowledge and skills about African American culture. The literature is replete with studies on African-American culture and values, the impact of race on worldview development, and mechanisms that shape and reshape perceptions (Robinson-Wood, 2013; Sue & Sue, 2013). The corpus of this literature reveals that while there is great diversity within the African-American culture, common cultural values held among them include: collectivism; concrete, structured approach; quick responding; fluid time perspective; affect-filled speech; action-oriented nonverbal modes of communication; extended family based not only on blood ties; spirituality; and, education as a means of self-help (Robinson-Wood, 2013; Sue & Sue, 2013).

Belize was chosen because of its multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial communities, its proximity to the United States, and the first author's familiarity with the country. Belize is the only English-speaking country in Central America and boasts a truly diverse population. Belizean natives share African, Mestizo, European, and Mayan ancestry and have as many languages as there are cultural groups.

The immersion to Belize had three phases: preliminary, international, and post immersion. The preliminary phase for this immersion started about 18 months before the expected departure date and included the development of the course and immersion experience, recruitment, and pre-departure activities. The International Experience in Human Development & Services courses were developed by the first author to provide an authentic, international, cross-cultural experience for graduate students in counseling, adult education, and school administration. It was hoped that these courses would allow students to access a transformative cultural experience that would further propel them on their multicultural journey. These courses were designed to be delivered in the summer over a five-week session and included a 3 week international immersion. The syllabus included specific learning outcomes and activities designed to increase students' cultural self-awareness, understanding of culture and social justice, and the impact of culture and social justice on counseling and education in an international setting through cultural interactions. Students were required to participate in cultural activities, community service, daily group process sessions, and journaling. Final assignments included student presentations on the impact of the immersion on their cultural self-awareness and the submission of a social justice reflection paper.

The university's Office of International Programs (OIP) provided logistic support for the delivery of the international experience and ensured adherence to the university's protocol for faculty led study abroad. Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2013) stressed the significance of working with a recognized organization for volunteer experiences to ensure program quality and safety. OIP vetted the agency's credentials and facilitated all the paperwork. The agency's director is a Belizean and has significant experience with study abroad in Belize. Jurgens and McAuliffe (2004) and Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke

(2010) noted the importance of prior visits to the host country and the development of collaborative relationships with community persons before the immersion. As a native of Belize, the first author is very familiar with the country and maintains professional contact with numerous governmental and non-governmental agencies in Belize. Five months prior to the immersion, the first author met with the director in Belize, toured proposed lodging, discussed logistics, reviewed the itinerary, and refined the community service component.

Recruitment for this study abroad started 1 year prior to the summer that the course was offered and included interest and informational sessions, brochures, and e-mails. In the fall semester an initial interest session was conducted by the faculty leaders, OIP, and Office of Financial Aid. Overview of the course, international cultural immersion component, proposed housing, destinations, activities, cost and possible funding sources were presented. Interested students were required to register with the OIP. Two subsequent informational sessions with the first author were conducted to provide updates and disseminate information to interested students. The first author maintained regular contact with the students, Belize agent, and OIP by e-mail and telephone.

Structured pre-departure meetings with OIP and faculty leaders started 2 months prior to the class. In the faculty led sessions, the orientation manual from the Belize agency, required paperwork, payment schedule, itinerary, and course expectations were reviewed. Relevant information about Belize's history, geography, socio-culture, and socio-political context was also shared in these meetings. Levy (2012) noted that students must be knowledgeable about the host community's history and context. Group dynamics began to emerge in these meetings. These initial interactions can signal the beginning of the group cohesion process (Barden & Cashwell, 2013).

The class met on campus for three sessions during the first week of classes. In the first class session, students completed their pre-departure journal, received a detailed overview of the course, and discussed the immersion. A lecture on multicultural concepts including cultural awareness and social justice was conducted in the second class session. The final pre-trip planning and confirmation of departure activities occurred during the third class.

The group met at the local airport and departed for Belize on a Sunday. Faculty leaders' preparedness for international travel included ensuring that the group moved smoothly through their airport activities, guiding students through international customs and immigration, and making initial contact with the local agent in Belize. The local agent conducted a comprehensive orientation after arrival in the host community.

The Belize immersion was designed to give students a culturally rich experience that started in rural settings and then progressed to urban and tourist areas. Canfield et al. (2009) indicated that the contrast between rural, urban, and tourist contexts increased students' understanding of cultural diversity. In the rural settings in Belize, students were exposed to the rich traditions of the predominant cultural group(s), amenities that were functional but basic, traditional meals, and customs. Students completed their community service in rural schools where they were expected to adhere to the local cultural norms and mores. Students were expected to dress conservatively and abide by the school's rules and regulations. The urban areas featured increased diversity and reflected the impact of capitalism and consumerism. There were more modern, sophisticated facilities

and increased access to and availability of diverse foods, traditions, housing, and leisure activities. The tourist settings offered numerous opportunities for recreational and entertainment experiences that were designed for and accessed predominantly by the non-locals.

The group participated in cultural tours, visits to cultural monuments, cultural lectures by local experts, visits to community service agencies, professional development, religious and traditional activities, and recreational/tourist activities. Students also interacted with mental health and education professionals to gain firsthand knowledge about the mental health, education, and social service sectors in the particular communities in which they were immersed. The students' lived experience included interacting at multiple levels with the locals in formal and informal settings. Students were required to participate in self-reflection through daily journaling and scheduled group process sessions. Unscheduled blocks of time and days were built into the itinerary to allow students to organize their own schedule and be by themselves or with their peers outside of the presence of the faculty leader or local agent.

Final debriefing and course activities were completed upon the group's return to the United States. These activities included final self-reflection activities, individual presentations on students' self-awareness journey, social justice reflection papers, and final course evaluations. During the semester following the immersion, students presented their experiences to faculty and students. They also participated in a follow-up group dinner that featured a traditional Belizean meal prepared by faculty leaders.

Significant Lessons in Faculty's Experience "Walking the Talk"

The depth of this immersion was reflected in the multifaceted nature of the experiences. One of the faculty leader's analogy of snorkeling versus scuba diving to describe the immersion experience aptly differentiates between a superficial and an in-depth immersion. Counselor educators were fully immersed alongside students and actively participated in all components of the intercultural experience. Faculty leaders had an authentic scuba diving experience in which critical lessons about their role as multiculturally competent facilitators emerged as faculty "walked the talk" in this multilevel immersion. These lessons illustrated the significance of flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, autonomy and responsibility, processing, mentorship, and racial identity development in immersion experiences.

Flexibility—Expect the Unexpected

Immersion leaders must be prepared to respond decisively and promptly to unexpected circumstances that arise while working with students in an international context. The presence of more than one faculty leader is instrumental in ensuring that affected students receive individualized attention and there is limited, if any, interruptions in activities for the remaining students. International travel in and of itself can present unanticipated challenges whereby novice and veteran travelers experience difficulties successfully negotiating the travel process. Faculty leaders and participants responded to students' unexpected reactions to air travel and medical challenges within the initial 24 hours of this immersion. Within 72 hours, faculty leaders were faced with disclosing and processing the unexpected death of one of the participant's close family members. The

timing of these events could have adversely affected the adjustment process of the group; however, it served as an opportunity for faculty to model appropriate skills in responding to unexpected circumstances. While one faculty member managed the unanticipated events, the other faculty provided support and continuity to the group.

Faculty's willingness to be responsive and adjust to contextual demands in a novel environment requires flexibility. Students in training often do not accurately predict their reactions to environments that are markedly different from what they are generally used to. Unanticipated changes in the weather, housing, food, reactions to the climate, interactions, and schedule can cause participants distress and affect their adjustment. Following an emotionally challenging day, one participant became extremely angry when the air conditioner in her room malfunctioned. She wrote "Coming back to the room without air or fan pushed me to a point of anger—that is not where I want to be." Faculty members' ability to discern and interpret students' verbal and nonverbal reactions to the experience, ability to gauge students' level of discomfort and make alterations to ensure that participants do not shut down is critical. Students in this immersion were originally scheduled to complete 9 days of community service in local, rural schools. The schools' environment featured distinct differences from participants' traditional experiences and expectations of schools in the United States. The required learning curve for students was steep and participants were expected to function effectively in the new environment and engage in mutually beneficial service learning. Faculty conducted daily analysis of students' reactions, performance, and environmental changes to monitor students' progress in meeting their objectives. Initial excitement and growth started to wane for some participants as cultural dissonance began to emerge and environmental conditions shifted. Students' difficulties adjusting to the unexpectedly sweltering temperatures and the fluidity of the placement were reflected in their decreased energy level, emotionality, and self-reflection content. Faculty and participants candidly explored these issues and the schedule was modified to prevent an impending burn out and provide more time for students to rejuvenate and reflect.

Tolerance of Ambiguity

In unfamiliar settings participants' inexperience and ignorance of the social norms and mores can create ambiguity. Additionally, the perceived loss of control and lack of clearly defined solutions to problems can exacerbate students' anxiety. One of the housing arrangements did not proceed as was initially planned during this immersion. There was insufficient prepared space available for the group in a location where there was neither a diversity nor availability of other housing options. The students who were affected were visibly distraught, angry, and agitated when they were apprised of the situation. The faculty leaders had to make a decision as to whether to intervene immediately or give students time to mull over the situation, their reactions, and consider possible alternatives, none of which were ideal. Faculty chose the latter as this situation presented an ideal context for students to engage in self-discovery. As such, faculty members were willing to have students sit in their discomfort and work through their feelings in order to facilitate their personal growth. The ability to retreat from an emotionally charged situation and regroup allows participants to engage in self-reflection, problem solving and meaning making (Walters et al., 2011). Students wrestled with the

ambiguity of the situation and became acutely aware of personal values about privacy, personal space, and self-preservation.

Autonomy and Responsibility

Faculty leaders assume multiple layers of responsibility for students' safety and well-being, faculty's personal safety, and preservation of the participating programs' and university's image. Faculty leaders have to be able to negotiate a balance between students' autonomy as adults and faculty's responsibilities as immersion leaders. The participants in this immersion were all female adults who were interested in exploring as many formal and informal aspects of the culture as possible. Therefore, an important component of the initial orientation included a detailed safety and security discussion by the local agency that described social nuances specific to the host communities, gender roles, sexuality, alcohol and drugs, local views about international visitors, and recommendations for participating in the entertainment component of the culture. Personal responsibility and the importance of being vigilant in fostering one's safety (Hipolito-Delgado, et al., 2013) were reiterated by the leaders. Notwithstanding these safety measures, faculty's anxiety peaked whenever students accessed local night entertainment options. Faculty struggled to find a balance in ensuring that students had a safe experience while recognizing students' autonomy. Faculty acknowledged the weight of this obligation and deliberated about faculty values about adult students' right to autonomy and responsibility.

Processing

International immersion participants adjust and adapt to multiple changes in what can be a relatively short period of time. Adjusting to these changes can have emotional and cognitive impacts on students that manifest behaviorally. Therefore, faculty leaders not only create spaces and mechanisms for students to work through their experiences but also must be skillful in helping students move beyond feelings and grow culturally (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Barden & Cashwell, 2013). They must be adept at holding multiple perspectives simultaneously and demonstrating this skill to students. Group dynamics were clearly evident throughout the entire immersion and started in the preliminary activities. Faculty adroitly handled resistance, anger, friction, and sub-grouping as the group went through the forming, storming, norming, and performing group stages. While scheduled group sessions provided an avenue for students to talk about their experiences, work through their feelings, and integrate their learning, reflection also occurred in impromptu settings. Participants shared their experiences with faculty leaders over meals, on the bus, individually or in smaller variations of the large group. While it was important that students perceived the environment as one in which they safely and candidly expressed themselves, they were also challenged to look more closely at certain experiences and in some instances re-evaluate and construct new meaning. It was also critical that the students engaged in "me" time, as well as time away from faculty leaders, to unload and unwind in their own individual ways. One participant disclosed, "After processing I really wanted some alone time. I could feel myself getting overwhelmed with the company of 7 other women." Time alone allowed students to reflect and gain insight from their experiences and reactions. It became clearly evident that participants needed to

be able to access multiple non-judgmental spaces with diverse individuals to either talk through their experiences or just be in the moment.

Mentorship

Participants' adjustment to the unfamiliar settings in cultural experiences can be mitigated by a mentor. Streets (2011) shared that mentorship from a more experienced cultural person would have hastened her multicultural growth during her immersion as an African American. The students' responses to being in Belize and the intensity of their reactions were as diverse as the students themselves. In the first week, there were students who were thrilled to be a part of the immersion and eagerly anticipated the unfolding journey and at least one student who desperately wanted to leave. Students' verbalization of "I am just so happy to be here" and "I called my mother to see how I can come back home" reflected the extremes. Students had emotional meltdowns at various points and in numerous contexts during their individual journeys. For one student it was at a self-chosen recreational activity. For another it was during the community service learning. This student described her meltdown in her journal as having to "look at the monster in the mirror...I had to take a look within and really try and identify the things that were making me feel the way I felt." Faculty's understanding of the process of cultural adjustment, participants' reactions, and cultural knowledge determined faculty's level and type of support as students' adjustment process unfolded.

The counselor educators served as cultural navigators in this immersion. The presence of a faculty member who is a native of Belize, knowledgeable about its cultures, socio-political structure, and social nuances enhanced participants' experiences and expedited their cultural understanding and cultural adjustment. The group had the benefit of a local expert who helped them to navigate entry into diverse communities and opportunities that were not readily accessed by foreigners. Furthermore, the cultural navigator is instrumental in helping students process micro-aggressions (Streets, 2011) and reconcile cultural norms and perceptions. In one incident in a restaurant, a local resident drew attention to some students' non-verbal expressions. The meaning that local person attributed to the observations was not positive and sparked an extended discussion in the facility between the local patron and the group. It was disclosed that it was uncommon for persons in that community to see African American students participating in international immersion and community service. Additionally, the rare instances were not viewed positively as the African American visitor was often perceived as presumptuous, disdainful, and operating from a position of privilege. The students' non-verbal expressions were interpreted as confirmation of those prior beliefs and experiences of the local person.

The native faculty provided cultural context and interpretation when that experience was later processed with students. The students were able to gradually move from a defensive position of ignorance and disbelief to one in which they were able to acknowledge the validity of non-verbal expression and challenge their assumptions about privilege in order to bring to the surface latent attitudes and beliefs about class that were evident in their non-verbal reactions. "Nonverbal communication is very powerful because it is more difficult to monitor and control. It also often is a true reflection of individuals' hidden biases and prejudices" (Sue & Sue, 2013, p. 222). There was clear incongruence between one student's perception of her reactions and body language in the

restaurant and the reality of what was evident to the observers. The student later wrote in her journal, “I know now, I need to monitor my facial expressions and mannerisms when I am around others, I would not like for anyone to have a bad perception of me.” It was important for students to recognize that their experience with the local communities can have far reaching impact on whether the host communities will welcome or be wary of similar groups of students.

In addition to supporting students on their journey, it was imperative that students understood that faculty shared their experiences. Faculty leaders lived in the same lodging facilities, shared a room, accessed the same level of amenities, used public transportation, battled the scorching heat and torrential rains, and ate at similar eateries. These interactions provided opportunities for mutual self-disclosures and problem-solving. Students were eyewitness to faculty’s humility, frustrations, successes, and openness to growth. Students worked in tandem with faculty to develop and facilitate requested community professional development sessions. The reciprocal dialogue and individualized learning (Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell & Ortega, 2005) characterized in mentoring can advance students’ growth and build faculty’s credibility. Students gradually became more comfortable and shared their personal struggles and engaged in problem-solving with faculty leaders.

Racial Identity Development

The recognition of shared history between the participants and Belize’s indigenous groups heightened participants’ awareness of cultural similarities and understanding of self as not only an individual, but also a member of a global community. Belizean natives’ ancestry includes African, Mestizo, Mayan, and East Indian. Faculty developed the immersion so that students would be able to interact with persons from all these backgrounds. The group self-identified as African American. While they were expecting to see profound differences, participants were awed by the degree of similarity and wrote in their journals “I saw more than one person that looked just like someone I know” or “I have been overwhelmed by the cultural similarities.” The recognition of shared heritage increased students’ cultural self-awareness and desire to learn more about their own cultural heritage and tradition. Prior to the immersion one student’s color-blindness was evident in her self-disclosures, “I personally don’t feel like I have any cultural values... I have likes and dislikes but I don’t attribute those things to a culture.” At the end of the immersion she shared, “I wish I knew more about my background... now I’ll have to do my research.” Students lived experiences in multiple communities with distinct cultural backgrounds and adoption of the natives’ way of life greatly assisted students in their own self-discovery and racial identity development. Another student noted in her journal “I had to check my feelings today while at the hospital as I feel that some of my classmates reminded me of how white people talk about minorities. Using words like “you all” “they” “them” really rubs me the wrong way.” Equipped with specific knowledge of African-Americans, racial identity development, and knowledge of cultures in Belize, faculty cultivated an environment where students were able to evaluate and acknowledge their racial identity development.

Impact on Faculty

Multicultural competence is generally conceptualized across the dimensions of awareness, knowledge, and skills (Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992). Streets (2011) identified cultural navigation, psychological self-soothing, and language facility as other key components in the acquisition of multicultural competency especially as it relates to cultural immersion. This immersion in Belize provided a multilayered cultural experience that enhanced counselor educators' multicultural competence as they encountered ample occasions to demonstrate and model multicultural competencies and increase cultural knowledge and understanding. Immersion provides an opportunity to "examine and uncover my own biases and stereotypes, increase self-understanding, and increase my tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty" (Streets, 2011, p. 76).

The counselor educators were also participants in this immersion and their experiences mirrored students. Platt (2012) described the importance of faculty leaders who are committed to ongoing work on the "self as an educator" in international immersion. He asserts that recognition of the privilege that accompanies the role of faculty is critical for educators when they work outside of their own culture (Platt, 2012). Fostering students' cultural development through immersion challenges the traditional framework of the classroom with the faculty as the primary expert and students as receptacles for information. Faculty leaders' recognition of students' expert role in their lives enabled the self-discovery process to unfold. For example, faculty leaders provided initial structure and daily processing for the students' community service activities. As students struggled to adjust to their placements, leaders assumed a non-directive role which enabled students to advocate and negotiate the intricacies of their community service learning.

As the role of leader and participant collided, faculty needed a nonjudgmental space, independent of students, to process their own experiences. Faculty's willingness to co-experience and manage their own discomfort as well as handling students' issues was critical. Being in the proximity of a group of students for an extended period of time, witnessing students' multicultural journeys, sharing their highs and lows, and shaping their experiences evoked cognitive, as well as affective responses in the leaders. Faculty's personal beliefs and biases about students' responses to cultural differences, being in a group, and cultural immersion emerged as students struggled to adjust to the culture and their need for faculty's support and direction were at times contradictory to faculty's previous expectations of their role. Furthermore, leaders' values about shared spaces, limited privacy, reactions to the multiplicity of roles, response to the external elements, and personal reactions to students' experiences surfaced.

Faculty leaders kept informal journals and through personal self-reflection and team processing, faculty's assumptions were challenged. Faculty leaders assumed that despite the inherent cultural adjustment process, adult participants would be more responsive to directives, verbalize their needs, and take initiative for their learning. This erroneous assumption prompted many discussions between faculty leaders as directives and expectations had to be reiterated. Albeit provocative at times, faculty's open exploration of their biases, needs, expectations, and reactions to students' behaviors was crucial in promoting faculty leaders' awareness. Each day, hours were spent talking about students' reactions, meeting students' needs, revising plans to meet students where they

were, guiding them on their journey, and evaluating the immersion's progress and process. The immersion not only demanded physical and mental fortitude, but also exacted a tremendous emotional toll on faculty. As faculty leaders lived in close quarters and shared this experience, they forged a bond that extended beyond the confines of academia.

The cultural lectures, workshops, demonstrations, and cultural tours provided new knowledge about the cultures in Belize and also the similarities between indigenous groups in Belize and groups in the United States with African, Maya, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino/na heritage. Faculty's multicultural skill set was enhanced as they engaged in direct interactions with members of diverse groups and sought to understand cultural traditions and activities. Cultural sensitivity was integral during professional dialogues with mental health, social service, education, and cultural experts. Faculty modeled multicultural competence in their interactions with students as they helped students to move from a position of cultural naïveté to one of increased knowledge, in their interactions with the cultural communities in Belize, and their response to the various expected and unexpected components of the immersion.

Faculty leaders' experiences were differentially impacted by their personal and professional histories. For one faculty the immersion to Belize was a homecoming, while for the other faculty it was exploring new cultures. The experience of being in one's home country, re-experiencing the richness of the culture, being able to speak in one's native language and being a cultural navigator was a powerful experience for the Belizean faculty. The faculty leader's extensive professional and personal attachments to the people of Belize and intimate knowledge of the cultures and socio-political landscape created unique opportunities for the group. While the native faculty adjusted readily to Belize, the role of being a cultural navigator was new. Students' concern about not offending the faculty leaders and making a good impression revealed students' vulnerability and social desirability need. It was disconcerting at times for faculty to objectively listen to students' interpretation of cultural nuances without interjecting faculty's perspective. Stepping back and allowing students to construct their own meaning of events without being prejudiced by faculty's biases was critical in ensuring that students' interpretations were authentic. Intuitively, knowing when to offer relevant knowledge that would advance participants' understanding of their encounters was also imperative. On one occasion, the faculty leader shared insights about locals' perception and experience with African American visitors and volunteers. The information shared was instrumental in helping one participant understand a subsequent dialogue with a resident. She noted, "Everything he said truly came full circle with what Dr. Augustine talked about at our last processing regarding how the Belizean people perceive Black people from the states."

The second faculty leader has travel extensively however this was her first visit to Belize. Her history of international travel, multicultural competence, and intrinsic passion for the advancement of cultural competence expedited her adjustment to Belize and enhanced her leadership of the group. Whilst faculty's contagious quest for cultural knowledge through immersion inspired the group, faculty had to be cognizant of participants' varying developmental levels and where they were on their multicultural journey. While some participants readily explored other cultural activities, others were more reticent. Faculty's cultural sensitivity was critical in ensuring that students were

genuine in their expressions and had a full experience. Students' perceptions of faculty's credibility, expertness, and trustworthiness as leaders and professionals were instrumental factors in the dynamics of this immersion.

Conclusion

As communities become increasingly diverse and the demand for global competence intensifies, it will be incumbent upon counselor educators to be very intentional in their selection of continuing multicultural education strategies. Counselor educators need to embrace not only the didactic component of learning, but also be willing to 'walk the talk' through experiential activities. The benefits of international immersion as a cultural competence strategy for students continue to be documented in the literature. Therefore, counselor educators, as immersion leaders, can reap parallel benefits as they help students to acquire multicultural competence. The exploration of counselor educators' experiences in this article highlights not only the importance of faculty preparedness to lead immersion, but also the inherent opportunities for faculty to demonstrate and enhance all dimensions of cultural competence. This immersion with African-American females provides a glimpse into some of the process components that may be uniquely cultural and provides an avenue for further scrutiny. Further consideration in the literature of faculty's utilization of and experiences in immersion can shed additional light on the factors associated with faculty's willingness to participate in intercultural experiences and their value for furthering cultural competence.

References

- American Counseling Association. (2014). *Code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Alexander, C. M., Kruczek, T., & Ponterotto, J. (2005). Building multicultural competencies in school counselor trainees: An international immersion experience. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 44*(4), 255-266.
- Arthur, N., & Achenbach, K. (2002). Developing multicultural counseling competencies through experiential learning. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 42*(2), 2-14.
- Barden, S. M., & Cashwell, C. S. (2013). Critical factors in cultural immersion: A synthesis of relevant literature. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 35*, 286-297. doi: 10.1007/s10447-013-9183-y.
- Burnett, J. A., Hamel, D., & Long, L. L. (2004). Service learning in graduate counselor education: Developing multicultural counseling competency. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 32*, 180-191.
- Canfield, B. S., Low, L. & Hovestadt, A. (2009). Cultural immersion as a learning method for expanding intercultural competencies. *The Family Journal, 17*, 318-322. doi:10.1177/1066480709347359
- Casto, C., Caldwell, C. & Salazar, C. F. (2005). Creating mentorship relationships between female faculty and students in counselor education programs: Guidelines for potential mentees and mentors. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 83*, 331-336.

- Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2009). *CACREP: 2009 standards*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- DeRocco, J. N., & Sciarra, D. T. (2005). The immersion experience in multicultural counselor training: Confronting covert racism. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 33*, 2-16.
- Hipolito-Delgado, C., Cook, J. M., Avrus, E., & Bonham, E. J. (2011). Developing counseling students' multicultural competency through the multicultural action project. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 50*(6), 402-421.
- Hipolito-Delgado, C., Cook, J. M., Avrus, E., & Bonham, E. J. (2013). The lived experience of cultural immersion. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, 52*, 191-207. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1939.2013.0042.x
- Ishii, H., Gilbride, D. D., & Stensrud, R. (2009). Students' internal reactions to a one-week cultural immersion trip: A qualitative analysis of student journals. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 37*, 15-27.
- Jurgens, J. C., & McAuliffe, G. (2004). Short-term study abroad experience in Ireland: An exercise in cross-cultural counseling. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 26*(2), 147-161.
- Levy, L. B. (2012). International opportunities for psychology students: Logistics, training, and ethical considerations. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 6*, 84-92.
- McDowell, T., Goessling, K., Melendez, T. (2012). Transformative learning through international immersion: Building multicultural competence in family therapy and counseling. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 38*, 365-379.
- Nieto, J. (2006). The cultural plunge: Cultural immersion as a means of promoting self-awareness and cultural sensitivity among student teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly, Winter*, 75-84.
- Platt, J. J. (2012). A Mexico city-based immersion education program: Training mental health clinicians for practice with Latino communities. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy, 38*(2), 352-364.
- Pope-Davis, D. B., Breaux, C., & Liu, W. M. (1997). A multicultural immersion experience: Filling the void in multicultural training. In D. B. Pope-Davis & H. L. K. Coleman (Eds.). *Multicultural counseling competencies: Assessment, education and training, and supervision* (pp. 227-241). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Ridley, C. R., Mendoza, D. W., & Kanitz, B. E. (1994). Multicultural training: Reexamination, operationalization, and integration. *The Counseling Psychologist, 22*, 227-289.
- Robinson-Wood, T. L. (2013). *The convergence of race, ethnicity, and gender: Multiple identities in communities* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson
- Roysircar, G., Gard, G., Hubbell, R., & Ortega, M. (2005). Development of counseling trainees multicultural competence through mentoring English as a second language students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 33*, 17-36.
- Shallcross, L. (2013). Multicultural competence: A continual pursuit. *Counseling Today, 56*(3), 31-43.
- Streets, B. F. (2011). How deep is your commitment? Crossing borders via cultural immersion. *Issues in Teacher Education, 20*(2), 67-79.

- Sue, D. W., Arrendondo, P., & McDavis, R. J. (1992). Multicultural counseling competencies and standards: A call to the profession. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*, 477-486.
- Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2013). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (6th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.
- Tomlinson-Clarke, S. M., & Clarke, D. (2010). Culturally focused community-centered service learning: An international cultural immersion experience. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 38*, 166-175.
- Walters, L. M., Green, M. R., Wang, L., & Walters, T. (2011). From heads to hearts: Digital stories as reflection artifacts of teacher's international experience. *Issues in Teacher Education, 20*, 37-52.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm