Study abroad as a means of questioning colonial power and jingoistic perceptions of alterity.

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This paper addresses conference topic 1: “What is the culture of study abroad and study abroad participants/stakeholders (teachers, hosts, organizers, etc.)?” It rethinks the oft-stated assumption that students who participate in study abroad programs will automatically benefit from international cross-cultural experiences. A growing body of study abroad literature suggests that students’ problematic and stereotypical views of others are reinforced rather than challenged (Bartolome, 2004; Kinginger, 2010; Phillion et al., 2008; Pray & Whitaker, 2010).

Drawing on critical and postcolonial theories that challenge the ideological *givens* of U.S. exceptionalism, we analyze ten years of data from a study abroad program for preservice teachers (114 participants) at a large, public US Midwestern university. Data collected include on-site observations, pre- and post-trip formal and informal interviews, participants’ reflective journals, course assignments, and course discussions. Data were coded based on Riessman’s (2008) dialogical analysis with a focus on the dialogical relationship among participants’ cross-cultural experiences, the influences of globalization and neoliberalism on education and throughout society, and students’ ideological shifts in thinking related to nationhood.

The Honduras Study Abroad Program aims to prepare critically conscious and globally minded teachers through international cross-cultural experiences. Despite having students engage with texts and have experiences that might move them into “displacement spaces” (Brock et al., as cited in Martin & Griffiths, 2012, p. 922), our analysis of data indicates a troubling reluctance among students to adjust their *we’re number one!* mentality regarding perceived US superiority.

One purpose of study abroad is to allow participants to cross epistemic borders, hear multiple perspectives, and explore new ways of thinking and being. Yet, despite attempts to question and discuss issues of power, inequality, and injustice, many students seem committed to identities of “ignorance” (Malewski & Jaramillo, 2011). This is an important acknowledgment to make: it does not mean that study abroad has failed; it means that when we are honest with ourselves and our data, we are able to analyze where changes might be made to make substantial improvements in study abroad programs for the goal of social equity.

References


