

Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale

Volume 42 | Issue 1

Article 4

6-19-2013

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Recommended Citation

O'Sullivan, Michael W. Dr. and Smaller, Harry (2013) "Challenging Problematic Dichotomies: Bridging the Gap Between Critical Pedagogy and Liberal Academic Approaches to Global Education," *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale*: Vol. 42: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol42/iss1/4>

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Challenging Problematic Dichotomies: Bridging the Gap Between Critical Pedagogy and Liberal Academic Approaches to Global Education
Contestation des dichotomies problématiques: Comblent l'écart entre la pédagogie critique et l'approche académique libérale à l'éducation globale.

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Abstract

This empirical exploration examines two case studies involving secondary school students' involvement in global education. The paper begins with brief discussions of three related concepts (global/citizenship education, study abroad, and international service learning), followed by a description of the case studies and an analysis of our empirical findings. We conclude with some comment on the possible connections between our findings and the ongoing tensions between advocates of explicitly critical/transformational pedagogy, as compared to those favouring a liberal academic perspective – suggesting that, in some circumstances at least, there may be more similarities than differences in outcomes for individual students relating to their critical thinking and social awareness.

Résumé

Cette exploration empirique examine deux études de cas portant sur l'engagement d'élèves du secondaire à l'éducation mondiale. Ce document commence par de brèves discussions des trois concepts connexes (éducation globale / à la citoyenneté, études à l'étranger, et apprentissage par le service international), suivi par une description des études de cas et une analyse de nos résultats empiriques. Nous concluons avec quelques commentaires sur les connexions possibles entre nos trouvailles et les tensions continues entre les défenseurs d'une pédagogie explicitement critique/transformationnelle, comparés à ceux favorisant une perspective académique libérale, suggérant que, dans certaines circonstances tout au moins, il peut y avoir plus de similarités que de différences dans les résultats pour les étudiants concernant leur pensée critique et leur conscience sociale.

Keywords: global citizenship education; study abroad; and international service learning
Mots-clés : éducation à la citoyenneté mondiale; études à l'étranger; et apprentissage par le service international

Global Education

In 1976, two publications signaled the beginning of what Hicks (2003) termed a “significant resurgence” (p. 269) in the interest in global education as a pedagogical movement. In the U.K. Robin Richardson's published his book *Learning for change in world society: Reflections, activities and resources*, while in the U. S. Robert Hanvey published a lengthy essay entitled *An attainable global perspective*. At the same time, these two publications also foreshadowed a fundamental point of tension within that movement. Richardson's thesis promoted a strong social activist intent, one which would foster global citizens who “know how the world works, [are] outraged by injustice and [are] both willing and enabled to take action to meet this global challenge” (Richardson, 1976; cited in Davies 2006, p.7). Hanvey, in contrast, emphasized “awareness raising rather than ... action” (Pike, 2000, p. 66). This dichotomy has had the effect of dividing many global educators into one of two camps which are considered as constituting opposing perspectives – *liberal* (or what Larsen & Faden, 2008, characterize as *typical*,

or *mainstream*) pedagogues, and *critical* and/or *transformative* pedagogues. While it could be argued that these are not necessarily oppositional categories and that individual teachers and programs might simply reflect differing (or even overlapping) positions along a curricular/philosophical spectrum, we would hold that there are fundamental differences at play, making it useful to maintain this dichotomy

To be sure, providing concise/precise definitions of these two concepts – liberal vs critical pedagogy – is also challenging. A number of advocates of critical pedagogy have argued that liberal approaches to teaching and learning do not encourage students to critically examine issues of social justice, inequality, gender, race and power(lessness) (McLaren, 1989; Giroux, 1994; Paul, 1994). Furthermore, some argue that liberal academics avoid the issue of student political engagement (Davies, 2006). There is no doubt that there are some liberal educators who, out of ideological conviction (or lack of courage), reinforce, rather than challenge, the status quo (Davies, 2006; O’Sullivan, 2008). Schweisfurth (2006) for example, suggests “that most Canadian teachers perceive their role as implementers of government-initiated policies rather than as active agents of social change” (p. 43), and that activist global educators “remain at the periphery of the concerns of the [teaching] profession as a whole” (p. 49).

However much Schweisfurth’s observations might reflect the reality of many classrooms, it is important to note that liberalism as an ideology is neither static nor homogeneous, but rather reflects a broad range of world views - from rigidly narrow and conservative to radically reformist. Certainly not all liberal educators are working to uncritically reinforce the values of the status quo in their classrooms. Indeed, it is possible (as we found and report in this study) that many critical pedagogues and at least some liberal educators can and do share much in common, including the outcomes of their efforts as global educators. Both groups want to provide their students with the opportunity to think deeply and critically about global social, political, economic and environmental issues, and both encourage their students to take up the challenges of active citizenship.

Davies & Pike (2009) have observed that whatever differences may exist among global educators, certain “common threads” (p. 63) are also shared across this divide. These shared perspectives include teaching students about global interdependence, stressing the importance of cross-cultural understanding, and underscoring the need for humanity to make common cause to confront a shared global future. Davies & Pike recognized however, that these common threads, while not unimportant, constitute what they termed a “bland visage” (p. 63) that hides very real differences with respect to the theory and practice of global education. These differences, they note, “span a spectrum of ideological positions [and] ... have given rise to considerable controversy,” and they cite S.H. Toh’s earlier claims of the existence of “two paradigms of global literacy” (p. 63-64). While we understand that these differences are contentious (particularly those related to the theoretical expression of global education), a central contention of our study is that, with respect to the *practice* of global education and its *impact* on student learning, the results of our own (albeit limited) findings suggest that the significance of these theoretical differences may be at least somewhat exaggerated.

The work of Nigel Dower (2008) is of particular interest as we consider seeking principled common ground between these contending approaches to global education. Dower notes that, whether or not we define ourselves as global citizens, we cannot escape

the fact that, as he puts it, “in some respects we are all global citizens” (p. 39). If one accepts this fate which arises solely, but not unimportantly, from the fact of our birth on this planet, it can then be argued that this situation imposes a responsibility on educators to make their students aware of the fact that they have this cosmopolitan status and a corresponding “set of opportunities that goes along with [it]” (p. 39). It is noteworthy that Dower speaks of a “set of opportunities” and not a “set of responsibilities” which would impose a heavier obligation on each individual, however, he does address what one might do (or fail to do) given the “set of opportunities” our status as global citizens provides. In so doing, Dower raises the question that constitutes the point of demarcation between critical/transformational educators and their liberal counterparts, at least as that difference is reflected in the work of Richardson and Hanvey. “Which is more important?” Dower (2008) asks,

... that we produce a lot of educated young adults who at least have a basic knowledge of the world and an openness to it but who, apart from having ... a general attitude of tolerance of diversity and sympathy for those who suffer elsewhere in the world, do not actually *do* very much? Or that we produce a rather smaller number of educated people who become active global citizens and the future “movers and shakers” of the world? (p. 40, emphasis in original).

Dower refuses to be bound by what he sees is an oversimplified dichotomy. He argues that it is important that educators continue to encourage the development of both types of citizens and notes that “[g]enerally the same processes of education will lead to ‘the many’ becoming globally aware and ‘the few’ taking it farther to active engagement” (p. 40). We will return to his discussion of the “active few” and the “many aware” and his claim that both seem to emerge from similar educational experiences.

Study Abroad

Both of the experiential education programs that we review in this study provide their students with a short term study abroad experience. The students from the school that we designate as the Catholic School spend two weeks in Nicaragua while those from the Public School (details of the two schools are provided below) spend two weeks in Cuba. The Public School students also spend four weeks in Germany but it is the time spent in Cuba that we focus on in this study.

The concept “study abroad” - defined by Chieffo & Griffiths (2009, p.365) as study outside of one’s home country for less than one academic semester - has a long history, which in Canada and the United States can be traced to the 19th and early 20th century phenomenon of the *Grand Tour* (Lewin, 2009, p. xvi). This most often involved a lengthy study trip by wealthy students to Europe and, for some, to the Holy Land, during or following their last year of undergraduate studies. There were many variants to the basic model but it provided the students with exposure to the “great achievements” of Western culture. Consequently, London, Paris, and Rome were invariably among the cities visited. The grand tour was clearly an elite phenomenon.

In contrast to this elitism, Lewin (2009) argues that the modern short term study abroad experience represents a process of democratization, if only because the short duration of these experiences, coupled with the relative affordability of long-distance travel, provides more students with a study abroad option. However, Lewin and others take pains to distinguish between student tourism and critical/transformational study abroad, noting that, more recently, the door has been opened widely to what he calls the lucrative

commercialization of this educational experience - providing simply an additional form of consumerism whereby students from the developed world are offered “exotic” or culturally “authentic” experience in the global south to include in their resumes. As Lewin points out, the “authentic” is an increasingly problematic concept in the era of globalization, as few places exist that have not been touched – often deeply – by the symbols (e.g., Coca Cola) and the more substantive reality (the labour markets, modes of dress, dependence on the modern) of global capitalism. He argues strongly that if the short term study abroad experience is to avoid the banal quest for the authentic, the experience has to be conceptualized and executed in such a way that it helps the student come to a deep and critical understanding of globalization. For example, rather than seeking to find one of the few isolated villages in the global south where Coca Cola (or similar product) is not sold, or where people exist entirely on subsistence agriculture (i.e., the quest for the “authentic”), the educator responsible for the trip could design it with a view to helping students understand how, in the era of globalization, global consumerism and market relationships are penetrating even the remotest villages. In this way, students could experience, not only traditional culture, but also the ways in which even the most “authentic” of cultures are incorporated into global capitalism, and also importantly, the ways in which local accommodation and resistance take place. While the phenomenon of the penetration of global capitalism nesting in every corner of the globe can, of course, be studied in the safety and comfort of a North American classroom, as Chieffo & Griffith (2009) point out, experiencing it firsthand has had a greater impact on students than staying home.

A frequently expressed concern about study abroad is its brevity. What can students learn in two weeks in Cuba or Nicaragua, to cite the destinations and time frame of the two school programs examined in this study? While the claim is legitimate, Chieffo & Griffith suggest that even short experiences have been shown to make a lasting impact, where they involve as much contact with the host culture as possible, including home stays, and the opportunity, however basic the students’ language skills, to be immersed in the local language. Very importantly, the experience must include a considerable amount of structured time to reflect individually and collectively on the experience. Even such short term experiences, Chieffo & Griffiths claim, have a greater impact on students than much longer study abroad programs, during which the visiting students are housed together, study in their own language, have only sporadic contact with the local culture, and do not deeply reflect upon the experience. The issue, then, is less the amount of time spent abroad, but rather it is the quality of the program and the opportunity the students have to engage in and reflect upon their experience.

International Service Learning:

The National Service Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC) defines “service learning” as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities;” further, they suggest that the “distinctive element of service learning is that it not only enhances the community through the service provided, but it also has powerful learning consequences for the [participating] students” (NSLC). In this context, King (2004) argues that service-learning can be “a site for critical pedagogy” and that students must be given the opportunity “to critically examine their assumptions about

self and society during the course of their involvement in an international service learning program” (p. 121) – an essential difference from basic volunteerism or paid work which does not structure in this organized educational component.

Two other issues relating to international service learning are also raised in the literature. One is the claim that the benefit for the receiving community should be greater than the simple contribution of the (usually unskilled) labour that the students provide to a particular project, and that there should also be some growth among community members in relation to their knowledge and/or social awareness. The other issue relates to whether or not service learning/study abroad experiences should be part of a formal, credit-bearing student program, with some educators arguing that this should be the case, not only to increase student interest in engagement (to be sure, a complex motivator) but also to help ensure that the program is, and is seen to be, of academic rigour (see, for example, Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Both of these issues arise, and are discussed, in the context of our two case studies.

Methodology

For this study, two specific secondary school-based, international travel/learning programs were selected, partly because of their specific similarities and differences, and in part because they are relatively well-established programs, well-known among global educators in Ontario. Both programs involved significant pre-travel components, while at the same time their respective curricula reflected very different philosophical foundations, as will be described in detail. Importantly, teachers in each program were quite willing to engage in critical discussions about their work; equally, the students involved proved very open to being interviewed and questioned about their involvement.

For the most part, a traditional mixed-methods approach was employed. On the one hand, official school documents and other materials were collected, and initially surveyed in order to establish main themes of importance to our study (eg. aims and objectives of the program, curriculum process and pedagogy, staff and student expectations, etc). Then, these documents were assessed more explicitly, and data relating to these themes were compiled for analysis.

The other main source of data was that of in-depth interviews and group discussions with the teachers and students who were involved in their respective programs during one specific year (methodological issues pertaining to these procedures are discussed further in our analysis section below). For each program, group discussions involving all students took place both before, and within a month after, the cohort had participated in their overseas travel. In addition, approximately five students from each program were interviewed individually about one year after they had participated in the program. Pre-travel student discussion themes included explorations of their motivations for engaging in this program, and their pre-travel expectations, aspirations and concerns. Post-travel discussions were more wide-ranging, involving reflections on their experiences overseas, their learnings, and the ways in which their experiences may have disrupted, shifted, or alternatively reinforced their long standing perceptions, understandings and beliefs about life, both abroad and at home. All group discussions, each lasting for an hour or more, were conducted in the students’ classrooms, and were structured to remain as open-ended as possible. After each theme was introduced,

students were allowed to respond spontaneously; interventions occurred, only to elicit clarifications, and to encourage other, less spontaneous students to respond as well.

All teachers in both programs who participated in the international travel component were interviewed individually, both before and after this travel. At the outset, they were asked why they had chosen to involve themselves in the program, what they saw as its aims and objectives, their perceptions of students' interests and motivations, and what their expectations, aspirations and concerns might be for the travel and post-travel portions of the program. Post-travel interviews fairly closely reflected the student themes – how they themselves had been affected by the experience, as well as their reflections on how students took up their experiences, and the ways in which the overall program may, and may not have, met its aims and objectives. Individual teacher interviews took place at locations of their choice – variously in a school classroom or faculty lounge, neighbourhood café, and/or in their own home. All discussions and interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed in the context of the themes noted above, which had been identified at the outset of the research planning process.

Description of the Schools/Programs

That one program is sponsored by a “public” high school while the other is part of the province’s publicly-funded Catholic School system, certainly suggests the existence of significant differences at some levels of the school culture. However, with the exception of school uniforms and a more religious orientation to visible signage and notices in the hallways of the latter, a passing visitor could easily conclude that there was little overt difference between the two. Both schools are located in the suburbs outlying their respective middle-sized Southern Ontario cities and thus many students are bused in from surrounding rural areas. Both campuses are relatively new, with typical late-20th century sprawling brick architectures, surrounded by playgrounds, fields and parking lots. Given similar burgeoning student numbers, both schools now include a number of “portable” classrooms on site. For both institutions, teachers’ qualifications, syllabus and graduation requirements are all set by the province’s Ministry of Education, and for the most part, programs in the schools weigh heavily to an academic, rather than vocational, orientation. The student populations, reflecting the demography of their respective areas, are mainly white and middle class, and the students in both global education cohorts reported being engaged in very similar overall course and program offerings,

Public High School

The global education program in the Public High School is the brainchild of a veteran teacher in the school who has been directing it for over a decade. The program runs annually, throughout the second semester of each school year (February-June), and is open to 28 Grade 11 students from across the regional education district, although the majority of students are from the host school. The program is advertised throughout the county school system, and each year there are more applicants than spaces. All applicants are interviewed during June of the previous year by the four teachers involved in the program, and decisions made then about who will be admitted to the program the following February. Typically, there are somewhat more girls than boys, and few are visible minorities given the demographics of the area. Students, or more accurately, their

parents, pay the travel costs associated with the program, although the information package includes the guarantee that “those students in financial need can expect assistance from community/corporate sponsors.” In practice, the program leader uses his network of friends in the local business community to ensure that no student is left out of the program because of financial need.

During the actual global education semester starting each February, the cohort comes together, remains together all day/every day, and engages in five integrated credit courses: history, language arts, visual arts, world religions, and Canadian and world issues. Taught by a core group of teachers, these courses simultaneously address the expectations of the official Ontario curriculum, while also being infused with programmatic themes taught from a global perspective. There is considerable emphasis on individual and group-oriented independent study, researching and writing papers, and projects related to the program content. (For example, the art course covers historical and contemporary themes relating to the two countries students will be visiting). All of these courses, with the exception of visual arts, are held in the designated portable, where the walls and bulletin boards are covered with visual and textual material pertaining to the program.

During the five-month semester-long program the group engages in two international trips. Two months into the semester (April) there is a two-week program in Cuba, provided in conjunction with one of the regional universities in that country. Students stay in a modest hotel located about an hour by car or bus from the city in which the partner university is located, and they are partnered with Cuban students for the day-to-day activities. Later, during May-June, they spend one month in Germany, in a program organized through the mayor’s office of a medium-sized German city “sistered” with the school’s home town in Ontario. In contrast to the Cuban trip, here students stay in the homes of students with whom they have been paired. (During the previous September, the German students spend a month in Canada, hosted by their Canadian counterparts). In both Cuba and Germany, they engage in lectures and discussions with local presenters, combined with tours to sites of historical and cultural interest. In both cases, they are also encouraged to engage in general informal discussions with their counterpart students – to the extent possible given the language barriers - during the “free time” allocated in the program – a featured part of the trip, judging from subsequent student reports.

The literature associated with the program provides some hint as to the overall purposes of the program. On the one hand, according to the Public School’s Program Information Sheet, the intent of having an “integrated” academic curriculum is very clear. For each student, the same grade is given for all of his/her courses. Only 25% of this final mark is based on “individual course specific expectations. The remainder is integrated in all aspects.” A number of the program documents stress the importance of “develop[ing] your intellectual, academic and interpersonal skills” and “study[ing] international affairs from an international perspective in an international environment.” In relation to content, it is also clear that there is an emphasis on students acquiring general knowledge about “the world.” For example, parents are urged to “encourage your child to READ newspapers, newsmagazines, academic journals, etc, between now and the onset of [the program] to increase their knowledge of world affairs.”

This liberal academic approach is also exemplified in another information sheet outlining the German exchange component of the program, “a program of cultural and educational experiences that will showcase our country, our city, and our people” one which will allow students to “meet and interact with important figures from the worlds of politics, literature, academe, economics and the media.” A major integrated assignment is entitled “Colony to Nationhood” and encourages students to “[c]onsider the following concept: ‘As cultures meet, they influence one another. As a colonial power leaves a territory, they leave traces of themselves behind.’”

Catholic High School

Like the Public School, the global education program in this school is also the brainchild of a longstanding teacher in the school, which, like his Public School counterpart, he has been directing for well over a decade. However, compared to the offering at the Public School, it is very different in at least three major aspects. First, it is not part of the regular curriculum/program of the school, but rather operates very much as an “extra-curricular” entity with virtually all activities taking place outside of regular school hours. In preparation for the trip, each of the weekly after-school sessions normally involves three components: a short Spanish language session, then a lecture/presentation/discussion about various aspects/themes related to the trip (Nicaraguan history, culture, politics, travel information, etc), and finally some discussion/planning for fundraising for the trip. Secondly, as compared to the Public School offering, this travel abroad program (described more fully below) includes – in fact, is built around - a “service learning” experience in rural Nicaragua.

Thirdly, there are no credits attached to the program. A number of reasons for choosing this non-credit approach are given by the teachers involved - the freedom to innovate program without worrying about official curriculum guidelines and outcomes; elimination of an “artificial” extrinsic motivation of receiving a credit for participating in the program; the voluntary nature of the program; and, alleviating the concern about arbitrary expectations being demanded or scrutinized by schooling officials and/or parents.

At the end of the first semester (late January), the group spends about 10 days in Nicaragua. The first two days are spent at an educational centre in Managua run by Casa Canadiense, a Toronto-based non-government global education organization established in 1993, in part to facilitate visits to Nicaragua by Canadian students.¹ At the Casa Canadiense Centre students engage in orientation sessions, and visits to child and youth-oriented organizations and programs, and other sites in the city. Then, the group travels to a pre-arranged rural village, where they spend a week, each living with a local family, and engaging in a work brigade activity of some type (building a one-room school, medical or recreation centre; repairing sports facilities, etc). Each year, part of the Catholic School’s fundraising activities in Canada are devoted to purchasing the supplies and equipment needed to undertake this project.

¹ Both authors are board members of Casa Canadiense but have no direct involvement with the student trips which are handled by the teachers in collaboration with the Managua-based Casa staff. Only the Catholic School organizes its trips within the framework of the Casa program; the Public School is not associated in any way with this program.

The program is well-known within the school. Early in the fall, an information meeting is held, following which students who have “demonstrated concern for and commitment to social justice” and who have the “intention to be involved in social justice work” upon their return, are invited to join the group and commit to participating regularly in the weekly after-school sessions, and in the fundraising activities. The program is also partially funded by the School Board, and in addition, students (parents) contribute to travel costs. Generally speaking, given the amount of time and energy required to fulfill this commitment, within a few weeks some of the selected students take the decision to withdraw from the program and the cohort is firmly established at about 10-12 student members. Typically, the majority is girls, and, once again, given the demographics of the area from which the school draws its students, very few, if any, visible minority students are involved. In addition to the two teachers who are core to the program (the male coordinator and the school’s female chaplain) and who accompany the students, two or three other teachers are also encouraged to take part, as a unique learning experience for them as well. Because much of the trip takes place in the week between the two semesters, neither students nor teachers miss more than a couple of days of actual class time.

Like the Public School program, the official documents for this project provide insight into its purposes, as expressed by the teacher leaders who prepared these statements. Overall, it would appear that there are two significant spheres of purpose to the project. On the one hand, and understandably given the Catholic Schooling context, there is much reference to achieving religious/spiritual goals which, on the surface at least, seem often to overlap with a more traditional “charity” model of engagement. According to the Program Information sheet: “The program’s primary goal is to meet and experience the poor’s poorest. . . . It is not a program where you work for others while obtaining ‘bonuses’ (tan, bargains etc) along the way. Rather, it is an opportunity for you to accept the challenge of giving yourself totally to God’s poor. . . . your goal is to exhibit by your attitude and conduct solidarity in Christ with His suffering people.”

At the same time, in outlining the purposes of the project, this same official literature also provides a strong aura of hope for both personal and more universal social change - “to help young people think in terms of common global needs and interests that are just and fair.” The program aspires “to facilitate an understanding of global social, economic and political structures and the forces that influence these structures,” and “to provide a critical counterpart to the narrow or distorted view of the ‘Third World’ that we often receive through the media and tourism industries” (Information sheet, Catholic School). In the official Board of Education parent application form, the “Educational Purpose” for the trip is described as follows: “to witness and learn from the efforts of Nicaraguan youth and adults who are working for social change and build bonds of solidarity with people involved in social justice.”

Even more pointedly perhaps, one compulsory, pre-Nicaragua trip activity requires all participants to travel by bus to Fort Benning, Georgia for four days, to participate in the annual demonstration demanding the closure of the “School of the Americas” located on a large American military base - a combat training program for

Latin American military and “security” personnel.² As stated in the program application form,

Graduates of this U.S.-taxpayer-financed institution, (with Canadian complicity), continue to be implicated in civilian-targeted killings throughout Latin America. For hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans, this school is a symbol of torture and failed U.S. foreign policy. It is out of line with the values of everyday North Americans, and closing it for good would send a strong human rights message to Latin America and the world.

In addition, the program purposely enrolls students who “have a least one or two years before graduating,” so that “they can contribute to raising the awareness of other students around global social justice issues. . . [and] become agents of change in their communities.” Students are encouraged, on their return, to “continue their education and action in Canada - for example: join or form a social justice group in their school, parish, community” (The Catholic School, Program Information Sheet).

Findings

Pre-trip and post-trip interviews were held with students in both programs. Given the relatively stark differences in the ways in which the purposes and undertakings of these two programs were presented to the respective students in advance, and the nature of the trips themselves, it is not surprising that there were differences in the ways in which students, both before and after their overseas experiences, described their reasons for engaging in their respective programs and what they got out of them.

Given the religious based/social justice focus of their program, the perceptions and motivations of the Catholic School students were expressed across a range of understandings and self-commitments related to wanting to understand what they perceive as injustices in Nicaragua and what they could do “to help”. These reflections seem to fall within three spheres of attention. On the one hand, a number of students expressed interest in exploring issues of *social difference* – as one student expressed it, “to gain an understanding of what the third world is like, poverty, and the lifestyle of the less fortunate.” A second strong dimension, for several students, could only be characterized as an interest in providing *charity*, as explained in the words of another student, “to help people who can’t help themselves.” Finally, some students expressed a concern about what they perceived as injustices in Nicaragua, and the consequent need for *social justice*. As one student put it, she wanted “to learn why it is like that, how it got this way [and] what really needs to happen to change it.” We shall return to these discourses later.

In contrast, the Public School students enunciated a constellation of interests and objectives which could best be described as “broadening horizons,” as exemplified by comments such as “trying to appreciate other people’s perspectives” and “learning more and reaching out to global issues.” To be sure, a few students also expressed concern about “helping others,” although often with a more global, as compared to an individual charity-oriented, perspective. For example, one student stated that “we could be helping humanity and not just ourselves,” while another noted that the program allowed her “to look outside of Canada, and effect some change in the world.”

² Although it was officially renamed the “Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation,” in 2001, its former name remains in general public use.

Understandably, given the fact that the Public School program was based on an interdisciplinary credit program, the students there also commented on the academic benefits, and the personal/scholastic growth they were experiencing. One student declared proudly that the inter-connectedness of the program had already (only one month into the program and before the trip to Cuba) “got me out of the ‘I am a math/science guy’ mindset,” while several noted the new values and skills they had acquired in having to work both independently and collectively within the project-oriented structure of the program. It is worth noting that these benefits arose from the in-school component of the program, benefits which could well have been achieved with any integrated program, whether or not global-education oriented.

In the post-trip discussions, following their respective stays in Cuba and Nicaragua, both groups enunciated similar feelings about having experienced what they characterized as poverty among the people they saw, and in the case of the Nicaragua contingent, the families with whom they lived. In many cases, students talked about the “shock” they felt in seeing these impoverished life styles. Related to this, a number also commented on their concomitant realization that Canada is “such a great place to live” and that “we are so lucky to have what we have.”

At the same time, many mentioned what they saw as the positive cultural aspects of life in the two Latin American countries – the spontaneous music, the convivial street scenes, and their impression that “life is a little less stressful, less urgent.” For both groups, this also often was accompanied by comments about how “happy” local residents seem to be, despite their apparent poverty. Although the Public School students could not reflect on family life specifically in Cuba, as they were accommodated in a hotel and not with families, their comments were often similar. One student said that “the poverty was a shock” but noted that “they have so little, but they are happier than we are,” while another student commented that the Cubans “seem fine with living in a lesser developed country”. This “poor but happy” scenario was particularly present among many of the Catholic School students on the Nicaragua trip, who lived with rural low-income families for a week.

Interestingly, our pre-trip interviews had suggested that, for whatever reasons, many of the Catholic School students had already formulated particular ideas on what family life would be like in Nicaragua. On the one hand, there was a definite tendency to romanticize family conditions and relations there, in spite of the fact that Nicaragua has a very high rate of family abuse and of single parent families (Pérez-Landa, 2001). Statements such as, “they [Nicaraguans] have tighter-knit families than in Canada, because there is nothing to pull them apart,” and, “In Canada we isolate ourselves from our families, I think that families in Nicaragua will be a lot closer and will do things together,” had already peppered their pre-trip perceptions. Interestingly, these same beliefs also pertained, within the context of the post-trip interviews, even after experiencing their week-long stays in very basic rural Nicaraguan homes. At the same time, and in spite of this romanticization, there was also a dramatic increase in post-trip comments about “how lucky we are,” their own “sheltered lifestyle” and the “we have it so ridiculously good” mode of self-reflection.

Our post-trip discussions – some undertaken within a month following their travel, others a year later – also provided a range of reflections expressed about the perceived value of the programs. On the one hand, virtually all students in both schools agreed that

the trips had been highly worthwhile, that they had been “moved” by the experience, and that they had “learned a lot.” Even the minority from each program who were less effusive about the experience, talked positively about how they would recommend it to other students; some, who had previously vacationed in the Caribbean, noted that how the school trips had been “very different” and “eye-opening.” Certainly, a large number of students from both schools saw their experiences as being much more significant in terms of how they saw themselves before and after. This was particularly pertinent, when expressed by students who were interviewed a full year after their trips. One Catholic School student, preparing to return to Nicaragua for a second trip, said that the first trip was “life changing” and “very educational” and expressed the hope that the second trip would “continue my personal growth” and “maintain my sense of social obligation.” Another student, also given the opportunity to return to Nicaragua, hoped “to gain more insights into my personal feelings on this trip than on the last one, and have more opportunity to reflect.”

For their part, the students who had completed the Public School global program the year before made impact statements about their personal growth that included both activist components and the benefits of the academic experience. Examples of the former included increased interest in world events, increased interest in being involved with the larger world, and a desire to help humanity “and not just ourselves.” In the words of one student, “the program fosters passion, a sense of wanting to help people.” In addition, given the academic nature of their global education program, the students attached great importance to the benefits they realized in terms of enhancing their scholastic knowledge, skills and values. In this regard, students cited a wide range of benefits: increased grades because of the intensity of the program and the need to stay focused and on task; helping themselves realize where their strengths were; helping to decide what to do after high school (e.g., take international development studies, an option not considered prior to the experience). In addition to these more general benefits, a number of more specific skills were noted: thinking “out of the box;” research skills; organization; leadership skills; social skills; working under pressure; creativity; independent work habits; time management; meeting goals and challenges. As noted above, in many respects these latter benefits could clearly be attributed to the nature of the integrated program they were engaged in at the school, regardless of its global education focus.

Analysis

First, despite whatever differences there may have been between the two programs, it was abundantly clear, from students’ self-reports during their post-trip discussions (as well as their teachers’ observations), that both sets of students benefited in relation to their enhanced self-confidence and global awareness, characteristics which would serve them well in university (the unquestioned option for virtually all of these students) and beyond. For their part, given the interdisciplinary academic approach, the Public School global education experience unquestionably augmented many of their important interpersonal and academic values and skills. Similarly, the Catholic school students noted the ways in which their interpersonal and group cooperative skills were enhanced by the collective nature of the experience and the demands placed upon them in the materially difficult living circumstances that they faced in the rural villages of Nicaragua.

By comparison, more complicated for us to unpack were the student discussions involving their perceptions and analysis of having been immersed in a foreign setting, particularly one of material poverty. As it turned out, attempting to talk about these issues in depth proved to be a struggle for many students, and often seemed to limit their capacity (and/or willingness) to enunciate clearly (to adult interviewers, at least), both how they took up their cross-cultural experiences and their subsequent reflections about them. Students stumbled in their narratives, often stating to the effect that it was “difficult” to explain what they were trying to say. Another outcome, when this “difficulty” was broached, was often a clear shift (or retreat) from a more critical to a more charity-oriented discourse - simplistic comments about wanting to help the less fortunate, and observations about “how lucky we are” in Canada.

To be sure, we were conscious of the conditions under which these discussions were taking place (directed by two older white male authority figures, however friendly) and connections to at least some of the theoretical discussion relating to power relations and qualitative data gathering (e.g. Fielding 2009; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Hammersley 1992). In relation to working with teenagers specifically, Richardson (2002) acknowledges “the complexity, ambiguity, and multilayered nature of human discourse,” and his methodological inquiry into “what [do] we mean when we ask questions and what answers [do] those questions elicit?” (p.1) certainly came to the fore as we struggled to analyze our student interview transcripts (see also, Tanggaard 2009).

In addition to any limitations which the interview process itself may have imposed, another (partial) explanation may be that many teenagers, in their formative years, do not (yet) have a level of discursive sophistication, or even understanding, to express the full range of what they had experienced – particularly the kinds of starkly different, cross-cultural engagements which they were required to encounter in Cuba and Nicaragua. As a result, one could argue that this shift to more traditional discourse did not suggest that this was their only sphere of understanding, but rather just an alternative one that was more comfortable, or desirable, or even possible, for them to engage in.

A related perspective on attempts to unpack their discourse involves bringing to the fore, the cultural/class background of these students – materially comfortable, white middle-class. Given the dominant liberal ideological bias one might associate with this sector (one which posits poverty as misfortune and charity as the response, in contrast with a position which recognizes that poverty is structurally generated and proclaims the possibility of resistance to this political/economic mode of being), it is perhaps understandable why these students might retreat to this “naturalist” position, given the “difficulty” in providing an alternative, more critical, response at the moment. Thus, “feeling sorry for the less fortunate,” especially when the “less fortunate” are thought to be in that condition through no fault of their own, often becomes an acceptable default within socially-sanctioned discourses of charity. By comparison, an ingrained ethic of solidarity, for example, is not necessarily a part of their social reality. Even when they hear such alternative discourse (as they do at the Catholic School), the students may well still interpret it in relation to that with which they are familiar. Thus, solidarity with the oppressed becomes “helping the needy,” and “structural inequality at the global level” becomes “we are lucky to live in Canada.”

In short, it certainly is challenging to try and understand the meanings of this “poor but happy” discourse, particularly coming from idealistic young people, including

those who have experienced educational discourses to the contrary. On the surface, it does suggest that most of these students ultimately are satisfied with this perspective as an apt description of the life circumstances of those who live the reality of structural inequality and extreme underdevelopment. At the same time, it is also possible to speculate that, given the mitigating discursive factors at play during these discussions, some or many may also have entertained alternative possibilities as well.

These possibilities were also raised during our interviews with the teachers who had been involved with their respective programs. Overall, they were highly positive in their evaluation, pointing to their observations of their students while abroad and their subsequent discourse and activity upon return to Canada. Clearly, they saw a significant deepening of students' perceptions and understandings about "life abroad" (whether located in the North or South), and their increased capacities to reflect on their own existence in middle-class Canadian suburbs. From both programs, reference was made to a number of (perhaps exceptional) individual students who, having taken part in one of the programs, had subsequently decided to change their ensuing university program placement from traditional maths/sciences/professional orientation to that of continuing their exploration of these newly-developed global interests – political science, comparative economics, international development, global area studies, languages, etc. (sometimes, apparently, with the chagrin of more traditional parents).

The only significant concern expressed by the teachers about their respective programs came, not surprisingly from the Catholic School teachers. Their motivation for engaging in the program was precisely to encourage the students to become more socially activist and consequently they were disappointed that some (indeed many) students did not throw themselves into such activities after returning from Nicaragua in February. In fact, many of the students did not even maintain their previous agreement to continue meeting regularly until the end of the school year as part of the debriefing/follow-up process. Reasons cited by the teachers for this lack of continuing commitment did not focus on any limitations of the program itself, but rather on external issues such as the academic pressures associated with starting a new set of courses in the second term, and the many other extra-curricular activities in the school vying for students' time and energy upon their return. Whether or not these immediate post-trip expectations on the part of the teachers were realistic, there is no question that they, as much as their counterparts at the Public School, were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluations of their respective programs.

Taking into consideration all of these complexities of unpacking student meaning, we did come to one general conclusion about the results of their global education experiences. Despite the vastly different ideological starting points of the two programs, in assessing the overall responses of the participants, we are not convinced that student awareness of global inequality, or student commitment to engaging with those issues upon return, was significantly different between the two groups. Despite the many differences in the two programs (including, perhaps most importantly, the vastly different ideological starting points), the response of the students to these two very different global education experiences, was surprisingly similar. Both groups of students included individuals who wanted to turn their feelings of wanting to help into action, although many or most were unsure as to how to do that.

The short-term nature of both programs, particularly the overseas components, undoubtedly mediates their impact on students, along with the passage of time as the initial excitement of the trip recedes and the routines of daily life impose themselves. One could certainly argue that real test of the transformative potential of such experiences for most, if not all, of these students, can only be accurately evaluated years after the program has ended, as their lives continue to unfold. For a number of theoretical and practical reasons, of course, such long-term assessments would be problematic.

Conclusions

Both models reviewed in this study break with traditional modes of education which encourage the simple transmission of knowledge. Both programs encourage a questioning of these basic assumptions, albeit from two different perspectives, liberal and transformative. Perhaps as a direct result of this difference, we found for example that the Catholic School students often used a more “political” discourse than their Public School counterparts when discussing the issues they encountered. However, from our overall analysis, there seemed to be almost as much spread across students within either of the two groups, as there were overall differences between the two programs, in regard to immediate outcome as measured on a liberal-radical continuum.

The future predilections of these students remains unknown, at least for the present. In the meantime, this study does suggest empirical support for Dower’s (2008, p.40) overall thesis, that it is important for educators to continue to encourage the development of both “globally aware” and “globally active” citizens, and that “[g]enerally the same processes of education” and the same kinds of educational experiences, will support both outcomes among students.

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