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Building Culturally Sensitive Practice for Social Work and Human Services Practitioners in Training: The Role of Transformative International Intercultural Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of an investigation exploring transformative intercultural learning with a focus on the development of culturally sensitive practice for a cohort of 20 Australian human services and social work students. The research was facilitated over a three-week period and was embedded within a field trip to the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. The field trip centred more broadly upon student exploration of international human services and social work within a developing country through an immersive, hands-on approach. The findings of the study provide an evidence base highlighting the utility of global mobility programs in promoting transformative intercultural learning, including the development of culturally sensitive practice for social work and human services students.

Keywords: *Transformative intercultural learning; Culturally sensitive practice; Human services and social work; Students; Nepal*

INTRODUCTION

A key aim of social work education is to equip graduates to work in culturally sensitive ways that are anti-oppressive. Increasingly it is recognised that this cannot be achieved solely through academic learning but requires some connection to lived experiences and critical reflection (Gollan & O’Leary, 2009). A range of studies have been undertaken that highlight the benefits of immersive, cross-cultural experiences for learning with social work and human services students (Dorsett, Clark, & Phadke, 2015; Kreitzer, Barlow, Schwartz, Lacroix, & MacDonald; Nuttman-Shwartz, & Berger, 2012). Such experiences have the potential to raise awareness of, and challenge, existing cultural bias and, in the process, develop greater understanding of practices that align with culturally sensitive practices when working in cross-cultural contexts (Gammonley & Rotabi, 2007; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012). There is evidence this can be achieved within the learning environment; however, there is less clarity on what the particular turning points in a student’s learning are when they are involved in immersive experiences.

Higher education over the last few decades has valued the role that international experiences can contribute to a well-rounded graduate. Governments in countries such as Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and the United States have funded global mobility programs to support this endeavour as well as strengthen international relations. These schemes provide a great opportunity for social work and human services students to immerse themselves in an international learning experience especially aligned to enhancing key educational aims and values (Gammonley & Rotabi, 2007). This paper details a study on student experiences of one global mobility program for 20 Australian undergraduate social work and human services students that included a three-week field visit to Nepal. The paper contributes to the existing pedagogical evidence base for how international immersion experiences can facilitate transformative learning to build culturally sensitive practice for social work and human services graduates.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE PRACTICE

According to Brown and Posner (2001), transformational learning is associated with “...a dramatic and fundamental change in the way an individual perceives themselves and the world in which they live, that results in behavioural change” (p. 274). This conceptualisation is consistent with the broader literature focusing on transformative learning (Hallows, Porter Wolf, & Marks, 2011; King, 2000, 2004, 2007; Kovan & Dirks, 2003; Lough, 2009; Lyons, 2002; Sathé & Geisler, 2015; Stone & Duffy, 2015). Within the context of higher education, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has provided a robust framework to give explanation to the functional role of learning in the transformative process (1978, 1981, 1991). According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning applies to “...learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 222). Given the constraints of this paper, and the fact that it is comprehensively and extensively covered elsewhere, Mezirow’s work will not be discussed at length here. Rather, an outline of his framework for transformative learning is provided below. The 10 phases which conceptualise the transformative learning process (Kitchenham, 2008) are referred to throughout this paper:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. Critical assessment of one's basic underlying assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared with others
5. Exploration of new roles and relationships
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquisition of new knowledge and skills
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence
10. A reintegration of changed perspectives into one's life.

This paper uses Mezirow's framework as a foundation to explore themes which emerged for students as they engaged with transformative inter-cultural learning in an overseas context.

Transformational learning can lead to a range of positive outcomes for students. For example, it can promote increased critical reflective capacity (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Clapp-Smith & Wernsing, 2014; Hallows et al., 2011; Lough, 2009; Lyons, 2002; Patterson, Munoz, Abrams, & Bass, 2015; Vatalaro, Szente, & Levin, 2015), reassessment of the individual's chief assumptions (Clapp-Smith & Wernsing, 2014; Taylor, 1994; Young & Karne, 2015), and philosophical engagement with others (McDowell, Goessling, & Melendez, 2012). This can occur because transformational learning is often grounded in experiences that disorientate individuals based on their existing views and assumptions about the world (Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, & Lundahl, 2014; Lough, 2009; Lyons, 2002; McDowell et al., 2012; Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012; Taylor, 1994). This invariably requires learning experiences that sometimes are confronting and raise students' consciousness about privilege within dominant cultural narratives, structures and practices (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009). Here the aim is to facilitate opportunities to engage in new ways of interacting with the external world (Hallows et al., 2011; Vatalaro et al., 2015; Young & Karne, 2015). Our study examined if this was the case for students in their experience of engagement in a short-term, immersive, cross-cultural experience in Nepal.

Much research has been undertaken within the fields of human services and social work focusing on the intercultural dimensions of learning (Colvin-Burque, Davis-Maye, & Zugazaga, 2007; Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015; Kohli, Huber, & Faul, 2010). Further, many definitions have been identified that centre upon the notion of intercultural competence; however, such definitions lack clarity (Deardorff, 2011; Fantini, 2009; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Ongoing critique of concepts such as cultural competence call for a

need to consider alternative discourses focused on intercultural awareness and interaction (Garran & Rozas, 2013; Goldberg, 1993; Park, 2005; Pon, 2009). According to Danso (2018), semantic appeal does not necessarily add more value to social work practice; what matters is that the fundamental ideas underpinning cultural humility – of anti-oppressive social work practice and education – are adopted. Given the range of contextual factors highlighting the controversial nature of definitions associated with intercultural practice, for the purposes of this study, the term *culturally sensitive practice* has been utilised. Culturally sensitive practice refers to interactions that are founded on thoughtful practice decisions that are inclusive of all cultures and that demonstrate respect, care and concern for all individuals and groups (Gray & Allgritti, 2003).

WORKING IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES: NEPAL FIELD TRIP

This study is based on a three-week field trip to the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. The field trip formed an integral component of the semester-length course “Working in International Communities; Nepal”, a 13-week, 10-credit-point undergraduate social work and human services elective focusing more broadly on international social development work. The field trip was funded through an Australian Government grant (the New Colombo Plan).

Given the high level of interest in the course, students were selected for inclusion in the program through an initial screening process including the completion of a short, written application and a 20-minute interview that focused on the potential benefits of each candidate’s involvement in the course. Of the 30 students interviewed, 20 were finally selected for inclusion. The final cohort participated in a series of induction meetings and workshops prior to the field trip component of the course. Curriculum was based on international social work and social development literature. A number of pre- and post-trip assessment activities were employed. One of the meetings focused specifically on an in-depth exploration of culturally sensitive practice in international human services and social work.

The field trip was facilitated in June 2016 and consisted of a three-week itinerary engaging with a range of human services agencies within the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal and enjoying a number of cultural experiences including visiting temples and other cultural sites of interest. The services visited included NGOs (non-government organisations) working with people from a range of diverse backgrounds such as aging populations, LGBTQI groups, children and youth, and an INGO (International non-government organisation) partnering with local service providers focusing on child protection and maternal health. The program also allowed for students to engage in a hands-on capacity with the various NGOs and schools visited through planned, capacity-building focussed activities. This component of the program ensured that the cohort was meaningfully contributing to the work of the various organisations as part of their interaction across the various service sites.

As part of the course assessment, students completed a travel diary throughout the duration of the field trip component of the course. This assessment gave students the opportunity to reflect on their attitudes and perceptions, particularly in relation to their engagement with a cultural context different to their own. This focus was particularly important to the overarching purpose of the study that was to explore how student experiences of

intercultural learning may have influenced the development of culturally sensitive human services and social work practices.

PARTICIPANTS

Twenty university students participated in this mixed-methods study. Prior to the commencement of the research, full ethical approval was obtained from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee. The study adhered to all research protocols as outlined by the Australian "National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research" (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). As a means of acquiring informed consent for participation in the study, all participants read an information sheet outlining details on the nature of the investigation. Each participant was invited to participate in the research on the condition that they could withdraw at any time during the investigation without penalty. Privacy was assured and upheld with names, contact details and personal information not shared with, or identifiable by, third parties.

The majority of participants were female, reflecting the predominance of female students enrolled in human services and social work courses in Australia. Sixteen students identified as female (mean age 24.5) and four as male (mean age 24.9). All but one student indicated that this was their first trip to Nepal, although the majority had experienced at least one trip overseas prior to embarking on the course. The majority of students fell within the age range of 18 to 25 years given that one of the key selection criteria for the New Colombo Plan funding is that participating students are aged between 18 to 25 years. Four mature-aged students (above aged 25) were granted permission to participate in the course in accordance with the funding rules. The majority of students were drawn from one of three undergraduate programs: 10 from the Bachelor of Social Work program; five from the Bachelor of Human Services degree; and four from the Human Services/Criminology combined degree. One student was completing a Master of Social Work program. Many listed their prior education at the high school, Year 12 or Year 10 level ($n = 14$). Some participants had also completed certificates ($n = 4$), diplomas ($n = 2$), part of a degree ($n = 2$) or a degree ($n = 1$). Thirteen of the participants specified their ethnicity as White Australian. One student identified as Aboriginal Australian. The remaining six students did not specify their ethnicity.

METHOD

The research in this study was directed by the following question: In what ways can an international immersive, cross-cultural field engagement focussed learning experience bring about transformational outcomes including the development of culturally sensitive practice? In order to address this question a mixed-methods approach was employed utilising both qualitative and quantitative data derived from two focus groups and a written survey.

Data collection

The first and second authors facilitated a 90-minute focus group with all participants (FG1) on the first day of the field trip, after students and staff had settled into their accommodation. Students were asked 11 open questions about their motivations,

expectations, beliefs, values, principles, attitudes, behaviours, understanding of cultural diversity and concerns. A second focus group (FG2), also of 90 minutes' duration, was facilitated by the first and third author on the final day of the field trip to explore the ways that these factors may have changed since the first focus group time point.

In addition to the focus groups, students were also asked to complete a written survey following the conclusion of the second focus group. This survey was adapted from King's (2000) survey instrument. The survey is a 22-item measure with strong validity and reliability that seeks to identify: (1) educational experiences during the field trip; (2–3) changes in values, beliefs, opinions or expectations; (4) factors that influenced change; (5) engagement with the program; (6–7) reflections of experiences; (8) learning modalities experienced during the field trip; (9) the impact of gender; (10) marital status and ethnicity); (11) program of study); (12) prior education; and (13) age. Two of the survey questions prompted participants to describe their experiences: “Briefly describe what happened that influenced changes in your values, beliefs, opinions and/or expectations”; and “Thinking back to when you first realised that your views or perspective had changed, what did your engagement with the program have to do with the experience of change?”

Data analysis

Basic descriptive analyses were conducted on quantitative survey data using Microsoft Excel with a focus on mean scores for all measures. Qualitative data from the two focus groups and survey were analysed through the six-phase thematic analysis procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). This process was conducted by the fourth author and verified by the other authors to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the qualitative data.

Quantitative reflections on experiences (survey responses)

All participants ($n = 20$) completed the 22-item survey. The majority reported that the field trip had included at least one experience that made them question their normal actions ($n = 19$) and ideas about social roles ($n = 15$); and consider acting in a different way ($n = 15$). Table 1 provides details on other educational experiences that students encountered during the field trip, including the realisation that other people also questioned their own beliefs ($n = 17$). Twelve students suggested that their values, beliefs, opinions or expectations had changed since engaging in the Nepal field trip. Participants went on to describe something that had influenced changes in (or consolidation of) their values, beliefs, opinions and/or expectations in the survey, and identify specific learning modalities that had influenced this change (Table 1).

Qualitative reflections on experiences from focus groups and survey

Overall, the data suggested that the cohort of students were generally self-reflective but had varying levels of experience in developing countries. All participants reported that they characterised themselves as individuals who reflect on previous decisions or past behaviours. The majority also indicated that they frequently reflected on what their studies meant for them personally ($n = 18$). A few participants said that this was their first opportunity to “get out of Australia”. Others had “been to some developing countries before”, “done a fair bit

Table 1. Number of Students Indicating that Particular Statements Applied to their Educational Experiences During the Field Trip

Survey question	N	%
I had an experience that caused me to question the way I normally act	19	95
I realized that other people also questioned their beliefs	17	85
I had an experience that caused me to question my ideas about social roles (e.g., the role of women within the Nepalese context)	15	75
I thought about acting in a different way from my usual beliefs and roles	15	75
I tried to figure out a way to adopt these new ways of acting	13	65
I began to think about the reactions and feedback from my new behaviours	13	65
I took action and adopted these new ways of acting	13	65
I felt uncomfortable with traditional social expectations	11	55
As I questioned my ideas, I realised I no longer agreed with my previous beliefs or role expectations	9	45
I do not identify with any of the statements above	1	5

Number of students identifying specific learning modalities that influenced changes in their values, beliefs, opinions and/or expectations

Survey question	N	%
Engagement with the culture	19	95
Engagement with group discussions	16	80
Engagement in informal discussions	16	80
Journal reflection	16	80
Verbally articulating your experiences	16	80
Personal reflection	15	75
Self-evaluation	10	50
Your lecturer's support	9	45
Another student's support	8	40
A challenge from your lecturer	7	35
Engagement in a course assessment task	7	35
Course reading content	6	30

of volunteer work in third world countries” and one participant indicated that they were “born in a similar environment” to the field location.

Analysis of the qualitative information collected through focus groups, surveys, reflections from students and the observations of staff accompanying them indicated that all participants experienced some level of transformative learning from this intercultural experience. Three distinct themes emerged from the data: (1) preparation for collaborative learning (being open and humble); (2) being immersed in a range of learning experiences and modalities; and (3) solidifying personal/professional values and actions. These themes seem to nest within Mezirow’s well-established model of transformative learning, and elucidate how immersive intercultural learning experiences may fit within his 10-phase transformative learning framework. A visual representation of these thematic relationships can be seen in Figure 1 and are further described below.

Theme one: Preparation for collaborative learning (being open and humble)

The first theme that emerged in the transformative learning process for participants seemed to be about developing an understanding of group members’ motivations and establishing a shared intent; specifically, learning in an open and humble manner, and consciously trying not to cause any harm. Students did this by discussing their personal and professional motivations and goals, and establishing a shared frame of reference.

Discussing professional and personal motivations and goals

Discussing their motivations seemed to be an important part of the collaborative learning process; developing a deeper understanding of what they (and others) hoped to achieve from this experience. This links with phases 1–5 of Mezirow’s framework.

During their first focus group discussion, participants established nine learning goals:

1. being exposed to different cultures, values, beliefs, needs and ways of doing things;
2. learning to work with (rather than imposing on) others in a culturally sensitive way;
3. seeing what community development and human services and social work principles look like in practice;
4. being able to use/apply the skills they had learned through their degree and placements;
5. seeing if they would like to undertake this type of work in the future;
6. learning from other peoples’ experiences and points of view (including each other);
7. enhancing their understanding of complex social issues (e.g., poverty);
8. becoming more conscious of their own privilege compared to others;
9. wanting to develop more life experience and grow as a person.

There seemed to be a mixture of professional and personal motivations, including wanting to assess the person–profession fit between them and this type of work.

One participant described three of these goals (numbers 2, 4 and 6):

[My] first one would be, my first placement was in a local community development setting, so to be able to take those skills and be able to apply them to an international [setting] ... The second one is to learn to be culturally competent ... we talk about it, but actually applying it and seeing how to approach that and do that in practice [is valuable]. And then the third one would be just getting the opportunity to hang out with twenty other social work students who were handpicked, with the social workers leading us.

Another participant placed her experience in a global context, reflecting goal numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 9:

...learning about new cultures [and] social work internationally; ...see[ing] what [life is] like for [Nepalese people and] try[ing] to understand it from their point of view; seeing if they might enjoy (and be able to handle) this type of work; and growing as a person.

Such responses reinforced the students' awareness of the relevance of culturally sensitive practice as emerging practitioners.

Ultimately, many students mentioned that they wanted to discover whether there was a good person–profession fit between them and a career in international contexts such as Nepal, (learning goal 5). One participant stated that she had “quit previous degrees, because [she] went out on [practicum placements] and ... didn't like it”; she enjoyed studying the content, but realised that the practical application “isn't for me”. Another indicated that she would “have studied for four years [before getting] to do one prac.” She was hoping that this experience would enable her to find out if she liked working in international, low income countries, or if she would be better off “steer[ing her] placement in another direction”. This seemed to be an important component to peoples' training as aspiring human services and social work practitioners.

Establishing a shared frame of reference

The students also appeared to create a shared frame of reference in the first focus group, underpinned by a sense of openness and humility. Several mentioned that they wanted to approach the trip “with an open mind; ... experienc[ing] it for what it is”, rather than imposing any expectations. This spirit of discovery included a willingness to be exposed to difficult issues (e.g., child trafficking), and different perspectives and ways of doing things; knowing that they were bound to be uncomfortable at some points, and inspired, surprised or unsure at others. Many were conscious of their potential impact on their host country; wanting to do what they could to avoid harm. This reinforced the shared desire within the group to be mindful of culture, including potential individual and group impacts on cultural interactions. For example, one participant wanted to make sure that they did not “come in with their heart[s] in the right place but [inadvertently] perpetuate an entire

industry built on suffering”, while another reflected on a time when his efforts to help one community had created unanticipated tensions among other groups. Many people said that they wanted to learn how to help in an empowering, sustainable manner with one participant articulating that they were interested in building capacity “rather than just going in there and doing something for six months and then just leaving”.

The group collaboratively identified a number of intentions and values that reflected their role as open and humble observers, trainees and guests. These included: respecting local customs and needs (e.g., wearing long pants and not wasting food); sitting back, listening and seeking to understand, but suspending judgement; asking questions if they were unsure what to do (e.g., when to say *Namaste*); being grateful for the opportunity to learn and experience another culture; and ensuring that they took time for self-care (e.g., journaling).

One participant incorporated many of these points in the following statement:

... being respectful. Don't come in “guns blazing, just because I'm from a developed country and I know best”, you know. It's all about coming in and ... being a guest and letting them explain to you how they think it is. It's putting ourselves in their shoes,... seeing it from [their] perspective. ... Empathy.

Participants appeared to want to act with integrity, demonstrate their respect, listen and learn in a culturally sensitive manner.

Theme two: Being immersed in a range of learning experiences and modalities

While the first theme of the transformative learning process in this cross-cultural experience seemed to revolve around orientating (and opening) students to the field trip, the next theme encompassed the actual immersion process, including: (1) interactions with community members and organisations; (2) group reflections with their peers and lecturers; and (3) individual reflections (e.g., journal entries). This theme links with phases 5–8 of Mazirow's framework for transformational learning, and serves to demonstrate how it can be applied in an intercultural setting for the purposes of developing cultural sensitivity.

Interacting with community members and organisations

The students said that they had learned a lot about their profession, Nepalese culture and themselves through the organisational visits, discussions with community members and student guides, and leisure activities. This was articulated in various ways that showed the immersion in culture and the environment provided a basis to be out of their comfort zone, for example:

Speaking to the beneficiaries and staff ... really impacted my beliefs and opinions, as they gave me the chance to see the impact international development can have, which is something I had no previous knowledge of, and also further inspired me to learn more about international development.

Other learning experiences came from linking personal experiences to the cultural processes in the Nepalese context. For one participant, this helped her to process a personal loss:

I ... witnessed a funeral whilst in Nepal and ... our [student] tour guide explained why they do the ceremony and what it represents. Later in the trip I got a call from home saying [a friend] had committed suicide and although I could not be home for the funeral I did try the Nepali ways of letting go of their loved one through accepting what has happened and saying a prayer that would be released into the atmosphere through the pray[er] flags they have over the Tewa centre. After doing this I did feel better about the situation I was in even though there was still sadness and pain for the loss. This is just one of the ways that the trip influenced my values and opinions on death and other subjects through making me question what we do in Australia.

These reflections showed changes in emphasis in the development of a culturally sensitive orientation to practice.

Reflecting on experiences with peers and lecturers

Many students said that they appreciated being able to debrief with their peers and lecturers; one on one, in small informal gatherings, or formally as one large group. Reflecting with their colleagues seemed to help them to process their experiences and gain a deeper understanding of various issues, observations and challenges. One participant indicated that these conversations helped him to contextualise what he had learned about “wicked problems” at university:

I've got this whole understanding of what wicked problems really mean now. I've struggled with trying to wrestle with why is the system like it is? ... I've tried talking to everybody and I get so many different views from the different local people I talk to. I guess that's been a real eye opener for me just to understand that, having to be okay with knowing that some problems are just too big for one person to fix. I guess what's been one of my highlights this trip has been the conversations I've had with people... where I've been able to process that information so then trying to work out how do I apply that to myself?

There were numerous examples where students reported the benefit from their cross-cultural immersion *and* their ability to discuss their experiences with their peers and lecturers. Action and group reflection were both important in bringing about transformative change.

Reflecting on experiences as an individual

The ability to undertake individual reflections seemed to be another important aspect of people's learning experience. Students described a number of personal insights that had arisen through their reflections. For example, one participant had learned to question her cultural privilege by experiencing what it was like to be a minority:

It was a combination of being in a different culture and becoming the minority, as well as realizing my own privilege, and the challenges that come with questioning what that means and the values that I bring.

Examples like this demonstrated the deeply personal nature of this type of reflection, and its intrinsic connection to past experience; present characteristics, strengths and learning edges; and future aspirations as culturally sensitive practitioners.

The students' experiences in this study suggest that these three learning modalities (learning from organisations and community members, reflecting with peers and lecturers, and engaging in personal reflections) were connected in a synergistic manner; building on (and adding to) each other. Several students seemed to demonstrate the holistic, integrated quality of this learning process by discussing all three aspects as a whole as demonstrated in the following quote:

My time in Nepal allowed for exposure to a culture completely different from my own...Additionally, the discussions with other students and staff members allowed me greater reflection on not only my thoughts and opinions but those of others. This allowed me to challenge my own beliefs by listening to others opinions and justifications. I believe this was a crucial part in my change of perspective...

There were numerous similar comments from students about changes and clarifications in values that shape professional and personal identity.

Theme three: Solidifying personal/professional values and actions

The third theme acknowledged a desire to solidify the lessons people had learned about themselves and their profession, and determine whether they would be a good fit for this type of work. This links to phases 9–10 of Mezirow's model of transformative learning.

Increasing understanding of profession and self

The field trip seemed to enhance people's understanding of their profession. Some realised how much they already knew and its applicability to other cultures. One participant mentioned that she was "surprised at how well our social work values from Australia ... connect in Nepal"). Many enjoyed seeing how this knowledge was applied to various populations and settings. The ability to learn from a range of different organisations and beneficiaries seemed particularly helpful. Another participant indicated that she found the "range of different perspectives ... really useful", while another noted that "the amount of detail and honesty ... each organisation provided [was] great, as well as the depth and breadth of the questions we were able to ask".

It was evident that students felt they were not simply observers but had meaningful interactions and first-hand experiences that enabled them to get a better understanding of many issues including poverty, child-trafficking, family violence, the sex-trade, elder-care, and LGBTIQ issues. One participant suggested that this trip had enabled her to learn about "the layers and dimensions involved in just the one problem" and the diversity of ways each issue can be addressed. Thus, this field trip appeared to build on (and confirm) existing knowledge, demonstrate what this might look like in practice, point to the diversity of potential approaches, and reinforce the need to apply cultural sensitivity to identify and understand client perspectives, expectations and needs rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

The students also reported a better understanding of their beliefs, values, experiences, vulnerabilities and strengths as a result of this trip. Several said that they had learned a lot about themselves. A number of participants declared that “this trip ha[d] been life changing”, while one individual acknowledged that she was “not going home the same person”. Some said that they had become more confident in their ability to practise social work and human services while others had realised how much they still needed to learn. One student said that she had developed a sense of “cultural humility”, which had prompted her to want to find out about peoples’ experiences and needs rather than assuming that everyone experiences things in the same way. The students mentioned several other personal insights including: a desire to learn more about other peoples’ cultures; a new (or renewed) level of gratitude and appreciation for being able to access things like food and water; an acknowledgment of their own privilege and a commitment to not to make other people feel uncomfortable through their clothes, etc.; a deeper understanding of the emotional impacts of dealing with this type of work and the need to prevent a sense of being overwhelmed; a greater sense of connection to people (and potential clients) on a very human level; and a stronger commitment to “allowing the other person to take the lead in ... their experience”.

Some people who had travelled to other countries previously said that they wanted to make sure that they maintained these changes after this trip. For example, one participant mentioned that:

Every time I go travelling for a significant amount of time I go home and then it’s just some little things about me that have changed. I just hope that this time it really solidifies with me and extends through my professional [life] as well.

The students seemed to be conscious of several changes that they wanted to continue when they returned home, including maintaining a culturally sensitive orientation across future contexts.

Assessing person–profession fit and next steps

Students also discussed their perceptions of whether this type of work was likely to be a good fit for them as a person and proposed next steps. This trip confirmed some students’ desire to work in a developing country. For example, one participant said that this trip had “cemented into me that this is what I want to do with my degree”, while another had affirmed that “yes, this is what I want to do and this is going to be my driver”. This experience had also confirmed another’s feeling that international work might be something she would “enjoy” and be “good at”, while another individual had “never been so clear” on his career plans. Others had not planned to get into international work after their studies, but this experience had made them more open to (and confident with) this type of work. As one participant explained:

I now have even less of an idea which direction I want to go in because it’s just opened my mind completely. [A]t the very beginning of the field trip I questioned whether can I do this, am I cut out for social work because of the impact that some

of the organisations and beneficiaries had on me. As I've progressed I now have more confidence and yes, I can do this.

The students seemed to be assessing other peoples' needs and their ability to help. Some decided that it would be good to help people in developing countries. One participant articulated that "it would be a tragedy to be educated in our society and not really consider coming to somewhere where it's really in need."

While some students did not envisage their careers being based outside of Australia it gave them a focus on priorities and global issues in the local context: "There is still so much disadvantage in Australia" and I want to focus on "our own issues at home [including] refugees [and] Indigenous" people. An overarching theme emerging through the person-profession fit discussion was the necessity to sustain an underpinning posture of cultural respect as future human services and social work practitioners.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study clearly indicate that the Nepal field trip experience facilitated transformative intercultural learning for all participants. Further, the primary learning outcome under investigation – the development of culturally sensitive practice – was achieved to varying degrees for the 20 participants.

The three themes identified by this study contribute to the establishment of an evidence-based pedagogical approach to transformative intercultural learning, with the ultimate aim of promoting culturally sensitive practice. The study also points to the utility of Mezirow's (1978, 1981, 1991) transformative learning theory in providing an explanation of some of the key processes underpinning transformative change as an outcome of inter-culturally immersive experiences of learning within higher education more broadly and within Human Services and Social Work training specifically.

Many participants were surprised by how much they had grown through the experience and emphasised how the intercultural learning approach had served to better prepare them as practitioners in training. The examples students provided about how interacting with community members and organisations impacted their beliefs, values, perspectives, and behaviours appeared to reflect many of the principles in Mezirow's (1978, 1981, 1991) transformative learning theory, as well as Kovan and Dirkx's (2003) suggestion that transformative learning results in "a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions ... a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world".

All participants indicated that their values and beliefs were directly challenged as a result of engaging in the program. Responses highlighted a deep shift for many participants in both their conceptualisation of, and outward responses to, culturally sensitive practice. In doing so it necessitated students reflecting on their own personal experiences as well as their position of relative privilege. The culturally immersive focus of the program created an environment for transformative change, where existing assumptions were challenged through ongoing reflective engagement in a range of intercultural activities.

Results suggest that immersive intercultural field trips can enable people to develop, refine or recommit to an open, respectful and empowering (client-centred) perspective that is culturally sensitive in orientation. The process seemed to expand or consolidate peoples' values and approaches, enabling them to recognise new situations, ask for guidance, adapt their perspectives and behaviours, and reflect on their responses to diverse cultural situations.

The findings also support the broader acknowledgement of the efficacy of cross-cultural immersive experiences of learning in facilitating transformative engagement for social work and human services students. Government-funded schemes such as the one utilised in this study provide a powerful opportunity for immersive learning experiences in international contexts. This is especially important for social work and human service graduates to develop applied knowledge and skills for an increasingly complex and diverse world.

Limitations and future recommendations

This study is relatively small in scale and the generalizability of findings need to be viewed with some caution. The field trip allowed for the exploration of the development of culturally sensitive practice within only one specific international location. Different cultural contexts may change learning foci and require different pedagogy. The quantitative component of the research was limited to analysis of mean scores. Future research could look at multiple sites of immersive learning experience to compare and contrast survey data. This could include the facilitation of longitudinal research that tracks the sustainability of transformative effects of intercultural learning over time. Field education programs also are immersive in nature and could be compared with short-term immersive activities for students. Our research did not have the scope to test the relationship between time spent in an immersive experience and the degree of transformational learning.

CONCLUSION

The results from our study provide an evidence base for the value of immersive international experiences for social work and human service students. Learning gained from the course and field trip were profound and transformative for students establishing an applied basis for culturally sensitive practice informed by the global context. The experience consolidates core professional values and identity that are critical graduate qualities. Further, the outcomes of the research lend support to the efficacy of intercultural learning as a vehicle for enhancing work readiness for individuals training to engage in human services work with individuals and groups located within a range of diverse cultural contexts. Social work and human service programs add value to the quality of the learning experience when they provide global mobility components to their curriculum.

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