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EXAMINING DISEQUILIBRIUM IN AN IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

by

Carol J. Brazo, Genevieve Harris, and Rebecca A. Addleman

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Abstract

This study examines the disequilibrium raised by a cultural immersion experience, using the structure of White racial identity development, in an effort to better scaffold the immersion experience in the future. Thirty-two students participated in an immersion experience in Quito, Ecuador. The study follows their experience as they strive to make sense of their experience and begin to understand and unpack their own sense of privilege. The six stages of racial identity development are used as a grid through which to view and consider the experiences of teacher candidates in a cultural immersion experience. Two predominant themes included schools/classroom management, and language/culture/race.

Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism does not affect them because they are not people of color: they do not see "whiteness" as racial identity. Harlon Dalton, 1995

Imagine three professors discussing the most profound learning experiences of their lives. Of the three of us, one is Latina and two are White. We all name international experiences as the most far-reaching learning experience in our lives. That initial conversation has led to many others. We dream of giving our graduate students similar experiences and ultimately we have devised a program that allows our teacher candidates an immersion experience in Quito, Ecuador, giving them an opportunity to experience what it is to be racially, culturally and linguistically other.

Over a two-year period, we have led 32 students to Ecuador for three-week practicums that included homestays. They live with Ecuadorian families, teach in Ecuadorian schools and study Spanish. At the end of the practicums, the outcomes remain varied. One refrain that is repeated at interesting intervals in both groups is one that deals with a new realization of what it means to be White, American, and privileged, exemplified by a student comment, "I have never felt more like a stupid American!" This refrain comes from all age groups and is echoed in their debriefing forums when they returned home. We joined forces with a colleague who is assisting us in understanding white racial identity development. The purpose of doing so is to examine the disequilibrium raised by the immersion experience, using the structure of White racial identity development, in an effort to better scaffold the immersion experience in the future.

Literature Review

This paper adds to the literature about cultural immersion experiences and preservice teachers, a predominantly White and middle class demographic. Unique to this study is the use of Helms's (1990, 1995) model of White racial identity development in order to examine stages of identity, as well as growth, throughout the experience.

Teacher Education Students and Cultural Immersion Experience

Many universities offer international opportunities, but it is uncommon for teacher education students to participate in these experiences (Quezada, 2004;

Quezada & Alfaro, 2007; Roberts, 2007). Reading about, discussing, and analyzing another culture does not equal the benefits of experiencing the culture and the role of “the Other.” Cushner (2007) stated:

Middle-class white teacher educators who are effective at teaching for diversity had their most profound and impactful experiences while living outside their own country. These teachers had, thus, encountered discrimination and exclusion by being an outsider within another cultural context. (pp. 35-36)

Having established the need for an immersion experience for our students, it became a point of interest to consider preservice teacher attitudes towards diversity. It was essential to recognize both the goals for which we were striving and the possible cautionary notes along the way. Numerous studies (Burriss & Burriss, 2004; Flores & Smith, 2008; Gay, 2002; Hollins, 1993; Lin, Lake & Rice, 2008; Wiggins & Follo, 1999; Youngs & Youngs, 2001) note the importance of exposure and immersion in diverse cultures. Ference and Bell (2004) found that even a two-week cross-cultural immersion experience in the United States increased knowledge, skills, and dispositions regarding immigration, culture, preconceptions, misconceptions, and feelings of isolation. Cautions included an over-inflated sense of competency on the part of preservice teachers (Burriss & Burriss, 2004; Wiggins & Folio, 1999) and the reality that students who find the exposure to other cultures too difficult do not desire to work with diverse school populations (Wiggins & Folio, 1999).

Race is a social construct that was created to benefit an economic system that arbitrarily allocates resources according to race (Helms, 1994; Helms & Richardson, 1997). Although race has been socially constructed, it clearly has real-life implications, and people “develop identities in conjunction with their racial classifications” (Marshall, 2002, p. 11). Identity is much more complex than racial identification. As Tatum (1999) explains, racial identity is intertwined with other aspects of identity, such as gender, age, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, religion (or atheism), and disabilities (Tatum). This rich diversity was seen throughout student comments.

Marshall (2002) describes racial identity, like race, as a construct. Racial identity describes “our inclination to identify (or not identify) with the racial group to which we are assumed to belong” (p. 9). Many factors contribute to one’s racial identity development, including family, society, politics, and history (Tatum, 1999). In the United States, people of color commonly receive messages of inferiority, whereas Whites develop a sense of superiority and entitlement due to societal messages (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). In fact, “societal norms have been constructed around [Whites’] racial, ethnic, and cultural frameworks, values, and priorities” (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, p. 39) to the point that Whites receive and internalize the message that they do not have a race or culture but that they represent the norm. This is something we observed in our study and which caused a great deal of disequilibrium for our students.

Models of racial identity development originated in the 1970s (Moule, 2012). The models were designed with people of color in mind, particularly African Americans, with the purpose of defining the process of creating a positive identity in a racist environment (Helms, 1995). Helms (1990) began to develop a model of White racial identity development in the 1980s. As she points out, “the central racial identity developmental task for a person of color is to resolve intra-psychic conflict involving whites as the contrast group” (Helms, 2003, p. 46), whereas developing a non-racist identity is part of developing a “healthy white identity” (Helms, 1990, p. 49). The White racial identity development model is interpreted broadly in this study

to address the cultural differences students experienced, which includes race, language, and culture.

The first stage is *Contact* a time of unexamined contact with people of color and/or vicarious contact (e.g., through the media) (Helms, 1995). This may be marked by a color-blind attitude or by a desire to avoid any “anxiety-evoking” racial information (Moule, 2012). The second stage, *Disintegration*, is often precipitated by a moral dilemma concerning race that results in cognitive dissonance (Helms). There is an acknowledgement that race makes a difference and there may be an initial discomfort with privilege (Moule). *Reintegration*, the third stage, is marked by a conscious acknowledgement of White identity. However, this identity is seen as superior to people of color: Often “any residual feelings of guilt and anxiety [from the dissonance in the previous stage] are transformed into fear and anger toward [people of color]” (Helms, p. 60). Helms describes the next stage, *Pseudo-Independent*, as the “first stage of redefining a white identity” (p. 61). In this stage, Whites begin to understand racism and their role in it, but this is an intellectual awareness only. A person might espouse a liberal ideology, but it may not be emotionally integrated (Moule). *Immersion-emersion*, the next stage, is a time when Whites seek a re-education and a personal understanding of racism and how one benefits. This may be the result of feeling rejected or isolated in some way (Moule). The final stage, *Autonomy*, is a time of “internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of whiteness evolved in the earlier stages” (p. 62). This stage is marked by flexible analyses and responses to racial material” (p. 188) and a positive, productive view of being White. Whites at this stage have developed the capacity to relinquish privilege and prejudice (Moule). Helms stresses the need to think of White racial identity as an ongoing, cyclical lifelong process. Further, as will be seen, one person’s responses may vary from stage to stage according to circumstances.

How did preservice teachers deal with disequilibrium and discomfort during a cultural immersion experience in Ecuador, according to the stages of White racial identity development? What are the implications for teacher education programs?

Methods

During the time of the research, 3,253 students (60% undergraduate and 40% graduate) were enrolled at the private religious liberal arts university, which is located in the Pacific Northwest in the United States. The university does have a documented plan for achieving diversity, but like many private institutions in the region, the student and faculty populations are overwhelmingly white: 80% of undergraduates were white, and statistics for graduate students and faculty were unavailable. The faculty involved in the study were full-time members of the teacher education department.

A total of 32 students participated in the two international practicums in Ecuador. The first group participated in a three-week practicum in May of 2009. Group One included 18 students with four students in their second semester of a four-semester program and 14 within weeks of graduation. Group Two participated in May 2010. Group Two included 14 students. Eleven were in their second semester of a four-semester program, while three were within weeks of graduation. There were six men and 28 women: 25 were White and one was Mexican American. Students ranged in age from their early twenties to their late forties. Seven students were bilingual, 15 tested at an intermediate level of Spanish, and 12 tested at a beginning level of Spanish.

Students spent mornings in the classrooms assisting teachers as they taught English to classrooms of approximately 18 to 22 students. Afternoons were spent at a language institute where students received additional hours of instruction in

Spanish. The organization that hosted the groups is the Andes Center for Latin American Studies (ACLAS).

All students wrote three reflections while in Ecuador. In the first reflection we asked students to compare what they were seeing and experiencing with their lives back in the United States. The second reflection occurred around day ten of the twenty-one days. Students were asked to deconstruct a critical incident in the first ten days and to discuss it in light of the stages of cultural adaptation (Brown, 1980). During the final week, students reflected on their teaching experiences at the private school. A focus group discussion took place ten to twelve days after students returned to the U.S. Two focus group discussions were held per practicum group to accommodate the geographical locations of students. Because of the focus on White racial identity development, the reflections of the Mexican American student were not included in the analysis.

The data were read and coded according to stages of White racial identity development. Each student entry was coded, and entries were grouped into themes. Two predominant themes emerged in responses that exemplified stages of White racial identity development: those related to classroom management and schools in Ecuador and those related to language, culture, and race. The data analysis was shared with the co-researcher for feedback and then the data were re-read to ensure that there were no missing student contributions. In this study, the two themes will be presented according to stages of White racial identity development.

Results

Two themes emerged as predominant in our analysis of White racial identity development among preservice teachers in a cultural immersion experience in Ecuador. Theme one is classroom management and schools. Theme two is language, culture, and race. Data contributing to these themes will be outlined below according to each of the six stages of White racial identity development. Classroom Management and Schools

The first stage of racial identity development is contact. Contact is a time of unexamined contact with people of color and/or vicarious contact (e.g., through the media) (Helms, 1995). This may be marked by a color-blind attitude or by a desire to avoid any “anxiety-evoking” racial information (Moule, 2012). In the following quote Diane exhibits a contact level of White racial identity development:

My hike from the hotel to the spa with Joan and Dawn has been my critical incident . . . we got to appreciate the beauty alone and together, quietly and to each other . . . I feel like I have not gotten much out of my experiences at Tomas Moro as a whole. It seemed poorly planned. My teacher had no idea I was coming until I was being passed off to her. I was placed in a class that had three whole days of field trips while we were there. I came in at the end of the unit and watched three exams, 3 three movies, and hardly any teaching.

Disintegration is often precipitated by a moral dilemma concerning race that results in cognitive dissonance (Helms, 1995). There is an acknowledgement that race makes a difference and there may be an initial discomfort with privilege (Moule, 2012). Our students exhibited this cognitive dissonance as evidenced in the following statements. Abby stated:

I did not see teachers differentiating instruction, providing a community feel in the classroom, providing scaffolding of any sort, planning engaging lessons. The teachers did seem to have goals or standards in mind but I have no idea what they were using to assess whether the students had learned the information.

Reintegration is the third stage and is marked by a conscious acknowledgement of White identity. Many student comments fit this category. However, this identity is seen as superior to people of color: Often “any residual feelings of guilt and anxiety [from the dissonance in the previous stage] are transformed into fear and anger toward [people of color]” (Helms, 1995, p. 60). Kate stated:

When I asked the teacher what she does about students, like the young girl, who were off task, she said “it is not my responsibility to teach students who do not want to learn.” She then scolded the student and said “She (and named the student) does not care to learn, so why should I bother teaching her?” She said this loudly enough to make an example of her in front of other students. This goes against everything that morally and ethically I believe in as an educator.

Diane said:

The differences in schools between Quito and the US far outweigh the similarities . . . I am kind of appalled by some of the differences. First and foremost, students in Quito had no respect for their teachers . . . The teachers don't set up boundaries and don't require the students to pay attention and do their work. In our country, students have been trained in this nature for their entire educational career. By the time they're in middle school and high school, it is an expectation.

In the fourth stage, pseudoindependent, we find the students redefining a White racial identity. In this stage, Whites begin to understand racism and their role in it, but this is an intellectual awareness only. A person might espouse a liberal ideology, but it may not be emotionally integrated (Moule, 2012). Our students exhibited elements of this stage as evidenced in the following statements. Abby said:

The classes though are often very chaotic. The students shout out, talk when others are talking, and waste a lot of time sitting or playing with their friends. From talking with other students at my Spanish instructor at ACLAS I believe this is more of a cultural thing and not specific to the teacher and classes I am working with.

Carla said:

To begin with, classroom management was nearly non-existent. When I asked what rules were in place, I was told that they followed the rules of the school; no rules had been set inside the classroom. Students listened to their iPods, ran in and out of class, and spoke frequently in Spanish (when they were supposed to be communicating in English), which made it very difficult to teach in this environment. Once I spoke to the teacher I was working with, I realized that no formal teacher training was required to teach there—they were not equipped with the strategies we were taught about. Instead of being angry with the students for being disrespectful, I felt sympathy with the teachers who were not taught how to manage a classroom.

Immersion-emersion is a time when Whites seek a re-education and a personal understanding of racism and how one benefits. This may be the result of feeling rejected or isolated in some way (Moule, 2012). Elizabeth expressed her experience of immersion-emersion following a rather hectic field trip:

I was in shock that we had just spent over two hours with these children and the only instruction they had received was a five-minute clay modeling demonstration. They were not even allowed to touch the clay. Most of the time, the children ran free. As I looked at the equipment, I was sad for the children. The disparity between the beautiful parks I had taken my son to and this one was disturbing. I realized I would never let my own son attend this school. I would have been outraged and removed him the first day.

Autonomy is a time of “internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of whiteness evolved in the earlier stages” (p. 62). This stage is marked by flexible analyses and responses to racial material” (p. 188) and a positive, productive view of

being White. Whites at this stage have developed the capacity to relinquish privilege and prejudice (Moule, 2012). Two of our students demonstrated this flexible analysis in the following reflections. Sarah said:

I think the biggest difference I noticed between teaching at Tomas Moro and in the US was the students behaviors in the classroom. Upon my initial introduction, the students at Tomas Moro seemed louder. They did not raise their hands, there was a lot of shouting, and students would get up out of their seats whenever they pleased. Observing this behavior from an “American” perspective, I felt like the students were being disrespectful. In the end though, I don’t feel their behavior was rude because the teacher didn’t interpret it this way. This was normal classroom behavior for these students and their teachers. This makes me realize that showing respect is relative to the culture you are in. Once I got [past] the change in classroom culture, I was able to begin processing the benefits of this type of environment. Allowing students to speak out seemed to encourage participation in classroom discussions.

Language, Culture, and Race

Contact is that initial phase of unexamined contact with another culture. It is often marked by a desire to avoid anxiety evoking racial information. The following reflection is a strong example of the contact phase around the theme of language, culture and race. Diane said:

I love the community-centeredness of this culture, but it is a little overwhelming . . . Joan lent me her iPod and Dawn encouraged me to just take some time by myself. I didn’t feel well right away, but that alone time was so refreshing and encouraging . . . we have to acknowledge our personal truths in order to function at our best...”

Disintegration occurred regularly around the theme of language, culture and race. Disintegration is an acknowledgement that differences exist. It may be characterized by some initial discomfort with White privilege. In a strong reflection that highlights disintegration, Leah stated:

First, let me say that being in a language minority is a horrible feeling. It’s constricting and binding, emotionally draining, and you don’t feel like yourself. This experience has opened my eyes in a way that nothing else could have.

Heather said:

Not knowing the language, combined with the simple fact that I am extremely white, has certainly made me feel as if I stick out like a sore thumb during most of my visit to Quito. Every time I venture to a store or just walk outside, I feel extremely conspicuous. Since I am small and fairly unremarkable, this is definitely not a feeling with which I am accustomed! I have felt like an “idiot gringa” more times than I can count, and I am now extremely comfortable with the feeling.

In a debrief session, Mindy shared how physically uncomfortable she was in Quito. She is 5’9” and blonde. She referred to herself as a blonde Amazon and described her need to “squish down in my chair so that I did not stick out in church or the theatre.” In a similar debrief session with Peggy, she shared an experience she had at dinner in her host family home. She had connected deeply with her host family and the two families had been introduced via email and Skype. She was very comfortable with her host family until the final week. At dinner one night, her host father was explaining that his two grown children had two very different political stances. One was a Communist and one a Socialist. She was appalled. She asked him how he could have a Communist in his family. As she told the story, she was flushed and recalled it with growing disequilibrium. She said, “He said that his son was really engaged in working for the rights of indigenous people. He wants them to have training in literacy and jobs. He said it makes sense to him and that the Communists are the only political party concerned with the welfare of this group of

the poor.” She went on to ask the faculty member from the U.S., “How can this be? How is it that the Communists are the ones working for the things I value?”

Our students experienced reintegration. They began to consciously acknowledge their own White identity, and guilt or anxiety about judgments regarding race were often transformed into fear or anger or shutting down completely. Here is a sample of their thoughts. Lori described how her host mom talked about language use among vendors in the market:

“A majority of them speak English and if they pretend that they don’t, they are lying to you.” So I’m going in there going all right they’re going to speak English so we’re going to barter in English. I’m walking around with her and she goes, “Speak Spanish.” I thought they know English? “No they don’t, quit speaking English!” I’m like, I give up, I’m done speaking Spanish, I’m done trying.”

John stated:

Honestly I don’t feel like I belong here because of my skin color and the fact that I am a 300-pound man walking down the street in a place where there are not very many obese people. I have no idea how I am being received as an American walking down the streets being stared at and just what are they thinking of me? The same can be said for them as well. I look at all the different people around and wonder just what in the world do all these people do to stay alive and for what purpose.

Pseudoindependent marks a redefining of White racial identity. It is an intellectual awareness that may not be emotionally integrated. In the following reflections, you will see a redefining of racial identity that is occasionally emotionally integrated and often not. Susan described having a big lunch with her host family and her inability to understand the language:

This day left me frustrated and feeling sorry for myself. I was upset that I couldn’t understand more. After emailing my mother about my day, I got a new perspective. She said to me (my mom is a former ESL teacher), “Now you know how your ESL students feel. Your family wasn’t ignoring you, they just probably didn’t know how to engage you in the conversation.” Well, she was right. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and looked at it from her perspective. Now I will (hopefully) be able to feel empathy for my English Language Learners and understand some of what they are going through.

Megan said:

This trip has completely changed how I feel about language minorities in my classroom, whether it is language minorities, socioeconomic minorities, or even mentally handicapped minorities. I may not feel the same as my minority students, but I think the first step towards bridging a gap between the two is understanding where they have come from and caring.

In this phase, Whites seek re-education and a personal understanding of racism and how one benefits from racism. This stage may result in feelings of isolation or rejection. Our students gave evidence of this stage in the following reflections. Megan stated:

The feeling of alone-ness has really played a heavy part in this trip and has made me think about my future students. While I have support of my fellow travelers and I will eventually go back to a place where I don’t feel alone at all, what about my students who don’t have such luxuries? What about my students who everyday have to battle with feeling alone in a foreign country, in a foreign culture, in a foreign language? How will I reach out to them and make them feel just a little bit less alone, even if it is only for 40 minutes a day?

Joan described an incident on the bus when a man walked up the aisle handing out candy. Joan’s host sister leaned over to her and said, “He will try to hand you candy, but it’s not free and you don’t have to take it.” In reflecting on the incident, Joan observed, “What a relief to have that kind of direct cultural instruction.” She then reflected on the implications for her classroom teaching:

I can’t expect that students know how I expect them to conduct themselves in class conversations. I can’t expect that they know what I consider “polite” or

“rude” body language. I can’t even expect that they know how to label a paper to turn in or what is considered “late”. All of these expectations can be established through just the kind of direct instruction that [my host sister] provided for me on that bus.

In autonomy, there is an integration of the earlier stages. There emerges a new definition of whiteness and a positive and productive view of race. At this stage, individuals can relinquish prejudice and privilege. Exhibiting signs of autonomy, Jane said:

As I spend quiet moments thinking about my experience here, I regularly think back to what this means to me as a teacher. After three years of working in an ESOL department and 16 months of an ESOL endorsement, you would think I was 100% prepared to teach English Language Learners—I know I did. What my job and studies could not show me was the first hand experience of being a minority and a second language learner in a whole new culture. My time in Quito has shed new light on what it really feels like to be a language learner, and it makes me even more sympathetic and understanding of what my ELLs (English Language Learners) go through on a daily basis for weeks, months, and years at a time. . . this experience makes me more determined to provide students with as many real life and hands on experiences as I can.

Beth stated:

I think different people react differently to culture shock—some with over-enthusiasm, some with fear, some with skepticism. Some is determined by personality, some by past experience. After [my experiences in] Saigon, I tend to have a laid back “whatever” goes approach . . . I think this mainly because I don’t believe in absolutes—absolute right, absolute wrong—at different points in history and in different cultures I think different ways of doing things are necessary for survival.

Discussion

The stages of White racial identity development were identified in preservice teachers experiencing a cultural immersion experience in Ecuador. Within two themes, classroom management and schools and language, culture, and race, these stages will be analyzed according to stages of White racial identity development.

Experiencing schools in Ecuador caused disequilibrium in many preservice teachers, but how they processed this disequilibrium differed. Some, upon further analysis, found that that school experience to be quite similar.

Diane seemed to brush off her experience at Tomas Moro as insignificant. She critiqued the planning and found little value in what she observed. What she really seemed to appreciate was the time she spent on a hike with classmates from the U.S. This exemplifies the *contact* stage, a time of denying differences and avoiding any anxiety differences may cause (Moule, 2012). Diane’s growth continued throughout the trip. By the conclusion of her time in Ecuador, she was noting her changing strength in self-efficacy. She noted that individuals who do not look like her or speak her language seemed to like her. She decided to apply for a teaching job in another state where the diversity is much stronger. She is currently teaching in a high school with strong racial and linguistic diversity.

Abby noticed many differences between schools in the U.S. and Ecuador. She noted concerns about schools in Ecuador but also acknowledged things that were going well, such as the fact that teachers seemed to have goals in mind. These comments fit the *disintegration* stage well: She noticed differences and was bothered by it. However, she did not show a favoritism for the U.S. system in a way captured by students in the next stage. Peggy was initially disturbed to find she shared goals with Communists. During the weeks after re-entry into her own culture, she found herself questioning her culture and pondering political ideology.

Several students made comments about Ecuadorian schools that exemplified the *reintegration* stage. Carla noticed some good things and not so good things. Adding the comment, “I am happy to teach here in the States versus there!” shows an attitude of superiority for the U.S. system (Helms, 1995). Carla continued to work between stages of *reintegration* and the *pseudo-independence*. Kate, Lori, Patsy, and Diane shared this favoritism, using superlative language to describe the “appalling” differences in Ecuador. Their observations were value-laden and not complimentary towards the schools, teachers, or students in Ecuador.

There were students who grappled with the differences in such a way that they were able to begin to take a step back and examine them with a more balanced view. Abby acknowledged that the “chaos” in the classes may have been cultural and not necessarily a problem with the teacher or classes with whom she worked. After stating that classroom management was “nearly non-existent,” Carla went on to state that she learned on the trip that many of the teachers in Ecuador did not have the advantage of formal training. She began to see a piece of a larger puzzle than the initial behaviors that were so shocking to her. Amy had the advantage of working with two teachers, one who had, in her view, effective classroom management skills and one who did not. This gave her the advantage of seeing the Ecuadorian schools in a more nuanced way, as opposed to making generalizations based on one classroom experience. In each case, the responses represent the *pseudo-independent* stage, a time of beginning to understand difference in a complex way (Moule, 2012). However, in the case of Abby and Carla, they come about the difference in a condescending and/or detached, impersonal way.

Despite the short duration of the trip, there were students who responded in ways that represent the *immersion-emersion* and *autonomy* phases. Elizabeth was shocked by the poor conditions of schools and playgrounds and made a personal connection to her privilege and to what she would tolerate for her own child. This represents the *immersion-emersion* stage, a time of making personal connections to difference and to one’s own privilege in the world. Despite their classmates’ many strong objections to what they saw in Ecuadorian classrooms, Kate and Sarah found the schools to be remarkably similar to those in the U.S., even preferable in some ways. Kate was impressed by how independent the children were, and Sarah analyzed the benefits of how students shouted out in class—how this would benefit them as adults. Those at the *autonomy* stage are able to analyze cultural differences flexibly, as these two students did concerning school differences. They were also able to examine privilege, as Kate did when she considered the types of students who are privileged and oppressed by certain school expectations.

Not surprisingly, the preservice teachers on the cultural immersion trip noticed many cultural differences, as well as language challenges and what it feels like to be the racial “other.” Their responses to these differences varied. When it came to this category, Diane once again seemed to avoid acknowledging any emotions related to the trip. She instead discussed how nice it was to borrow a friend’s iPod and to have time to herself. This represents the *contact* stage.

Several students were struck by how difficult it was to not know the language and to not be able to truly fit in. They experienced the *disintegration* phase in various ways. Leah felt extremely constricted being in the language minority, like she could not be her true self. Ginny contrasted her experience in Ecuador to her time studying abroad in Italy. Unlike Italy, where she knew the language and fit in racially, she felt like she could not assimilate in Ecuador no matter what she did. Heather discussed feeling like an “idiot gringa” for not knowing the language and because of her fair skin. Mindy described herself as a “blonde Amazon” and experienced great discomfort with her inability to fit in.

Some students fell back on their preference for their home culture and judged the Ecuadorian culture as inferior, representative of the *reintegration* stage. Lori was very frustrated when she received mixed messages from her host mom about speaking Spanish in the market; thus, she gave up trying. John shared quite a few observations and comments that seemed indicative of taking in the sights, sounds, and experiences and deciding that the U.S. was better. He mused about the purpose of “all these people” living, which showed a lack of respect for the Ecuadorian people. He also discussed this in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, explaining that because their basic needs were not met, there would be few Ecuadorian people who would reach the stage of self-actualization. This demonstrates the potential hegemony that exists in the educational theories taken as truth in Western culture, something John took for granted, in large part due to his education in the U.S. Finally, he took in the experience of the begging he saw and spent quite a bit of time wrestling with it. In the end, he fell back on his Christian belief that these problems will just exist until Jesus returns.

Several students began to examine the differences and privileges they experience in the U.S., although their thinking may still be in an intellectual phase only. This is representative of the *pseudo-independent* stage. Kate said that her time in Ecuador made her want to better understand global issues, such as poverty and children without parents. Susan said that while she felt sorry for feeling left out, her mom helped her to see how her own ELL students might feel back home. This led to a better intellectual understanding of where her students might be coming from. Finally, Megan said that the trip had greatly changed her view of students who do not speak English, as well as students from a variety of backgrounds. She is correct to note that the first step is this understanding. Students in the next phase may have moved into a point of personal integration of this new knowledge.

Megan, Emmy, and Joan experienced the same disequilibrium as the other students, and began to make connections to their own lives and teaching, a hallmark of the *immersion-emersion* stage. Megan related her feelings of loneliness to how her immigrant students might feel. She reflected on the need to reach out to these students. Emmy felt discouraged about her Spanish and was encouraged by her host mother that it really was getting better. Emmy considered how important it will be for her to encourage her own students and to help them feel safe in her classroom. Joan felt like an outsider when her host family spoke Spanish for an extended period of time. Rather than feeling left out or bitter, she felt like she needed to spend more time learning a language as opposed to watching television. She also really appreciated her host sister’s direct instruction about candy on the bus, and she discussed how many of her ELL students would need this type of cultural direct instruction.

The *autonomy* stage is similar to the previous stages but is set apart by the flexibility with which people can deal with cultural differences. Carla was able to see more similarities than differences when looking at classrooms in the two countries. Jane reflected on how well prepared she felt for teaching English Language Learners from her previous work and teacher preparation work and then how unprepared she felt after going to Ecuador. She feels much better prepared and more empathetic. Beth, partially because of previous travel experience, acknowledged her own “anything goes” approach and that so many of the cultural differences are merely that, differences. She finds these differences to be normal and natural as opposed to her own culture being the only “correct” way of doing things.

Implications and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the White racial identity development of preservice teachers during a three-week practicum in Ecuador. The

data confirmed that the immersion experience was a valuable addition to our program. With the exception of one student, all participants in the practicums wrestled with issues of difference in various ways. Even the student who did not seem to engage in the experience in Ecuador went on to experience growth that she linked to her time abroad. Student engagement with diversity was high, and many students experienced growth in their beliefs and thinking. One student who began the experience worrying about how to order a favorite cup of coffee ended her practicum exploring her sense of privilege and questioning why she felt so entitled. Her work continues to question the cultural entitlements she absorbed in her formative years. It is possible that John’s assumptions and biases were reinforced through the experience; follow-up data collection could prove to be enlightening, as this is a caution in the literature about immersion experiences.

Analyzing the data through the lens of White racial identity proved helpful to us as professors. It provided language for the disequilibrium, moments of tension and frustration, and also the acceptance of difference that we saw at various times and in various ways in the participants. We can use this analysis to help us improve the immersion experience on an ongoing basis. We can also use the language of White racial identity development up front with our students who are embarking on immersion experiences. Purposefully teaching the stages of White racial identity development will aid our white students in exploring their experience and analyzing the changes they find in their own thinking, and racial identity development models for people of color can be used with students of color who travel to Ecuador.

It is true that racial identity development has stages. It is also true that these stages are not a linear sequence but instead a circling back, a revisiting, a strengthening. Our students experienced many of the stages of White racial identity development, just as classroom teachers are constantly encountering disequilibrium. Many times throughout their careers, they will share the sentiments in one student’s reflection, “I’m so far out of my comfort zone, I will need a jet to get back.” They have not completed the process. We have not completed the process. The poet Audre Lorde stated, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” In the journey of racial identity, the ability to recognize, accept, and celebrate diversity is one we hope will continue in the lives of our students.

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