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Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of Debriefing Circles to Facilitate Self-Reflection During a Cultural Immersion Experience

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This study followed 9 teacher candidates through a 3-week cultural immersion experience in which they volunteered in educational settings where they were not members of the majority culture. This learning experience was designed to help candidates better understand their culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse future students. A qualitative design with an ethnographic approach was used to explore the use of debriefing circles, based on Parker Palmer's clearness committee structure. Debriefing circles were examined as a tool to facilitate self-reflection as a scaffold toward culturally responsive teaching. Candidate perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the debriefing-circle discussion framework are analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

With a progressively diverse society, we are preparing teachers for a changing world. Meeting the needs of all students presents an ongoing challenge. Over the past decade, schools in the United States have experienced a marked increase of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The National Clearing House for English Language Acquisition (2008) projected that by 2015, English learners (ELs) will constitute 30% of the U.S. school population. Teacher-education programs must prepare candidates to meet the needs of these students, but knowledge and strategies are insufficient; achieving this goal requires a self-reflective shift from teaching *regardless* of students'

Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identity of the study participants.

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cultural differences to teaching that is *informed by and shaped by* students' cultural differences.

Cultural Responsiveness Scaffolding: Self-Reflection

This shift in perspective does not begin with the knowledge and skills of classroom application but with self-reflection—a critical assessment or look at the origin of one's actions and the nature of one's feelings as part of the reflective experience (Kitchenham, 2008). Marx and Moss (2011) stated, "To be culturally responsive, preservice teachers must first become culturally conscious and interculturally sensitive" (p. 36). Gay and Kirkland (2003) recognized self-reflection as necessary scaffolding for culturally responsive teaching: "teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instruction effectiveness" (p. 181). We focus this research on self-reflection—in the context of debriefing circles—as a prerequisite to culturally responsive teaching, defined by Gay (2002) as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106).

Experiential learning in a cultural immersion setting is critical to preparing culturally responsive teachers (Malewski, Sharma, & Phillion, 2012; Marx & Moss, 2011) resulting in numerous benefits, such as increased self-efficacy, multicultural sensitivity, and instructional pedagogy (Cushner, 2011; Dantas, 2007; Quezada, 2004; Rios, Montecinos, & van Olphen, 2007). The transformative nature of these benefits is facilitated by the disequilibrium that participants experience during cultural engagement—rather than cultural tourism; staying with host families and participating in the community present challenges such as homesickness, lack of support systems, and adjustments to cultural differences (Mahon & Espinetti, 2007). The benefits of self-reflection, empathy, self-efficacy, and multicultural sensitivity result from engaging with culture rather than merely observing it from a distance (Cushner, 2004, 2007; Dantas, 2007; Quezada, 2004). We assert that it is essential for future teachers to experience the challenges of cultural engagement to increase awareness of both *self* and *other*—to remove themselves from the safety net of familiar cultural norms in order to engage disequilibrium, to critically reflect, to question assumptions, and to consider other perspectives—foundational building blocks for cultural responsiveness.

Self-Reflection Scaffolding: Cultural Engagement

Our private university in the Pacific Northwest, United States, offers a cultural immersion practicum in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program

to provide an opportunity for teacher candidates to engage in another culture, to explore cultural frameworks, and to develop an increased sensitivity to the needs of diverse students through self-reflection. Many graduate students are unable to leave family and work responsibilities for a semester overseas; therefore, the cultural immersion practicum is limited to 3 weeks, a time span that is more likely to prompt expectations of cultural tourism over cultural engagement. Due to this challenge, we specifically targeted cultural engagement, beginning with recommendations from the literature. To promote cultural engagement and self-reflection, researchers encourage programs to incorporate journals, guided reflection, and debriefing sessions to help students assess their home culture and become aware of possible difficulties they will encounter upon entering another culture (Marx & Moss, 2011; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Wilson & Flournoy, 2007). In our program's first year, we implemented the following recommendations from the literature: host-family stays, prefield workshops, and journal reflection prompts, adapted from Indiana University's cultural immersion program reflection prompts (Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; L. Stachowski, personal communication, November 6, 2008).

Self-Reflection Scaffolding: Debriefing Circles

After reviewing the first year's data through the lens of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2012), we purported the need for a dialogue protocol that encouraged listening skills, self-reflection, and analysis of assumptions instead of outside solutions and advice. Mezirow theorized that transformative learning occurs as a result of critical thinking and discourse and is triggered by a disorienting dilemma. During the short-term immersion experience, teacher candidates participated in components of transformative learning theory including disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and dialogue with family or friends about disorienting dilemmas; *however, the dialogue that candidates reported often reinforced the shame and embarrassment of disequilibrium rather than encouraging self-reflection and the ability to consider multiple perspectives* (Addleman, Brazo, & Cevallos, 2011).

We sought to implement a group structure that would promote self-reflective dialogue rather than shame. Schapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos (2012) identify three group configurations that promote transformative learning, of which the *personal growth and awareness group format* aligns most closely with our goal to promote self-reflection. The authors refer to Palmer's (2004) *Courage to Lead* group framework as one context where "individuals can critically assess their assumptions and frames of reference" (p. 362). Therefore, in preparation for the second year's immersion experience, we asked a colleague with training in *Courage to Lead* to prepare our students for on-site interactive reflection based on the concepts of Palmer's

work. During the prefield workshops, the professor modeled “debriefing circles,” an adaptation of Palmer’s clearness committees: structured group interaction to encourage listening in a way that encourages self-reflection and multiple perspectives (Aguilar, 2013; Jurow & Pierce, 2011; Palmer, 2004). The research during the second year of the program focused primarily on transformative learning; however, two secondary themes prompted the current study: (a) Teacher candidates were not prepared to consistently implement the debriefing-circle protocol, and (b) teacher candidates reported that they were able to name and define their feelings, to gain a better understanding of their thoughts and perspectives, and to continue to process their experiences during the debriefing circles (Addleman, Nava, Brazo, Cevallos, & Dixon, 2011). The dialogue framework held promise, but we recommended further research regarding its strengths and weaknesses to better implement it as a reflection instrument for short-term immersion experiences.

Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, and Wang (2009) describe study abroad in teacher education as “under-researched, under-theorized and under-evaluated” (p. 323). We seek to add to the literature on internationalizing teacher education by exploring the debriefing-circle dialogue protocol to enhance self-reflection among preservice teacher candidates in short-term cultural immersion experiences. The following question directed our research: “What are teacher candidates’ perceptions of the use of debriefing circles to facilitate self-reflection in a cultural immersion experience?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory provided a framework to explore the experiences and feelings of disequilibrium that candidates encountered during this study’s cultural immersion practicum; he states that the goal of adult education is not merely to help students acquire information but rather to facilitate critical reflection and analysis of assumptions through dialogue. Transformative learning theory is defined by the Transformative Learning Centre as a “deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” (Transformative Learning Centre, n.d.). Discourse and critical reflection are two components of Mezirow’s theory that provide the learner with opportunities to analyze assumptions while reshaping or rethinking current paradigms. The process of discourse allows for many interpretations or understandings of a belief to be questioned, discussed, and analyzed. The more this dialogue process occurs, the greater the chance of finding, in Mezirow’s (1997) terms, “a more dependable interpretation” (p. 7). When learners analyze the interconnected experiences of others,

they learn together by arriving at common understandings. These common understandings provide a foundation for belief until new information or evidence can be added and the cycle of discourse continues.

The learning process for both teachers and students has been examined through the lens of transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006; Greenman & Dieckmann, 2004; Harris, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow, 2008; Meyers, 2008; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011; Whitney, 2008). Saavedra (1996) worked with small groups of teachers as they discussed educational issues, achieving transformation through a cycle of inquiry. Saavedra identified specific conditions that facilitated transformative learning, such as (a) exploratory discussions where all voices were heard, (b) situations where learners were responsible for their own learning, (c) conflict and dissonance, and (d) consensus-building collaboration that promotes new interpretations from differing perspectives, reflection, self-assessment, and continuing reflective practice. Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) explored the opportunities for reflection that disorienting events provided for teacher candidates overseas. The researchers concluded that teacher candidates used four primary means of reflection to process the disequilibrium: journals, blogs, dialogue with colleagues, and silent reflection. Their candidates used dialogue to reflect on their experiences, related feelings, and the “how and why” of specific events. Trilokekar and Kukar emphasized the importance of peer support in short-term immersion experiences.

Palmer's Clearness Committee

Palmer's (1998) work with clearness committees, based on early Quaker practices of listening, community decision making, and problem solving, offered a basis for creating this study's debriefing-circle protocol. Palmer sees the clearness committee as an experience that removes interference so one can discover wisdom from the inside out. In this process, a “focus person” conveys a personal question or issue to a group of peers by describing the situation or problem, providing pertinent background information, and discussing possible future directions. The committee members then ask open and honest questions to the focus person. “An open question is one that expands rather than restricts your arena of exploration, one that does not push or even nudge you toward a particular way of framing a situation” (Palmer, 2004, p. 132). These questions are brief and aimed at helping the focus person process the experience as well as explore assumptions and perspectives in a safe setting. Palmer described the successful outcome of a clearness committee as new insight and revelation—not the solving of a problem; this framework aligned with our desire to foster self-reflection through interactive reflection rather than group dialogue of advice or shame. The committee's purpose is to create a safe space for the focus person to reflect and discover.

Although Palmer's work focuses on teachers and administrators (Intrator & Scribner, 2002), the clearness-committee protocol was not specifically designed for classroom teachers or cultural immersion settings. Jurow (2009) studied the use of clearness committees with educators as a form of transformative professional development. She attempted to help participants see themselves in new ways, both personally and professionally. Her work provided insights into how the educators gained a new understanding of self as promoted in the clearness-committee retreats. Jurow and Pierce (2011), in a yearlong study, researched the transformative professional development of public school leaders in the *Courage to Lead* program. They explored the carryover effects of the retreats—whether or not the participants continued to benefit from the insights they had gained once they returned to work. In this study, we seek to contribute to the current literature by exploring the possibilities and challenges of debriefing circles: an interactive reflection framework, adapted from Palmer's clearness committee protocol, to facilitate self-reflection in a short-term cultural immersion experience.

Discourse to Promote Self-Reflection and Transformative Learning

Mezirow (2003) and Palmer (2004) point to discourse as a critical element for processing disequilibrium. Both adhere to the foundational belief that “meaning” lies within the individual, and that discourse is an essential component for insight and self-discovery (Kitchenham, 2008; Palmer, 2004). Mezirow emphasized discourse as a vehicle for considering multiple perspectives, allowing participants to benefit from the combined knowledge of the group through debate, critically examining facts and feelings, and investigating assumptions and differing viewpoints. Palmer's clearness-committee framework also provides a forum for critically examining facts, assumptions, feelings, and multiple perspectives with a key difference—creating a safe environment is of utmost importance. Palmer states that when “confronting and correcting each other in debate” we lose the space for reflection and transformation because our energy is devoted to winning the battle. In an effort to lower one's affective filter, clearness-committee dialogue is practiced through the use of open and honest questions that prompt an individual to go deeper into his/her thought process, providing additional rationale and discernment for the issue at hand. The community creates space for the focus person to delve into a deep conversation of intrapersonal dialogue (Jurow & Pierce, 2011). The two approaches share the common function of presenting and assessing ideas as well as critically examining evidence and arguments, but Palmer does not include debate or coming to group agreement on the justification of beliefs. We adapted Palmer's approach to discourse in an effort to facilitate safe environments for self-reflection, necessary scaffolding for both transformative learning and culturally responsive teaching.

METHODOLOGY

Research Site

The study followed 9 graduate teacher candidates through a 3-week practicum in Vienna, Austria. In the participating university's course sequence, this practicum takes place before two semesters of student teaching and has been offered in Austria, China, Ecuador, and the United States. Candidates volunteer in an educational setting where they are not members of the majority culture. This experience is specifically designed to help pre-service teacher candidates better understand the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students they will teach. The Vienna practicum encompassed teacher candidates' experiences in the classroom as well as their cultural interactions outside the classroom. All 9 individuals were assigned to home-stays in Vienna and the surrounding towns. They spent mornings observing and assisting classroom teachers in international and bilingual Austrian schools, two evenings a week volunteering at a youth center for refugees (elementary and high school children), and weekends touring or spending time with host families.

Participants

Nine of the 10 teacher candidates who traveled to Vienna completed informed consent contracts and gave permission for their reflections to be used as data for this research study. There were 8 females and 1 male, aged 22–33. All had been raised in the United States; 8 were Caucasian, and 1 was Filipino American. Three were pursuing an authorization in elementary education and 6 in middle/high school education with specializations that included language arts, social studies, art, math, and physical education. The candidates represented three of the participating university's campuses in two states and were in their second semester of a four-semester program or had just graduated and were not taking the course for credit.

Data Collection and Interpretation

A qualitative design with an ethnographic approach was used to explore debriefing circles as a tool for self-reflection in a cultural immersion experience. Teacher candidates participated in two debriefing circles during their time in Vienna. In preparation for the circles, candidates were encouraged to write a reflection about a critical incident: "Describe a critical incident that you have experienced in the past week—an incident that you have been reflecting on or 'mulling over' for hours or days." After participating in the student-led debriefing circles, the participants were asked to reflect on the following four prompts:

1. Reflect on your experience, thoughts, and reactions to the debriefing circle as a focus person or committee member in the debriefing circle.
2. How did the debriefing circle influence your thinking about your critical incident? If it did not influence your thinking, discuss your theories as to why.
3. How did the debriefing circle provide or not provide “space for the soul”?
4. Transformative learning theory suggests that dialogue enhances critical reflection. Based on your experience would you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

The candidates were introduced to the debriefing-circle process during pretravel workshops using a gradual release of responsibility model. First, faculty members provided instruction on the characteristics of open and honest questions, as well as the structure of a debriefing circle: (a) 10 minutes for the focus person to share a critical incident including any helpful background or context information, (b) 25 minutes for group members to continue listening to the focus person by asking open and honest questions—at a relaxed pace with time for silence, and (c) 5 minutes for affirmations and sharing of positive patterns about the focus person that emerged during the circle. After faculty members presented these guidelines, they modeled the three-step process in a shortened, 5-minute timeframe. Then participants practiced the process and questioning techniques in small groups for 5 to 10 minutes. Participants were also provided with written instructions to review on-site before each debriefing circle.

The data that inform this study’s analysis were comprised of (a) candidates’ written descriptions of their critical incidents in preparation for the debriefing circles, (b) candidates’ written reflections following their participation in the two debriefing circles, and (c) a transcription of a five-member posttrip focus group. Due to Palmer’s (2004) clearness-committee structure, a foundational component of the debriefing circles was to create a safe space for self-reflection through open and honest questions, confidentiality, and student-led circles without professor presence. These safeguards were designed to build trust, to prevent judgment and advice giving, and to limit the influence of course grades and the student/professor power differential. As a result, we were not able to collect direct transcriptions of the student-led debriefing circles, but instead, we collected data on student perceptions of the debriefing-circle process. Although this data collection approach did not give us a complete picture of the process, it provided a way to research the use of this interactive reflection framework while honoring both the protocol and our students.

Using a basic interpretive approach (Merriam, 2002), we analyzed the data, identified themes and discussed the themes through the lens of our theoretical framework. We first read the data for relevant text then created

text-based categories to label the emerging groupings, looked for related categories and identified emerging themes. We repeated this process as we compared the related themes to our literature review on Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Palmer's clearness committees.

FINDINGS

In this section, we will describe the strengths, weaknesses, and perceived benefits of the debriefing-circle protocol as reported by the participants. Debriefing circles consisted of four or five members who spent approximately 40 minutes creating space for one member to reflect on a critical incident. After the focus person shared a critical incident, the other members were instructed to ask the focus person open and honest questions, without giving advice or sharing connections to their own life experiences.

Critical Incidents

Critical incidents ranged from missing the comforts of home, such as cell phones and 24-hour Internet service, to a variety of other challenges: "standing out" from the host culture, the inability to communicate while filing a police report, riding the right train to the wrong country, and an overall lack of understanding and control. The following is a teacher candidate's description of her critical incident:

I was in a fifth level history class where students were giving current event presentations. I had been feeling very comfortable interacting with students until the last presentation: The Death of Bin Laden by the Americans. As the student began to describe how and why the Americans killed Bin Laden, I became increasingly uncomfortable as everyone began to stare at me. During the presentation, the student kept saying he didn't understand why the Americans had to kill Bin Laden or why they needed revenge.

I had never been judged for my nationality. I had never felt ashamed of the actions of my country. The rush of emotions has been hard to process. I had never felt like I had to represent and speak for my country. I had never been the only American in a room.

Although the incidents were varied, candidates reported the common element of strong emotional reactions: shame, frustration, embarrassment, and/or humiliation. As evidenced in the example, they experienced disequilibrium. The following sections summarize candidates' perceptions of the debriefing-circle components that encouraged and hindered self-reflection.

Aspects of Debriefing Circles that Encouraged Reflection

LEARNING TO QUESTION AND LISTEN

As the candidates reported on the use of debriefing circles to promote reflection, they identified the importance of questioning and listening protocols. Several shared that these skills required conscious effort; they were not accustomed to “just listening” as part of conversation. The questioning guidelines outlined the need for open and honest questions, such as “You have mentioned a few times that you handled the situation differently here than you would have at home. How is that important? Why do you think you have circled back to that thought multiple times?” After hearing these questions, a group member wrote, “that question got me thinking about the element of self reflection that can be had just by being in a new culture. Normal events that would be nothing at home can become true moments of disequilibrium” (May, 2011). At first, many of the teacher candidates struggled with asking debriefing circle questions. Instead, they would ask questions designed to give advice, to fix a problem, to make a point, or to allow the questioner to tell his/her own story. One participant stated, “I was really impressed with the questions asked . . . I want to be a good questioner, but I’m afraid I do a lot more ‘fixing’ than I do prompting thought and reflection for the sharer” (Vivian, 2011). A group member who had just shared a critical incident with the small group reflected on the improvement from one debriefing circle to the next, “I think one of the major improvements from last week to this week was the quality of questions. It seemed that the good questions were brought back while the bad questions were discarded and replaced by more insightful questions” (Charlie, 2011). Palmer’s (2004) questioning approach was repeatedly labeled as challenging but beneficial for promoting reflection and awareness.

JUDGMENT-FREE ENVIRONMENT

Participants also identified the importance of creating a safe environment to encourage self-reflection: “This type of debriefing circle is helpful for making a judgment-free environment where no one is allowed to ‘help’ or ‘fix’ the problem right away” (Ann, 2011). Participants shared how this aspect created space for reflection. For example, “No one tried to tell me what I should have done differently. There was neutral space in the circle and the pressure was lifted from having to make a new decision or change what was already done” (Lynn, 2011). The protocol for the circles created comfortable and open spaces where participants were willing to share: “The questions were very considerate and open. I felt free to share, to receive and answer questions, and be affirmed on a deeper level than I would have otherwise . . . most of the time I felt that the questions truly got to the heart of my issue” (Grace, 2011). Another participant commented on how the group responded in a caring way:

They made me feel safe. Their questions were kind and I knew their intentions were good. So right off the bat I knew that it was safe because the minute I opened it up for questioning, they responded in a loving way, is how I took it. Instead of a question to get at “well do it this way next time” kind of a way or a “you shoulda done it this way.” It wasn’t like that at all. So, that created a safe tone for me. (Elizabeth, 2011)

Many participants recognized the advantages of creating a safe space to reflect and expressed the desire to transfer the debriefing-circle questioning skills to contexts beyond the research study.

Aspects of Debriefing Circles that Hindered Reflection

Another theme we identified in the data dealt with the challenges of debriefing circles. The most common barriers to authentic self-reflection were lack of cognitive and emotional investment in the process and a failure to adhere to debriefing-circle protocols.

QUESTIONING AND LISTENING

When the circles were not perceived as a safe space for self-reflection, the participants in these situations described the dynamics of the group as being less serious in nature and the group members as less vulnerable and unwilling to “go there.” The open and honest questions were a specific challenge in these cases. Some of the questions lacked depth and did not match the guidelines for debriefing-circle questions. These conditions detracted from one teacher candidate’s ability to authentically explore her critical incident, “There were some questions posed to me that seemed of a less serious nature and a bit biased during this circle. I still answered them but then I felt that my answer was skewed and I was trying to please the questioner with my answer” (Ann, 2011).

Teacher candidates did not always want to follow the protocol set for the debriefing circles. Some found the structure confining and ignored it. When this happened, instead of creating a safe space for reflection, participants reported a lack of desire to engage, to share, or to reflect. One participant stated, “The atmosphere became increasingly informal and at times immature. My fellow committee members asked leading and probing questions that I found very judgmental. Their lack of sincerity and willingness to follow the guidelines ruined the experience for me” (May, 2011). In these situations participants struggled with protocols such as asking open and honest questions rather than offering advice or empathy, allowing space for silence rather than filling the silence, and directing questions to the focus person without the communication norms of body language and eye contact.

ENVIRONMENT

Some candidates reported an initial hesitation to share their critical incidents. They questioned whether the incidents were relevant or “good” enough to talk about: “In coming to the circle, I was nervous sharing what I had felt about my experience and how it would make others feel about me and I didn’t know if this experience was important enough to share or too much for people to hear” (Ann, 2011). Once the debriefing circles started, participants reported feeling more confident that their critical incidents were appropriate. This reassurance came after hearing and comparing their critical incidents to others shared in the circle. Another reality our participants had to deal with was their relative unfamiliarity with each other. Due to prefield workshops on separate campuses, many had not known each other prior to the trip. In response to one candidate’s comment about the difficulty of sharing critical incidents with strangers, her classmate replied, “Well hello, we all met at the airport” (Grace, 2011). When candidates identified these themes of hindrance in a debriefing circle, it resulted in frustrating outcomes for the group members who were invested in the circle.

Perceived Benefits of Debriefing Circles

The data not only led to a clearer understanding of the debriefing circles’ strengths and weaknesses but also provided repeated reports of two resulting benefits: self-discovery and the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives. Participants wrote about “discovering” feelings and thought processes about their critical incidents as a result of the circles. In reference to discovering other perspectives, they used terms like “new thinking,” “a different light,” and “other viewpoints.” One participant said, “Most of the questions asked me to explain further or define something. It was through those questions that I was forced to see different sides of my incident” (Elizabeth, 2011). Teacher candidates also reported that the circles provided the opportunity for critical reflection and deeper thinking, “I thought this process truly helped in critical reflection. Without it I don’t think I would have felt numerous feelings or thinking about the bottom line of my incident” (Elizabeth, 2011). Another said, “I feel like the incident was discussed more in depth than if I had just kept it to myself or shared it with one other person” (Lynn, 2011). Candidate perceptions of the debriefing circles provided information for maximizing the tool’s strengths, as well as important considerations for improving the tool’s implementation.

DISCUSSION

Cultural immersion offers a powerful context for self-reflection. In our initial research on cultural immersion (Addleman, Brazo, & Cevallos, 2011), teacher

candidates' reported elements of transformative learning such as disorienting events and varied levels of reflection; however, dialogue was not identified as a tool that facilitated self-reflection. We found that participants often identified the dialogue process as a barrier to self-reflection, characterized at times by shame and blame resulting from well-meaning advice. For example, as 1 participant processed the disorienting event of being mugged, he reported conversations with group members and family at home comprised of advice about what he should have done and questions that elicited shame and guilt. This finding prompted our investigation of debriefing circles as an instrument to facilitate self-reflective discourse in a short-term immersion experience.

The debriefing circle framework created a new paradigm for discussing critical incidents during cultural immersion experiences. Teacher candidates in this study explored a structured group context designed to move beyond discourses of solutions, blame, or shame and to introduce a different approach of careful listening and creating space for the soul to promote self-reflection—a necessary scaffold for culturally responsive teaching. In the following discussion, we outline aspects of the debriefing circles that provided space for constructive reflection of discrepant perspectives and suggestions for future research based on the identified barriers to self-reflection.

Learning to Listen

The debriefing circles were designed to facilitate discourse by promoting deep listening, thinking, and questioning in a safe environment that provided emotional space for reflection. Many candidates identified this as a new and challenging discussion paradigm. They expressed the difficulties of learning to listen carefully and their struggles to avoid typical conversation protocols, such as responding to a speaker with personal opinions or advice. Instead of debriefing disequilibrium through the familiar patterns of asking leading questions or giving advice, many analyzed the questions they asked and attempted to ask open and honest questions that did not advise or fix. We saw this as a sign of growth; in typical conversation settings, they would not be aware of the types of questions asked and whether or not they were leading a person to follow outside advice or to critically evaluate his/her own perspective. The debriefing-circle training helped teacher candidates see discourse from another perspective. In addition to reports that they would like to transfer these listening skills to other interactions and situations, there were participants who approached us to request debriefing-circle dialogues with the professors and one or two trusted colleagues to process particularly difficult critical incidents.

Exploring Multiple Perspectives

Another perceived benefit of the debriefing-circle structure was the opportunity to reframe critical incidents and to consider situations from new perspectives. The teacher candidates reported “new thinking” about their situations in response to the questioning protocol. Instead of being tethered to a single perspective about critical incidents—narratives that often played and replayed in people’s minds—candidates reported that open and honest questions “cut the tether” and allowed them to see situations from other vantage points. They enjoyed the benefits of collaboration, such as the ability to cut the tether and to consider multiple perspectives, while diffusing the affective barriers that result from argument and debate; “the energy we expend trying to make sure that we win leaves us with no resources for reflection and transformation” (Palmer, 2004, p. 128). This collaborative approach allowed participants to reflect on their assumptions and to reframe disorienting events as opportunities for growth.

Barriers to Self-Reflection

One of our goals in this study was to identify the specific challenges of debriefing circles in order to improve implementation of the protocol. Although many of the debriefing circles created “safe” environments for teacher candidates to question their assumptions and to consider disequilibrium from different perspectives, further planning and research is needed to address the barriers to self-reflection that circles presented. The debriefing-circle protocol proved challenging for many participants. Some circles lacked the presence of open and honest questions; instead, a few of the groups reported leading questions that came across as judgmental. One possible reason for this break in protocol could be misunderstanding about the protocols, since we only conducted a limited number of workshop training sessions preceding the trip. Other possible reasons for failed protocol include participants’ lack of commitment or participants’ decision to break protocol because they themselves disagreed with the approach. When one or more group members lacked investment in the process, failed to follow protocol or hesitated to share personal issues with “strangers,” the debriefing circles were less likely to result in analysis of disequilibrium and a deeper understanding of meaning. Groups with members who did not appear to be emotionally or cognitively invested, reported superficial discourse and a hesitancy to share. How can safe group contexts be created to foster self-discovery. How can a comfortable level of trust be achieved in a cultural immersion experience for teacher candidates? How can debriefing-circle instruction and implementation be improved to maximize self-reflection opportunities during short-term cultural immersion experiences?

Failing to recognize and question one's own lens presents a critical obstacle to valuing and meeting the needs of all students. As teacher-education programs seek to facilitate culturally responsive teaching, they must attend to the prerequisite skill of self-reflection. Equipping teachers with the skills to create group dialogue contexts that promote critical self-reflection rather than shame and self-recrimination is one piece of the teacher-education scaffolding we build to prepare culturally responsive teachers whose teaching is *informed by and shaped by* students' cultural differences.

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