**THE ORGANIZATION AND ITS LEADER AS TOOLS FOR BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY IN IMMERSION PROGRAMS: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH**

**RESEARCH AND RATIONALE PAPER**

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An oft-cited vehicle to develop global and intercultural competencies is the use of international immersion programs, that is, a student group traveling together to a foreign culture. These programs can “fast track” the development of such competencies if such a program is intentionally designed and implemented explicitly to meet that objective (Che, Spearman & Manizade, 2009; Cushner, 2012; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). The effect of international immersion programs on students can endure for a lifetime, which Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon (2009) demonstrated in a U.S. Department of Education-sponsored, 50-year longitudinal study (1960 to 2010) that examined the long-term impact on undergraduate students who studied abroad. What makes an immersion program particularly life-changing? How do these programs successfully increase intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and in contrast, what decreases or limits the development of these competencies? In particular, how does the immersion group itself influence, support, or detract from the development of intercultural and global competency? Further, if the group is considered as a type of organization, what type of leader is necessary for that organization to facilitate sustained shifts in self-awareness, empathy, curiosity, openness, and shared respect?

This research study addresses a gap in understanding why immersion programs are so effective in building intercultural and global competencies by examining the role and influence of the organizational group itself and its leadership. Applying organizational theory and leadership approaches can help illuminate how a leader, typically an educator, helps this ad hoc organization – the immersion program group – and its members navigate and reduce resistance to change and increase openness to and acceptance of foreign contextual environments, habits, patterns, and myths. The organizational group and its leader, therefore, serve as an integral mechanism through which intercultural and global competencies are built. My hypothesis is a systemic approach to organization captures the interlinking and dynamic components of intercultural understanding; and, that the role of a leader is to address the narrative being used by the group to respond to the changing dynamics of a new culture while role modeling the embodiment of the attitudes, knowledge and skills of intercultural competency to optimally facilitate that process.

Research continues to affirm a clear correlation between increased and continuing global engagement after participating in an immersion program, also referred to as a study abroad program. Returning to the longitudinal study by Paige, et al (2009), results show 98.4 percent of participants indicating their study abroad experience increased their future global engagement (Paige et al., 2007); 73.8 percent note a strong impact on their friendships and student-peer interactions; and 96.3 percent report their program had an impact on the undergraduate and graduate coursework they chose after completing the program. Immersion programs are one of the most influential experiences undertaken by students and that they continue to influence participants’ global engagement and career choices years and decades thereafter.

Separately, Kishino and Takahashi (2009) looked at university students’ improvement in their self-perceptions of global competency after mandatory study abroad programs (2019). Using Morais and Ogden’s Global Citizenship Scale (2011), Kishino and Takahashi (2019) show that study abroad program participants who completed their program have higher scores on a global citizenship scale than students currently in a program or those who have not participated.

Looking specifically at pre-service teachers, Cunningham (2019) conducted an ethnographic study on pre-service teachers participating in an international student teaching program in Mexico; her research asked whether immersion programs for pre-service teachers increase their capacity of “cultural noticing,” that is, the ability to notice details about a cultural context; and their ability to respond to the cultural context, which she defines as the cultural practices, values and behaviors of individuals at a particular place and time (Cunningham, 2019). The results affirmed pre-service teachers do increase their global competencies of cultural noticing and responding to cultural contexts, but do not always use available opportunities to engage in cultural responding due possibly to factors such as race, gender, previous international experience, and/or social identity of the participants (Cunningham, 2019). How to prepare students prior to an immersion experience, and what demographic factors and previous exposure to different cultures may impact a participant’s success in developing global competency after an immersion program needs further research.

Ramirez (2013) reiterated this gap of knowledge, and further emphasizes the need for authentic engagement and improved knowledge of globalization when participating in an international immersion program (2013). Researchers such as Baecher (2019), Gilliom (1993), and Reimers (2009) confirm that study abroad programs, defined as immersion programs of service learning, practicums, or educational tourism, are effective in building global competency, particularly cultural awareness, among teachers. For teachers, Gilliom (1993) adds that building global competency is most effective through immersion programs specifically designed for students preparing to teach, and that these future teachers must be committed to global education. Researchers highlight there remains a gap in the literature in how to conduct immersion programs to best support participants in developing their global citizenship so that ultimately, they can be culturally responsive as teachers and school leaders (Cunningham, 2019; Gallavan, 2008; Gilliom, 1993; Kishino & Takahashi, 2019; Longview, 2008).

What these researchers and others have not examined is the effect of the immersion group itself. Immersion groups become their own organization with expected norms and culture based on the group’s members. Is there something about the group dynamic and how it becomes its own “organization” that influences the group as much as the external stimuli of the immersion experience? Further, what type of leader, typically an instructor, and/or leadership approach best optimizes the development of intercultural and global competencies?

To explore these and other questions, this research study first assesses the nature of an organization and its leader. Suchman (2011) argues organizations should be conceived as conversations based on human interaction generating self-organizing patterns of thinking (the organizational identity and knowledge) and relational (organizational culture). Through a phenomenological approach, Suchman (2011) uses appreciative storytelling and open-ended interviews to analyze 80 life stories from students and faculty at the Indiana University School of Medicine. Key findings from his study include recognizing a control-oriented approach to organizations negatively effects change; organizations are rooted in the principles of complexity dynamics; and the context cannot be separated from organizational assessments. Additionally, the inclusion of culture, diversity, and stories are necessary to recognize patterns of how knowledge, attitudes and habits are developed and expanded.

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) further posit that change is the normal state of organizations. As such, organizations are in a continuous state of evolving and re-organizing in response to new stimuli affecting the organization and its members. Their study revealed how the interrelationships of human actors create a pattern, which then becomes an organization, and that this organization inherently will shift again as new patterns emerge. Therefore, an organization is shaped by change and how its actors make sense of a new context in which their organization exists. As the organization is inherently a response to change, the organization is both becoming (a state of constant evolving based on interrelated dynamics) and has become (a momentary static entity). This interrelational web underlying the becoming of the organization arises from human actors engaging in reflection, sensory systems, sharing meanings, and re-thinking generalities.

The next question is what type of organizational theory best captures the complex, dynamic culture in which an immersion group-organization operates. Teerikangas and Hawk (2002) examine the role of and linkages between systems thinking, complexity theory, and culture, and how to manage cultural diversity within a system. The authors argue the complexity of culture requires a systemic approach integrating complexity theory to address and manage cultural diversity. A holistic and expansionist approach found in systems and complexity theories reflects the “living nature” of an organization as its members embody and respond to changing cultures, contexts, and chaos. In contrast, a scientific, reductionist approach to organizations removes the inherent interrelationships present between team members, management, and context.

Shaked and Schechter (2016) expand the work of Teerikangas and Hawk (2002) and consider systems thinking as an interdisciplinary, conceptual framework that orientates a perspective toward the whole and its interrelationships. In their study of school leaders, the authors found four main sources of systems thinking in school leadership: managerial experience; role models; academic study; and natural tendency. These findings similarly correlated with earlier studies that found experiential learning, a supportive environment, interpersonal and communications skills, and positive attitudes help develop a systems-thinking approach. This research emphasizes the significance of role modeling, mentoring, and management experience in building a systems thinking approach among leaders, and affirmed a reductionist approach is not effective when engaging context and culture (Shaked and Schechter, 2016; Teerikangas and Hawk, 2002).

A systems approach to organizations, defined here as a series of conversations, reflects the dynamism of immersion group organizations. Turning to leadership, the role of a leader is to observe what is occurring, perceive differences, craft new relevant patterns, and help interweave the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes to help an organizational change emerge, be responsive, and be perceived as legitimate to its members and others. In immersion programs, the continually evolving nature of an organization and the inter-relationships of its members are particularly visible. The leader’s role is to support and legitimize these shifts can ensure group cohesiveness and the absorption of new stimuli, senses, and emotions (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Said another way, the leader’s role is to interrupt existing patterns to initiate change, and encourage not just recognition of difference but also responsiveness to those differences, which are the building blocks to intercultural and global competency (Suchman, 2011).

A leader of an immersion group organization contends with resistance to change as the discomfort of the immersion experience unfolds for its members. Oreg (2007) explores how to reduce resistance to change by addressing the change process. Considering both the antecedents and consequences, Oreg’s study argues the importance of identifying resistance as a multi-faceted construct, and defines resistance to change as having affective, behavioral, and cognitive components (2007). Oreg concluded the most significant antecedent variable affecting resistance is trust in leadership; a lack of confidence in an organization’s leader most strongly correlates with negative attitudes, behaviors, and cognition toward the change. In addition, social influence – whether an individual is surrounded by advocates or critics of the change – has a significant impact on the resistance or acceptance of change. Information, on the other hand, is not correlated with an affective or behavioral reduction in resistance to change. Understanding that trust in leadership rises as the key factor of successful organizational change speaks to the importance of the immersion group’s leader, who will facilitate the group’s ability to positively respond to and navigate change.

As part of that effort to effect change, Bathurst and Monin (2010) examine the definition and role of myth in organizational change, and how a leader can aid in reshaping that myth. Defining myth as a type of speech, or an “ideology in narrative form,” the authors argue a myth contains a first and second order semiology (2010, p. 265) and that uncovering the embedded myth in an organization’s ideology can allow the second-order semiology to instigate, support, and lead change behavior rather than impede change. In immersion programs, a key challenge is identifying the source behind assumptions, particularly when beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors are in conflict with a new context. In organizational change where resistance is persistent, particularly in immersion group organizations, the recognition of our human myth-making and the emotion attached to those myths allows a new narrative – that is, language – to reshape the myth. The leader can address unspoken myths to avoid rejection, unease, and fear of the new in a vastly different culture, and guide the group members to redefine the myths underlying their beliefs and assumptions.

Looking more closely at the leader’s background, Nkomo and Kriek (2011) examine the influence of a leader’s life story and how this story underlies his/her influence, response, and navigation to organizational change and re-creation as emerging culture, values, structures, people, and processes arise and intersect with the organization. Following an analysis of case studies, the authors uncovered four themes sourced from the leaders’ life stories that they use to facilitate organizational change: embrace change, provide hope, connect change to values and culture, champion diversity.

Based on this initial literature review, several research questions arise:

* *What type of leadership approach optimizes the development of IC among students? Among students in an immersion group? In an immersion group internationally?*
* *What characteristics of a leader optimize the development of IC among students? Among students in an immersion group? In an immersion group internationally?*
* *Does the leadership approach or the characteristics of the leader matter more when increasing intercultural and global competency in an immersion group organization? This information could be cross-analyzed with the group’s and leader’s reporting of the effectiveness of the immersion experience relative to the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes of intercultural competencies.*
* *How is a student immersion group differ or similar to other organizations? How does the foreign context affect the group?*
* *How do life stories of a leader affect his/her leadership of an immersion group? If the students know his/her life story, to what extent does this information influence the group and the individual members of the group?*
* *What role does the power of indirect influence have on school leaders and immersion group organizations, such as the particular context/culture; the school’s institution; the host institution (if relevant); and so forth?*
* *How does a leader practically use social accounts to reduce resistance to change and allow organizations to support its members to navigate and adapt to changing contexts and conditions?*
* *To what extent does the destination of the immersion program affect the immersion group organization and its ability to build intercultural and global competencies?*

A rising awareness in both literature and the public arena is a gap in intercultural and global competency among teachers and schools. If we want to maximize our ability to develop students as globally and interculturally competent global citizens able to peacefully address a wide assortment of challenges and effectively engage with other peoples and cultures, then we need to intentionally teach and equip our educators with skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to intercultural and global competencies (Bastos & Araujo e Sa, 2014; Cushner, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Mahon, 2007; Myers & Rivero, 2020). While literature has been growing on the role of immersion programs, an area of research not addressed is the organizational nature of the immersion group itself, and correspondingly, the role of the leader of that organization. Organizational change theory and leadership attributes and approaches arguably have a profound effect on whether an immersion group will begin deeply embodying intercultural and global competencies, or leave the experience with knowledge, but not fully developed attitude or skills to apply their learnings. Subsequent literature to explore this topic will include additional study on organizational and group dynamics, particularly in stressful environments; deeper research on transformational leadership and the organizational systemic approach; and how cognitive dissonance theory is applied and informs the culture developing in the immersion group organization.

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