**Building intercultural competence through self-awareness:**

**Leveraging executive coaching with immersion program leaders as**

**the driver for paradigm shifts**

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Research Prospectus

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**Introduction**

In 2008, the Longview Foundation gathered a group of scholars to discuss how to equip future teachers’ intercultural and global competencies. The central question discussed was how to better prepare students to participate and effectively engage with an interconnected and globalized market as well as contribute to peaceful and productive relations across cultures (also see Stromquist, 2005). One result from this gathering was the report, “Teacher Preparation for the Global Age: The Imperative for Change,” which called out:

*“The critical role of teachers in internationalizing P-12 education has never been clearer, yet today’s educators rarely begin their careers with the deep knowledge and robust skills necessary to bring the world into their classrooms.”*

 *(Longview Foundation, 2008, p. 3)*

Sleeter (2008), Sharma, Phillion, and Malewski (2011), and Cushner (2009) reiterate that to maximize our ability to develop students as globally and interculturally competent 21st century citizens able to peacefully address a wide assortment of challenges and productively 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 (also see Bastos & Araujo e Sa, 2014; Cushner, 2012; Deardorff, 2006; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Mahon, 2007; Myers & Rivero, 2020; Shaklee & Baily, 2012; Valdivia & Montoto, 2017). Stated another way, teachers cannot teach what they don’t know (Sadruddin & Wahab, 2013; Santoro, 2014; Schneider, 2003). The next question therefore asks, how do we equip these educators? My research interest focuses on how to build intercultural competency among leaders as part of the broader effort to internationalize education (see Cushner, 2012; Shaklee & Baily, 2012).

**Statement of the Problem**

An oft-cited vehicle to develop intercultural competency is the use of international immersion programs, which can fast track the development of intercultural competency if such a program is intentionally designed and implemented explicitly to meet that objective (Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2009; Cushner, 2012; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). To develop intercultural competency, attend to issues of diversity, and improve teachers’ pedagogy and professional competence, immersion programs can be a tool to build these competencies and skills (Cushner, 2011; Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner &Lundahl, 2014). Smolcic and Katunich (2017) explore the breadth of research on how intercultural competence is developed among teachers in an immersion experience context. The authors identify seven learning outcomes that can positively lead to intercultural competency growth: personal experience; growth in self-awareness and societal awareness; increased emphasis on self-reflection; recognition of power relations and privilege; cultural understanding through language; shifts in behaviors; and a reframing of cultural incidents and perspectives (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017).

Similarly, Cushner (2011) argues that “carefully structured, intercultural field experiences where candidates are immersed in another culture” is most critical in developing intercultural competency (Cushner, 2011, p. 610), and adds experience is essential in culture learning. Cushner (2011) notes that such a shift requires openness, a willingness, and an ability to collaborate with people different from oneself. When teachers participate in these programs, they can become better equipped to support their students’ development in intercultural and global competencies, and consequently help facilitate their students’ ability to positively engage with and navigate the global environment (Cushner, 2011). Summarily, immersion programs offer a unique forum to shift paradigms, ways of thinking, perceptions of normal, and sense-making that can have significant effect on participants’ competency and capacity to engage effectively with other cultures.

Not well examined is the role of the instructor in developing intercultural competency and this paradigm shift. Davis and Spoljoric (2019) state this point succinctly: “faculty involvement in study abroad programs is seen as key to successful student trips, but literature on the faculty role is surprisingly limited” (p. 314). Niehaus and Wegener (2018) cite that “faculty members’ own intercultural competence” predicts their “approaches to teaching abroad” (p. 115), but do not discuss how faculty develop their intercultural competency except by the generality of previous interaction with other cultures. Anderson, Lorenz, and White (2016) call out the importance of “intentional instructor engagement with intercultural content” as critical in building student intercultural competency (p. 2). This research focuses specifically on the faculty who are hosting and teaching immersion programs.

Using faculty-led programs as a framework, how can the instructor be supported in developing his/her intercultural competency, which refers to deeper self-awareness, humility, curiosity, empathy, and presence that allows for a transformational experience, and subsequently evoked self-awareness and character traits in others, i.e. students, to stimulate their transformation? Arguably, an instructor cannot teach self-awareness and these traits if s/he has not experienced the process of developing self-awareness and the potentially possible transformation; as noted above, teachers cannot teach what they don’t know (Sadruddin & Wahab, 2013; Santoro, 2014; Schneider, 2003). As such, instructors arguably cannot provide facilitated or guided processes of self-reflection on different frames of reference if they have not experienced this process (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). Hence, my core research question asks: what might be an intervention to evoke this self-awareness?

My research hypothesis suggests if executive coaching is integrated into an instructor’s preparation for teaching immersion programs, or by extension into any environment in which the leader seeks to build and generate intercultural awareness, communication, and competency, then the instructor’s and the participants’ intercultural competency will be positively accelerated. Grant, Green, and Rynsaardt (2010) describe executive coaching as a transformation in which self-awareness is raised, insights are shared, and purposeful enactment of new behaviors ensures; executive coaching is when a coach keeps the coachee “focused on the goals, helping to monitor and evaluate progress over time as well providing an intellectual foil for brainstorming and self-reflection” (Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010, p. 154). Such coaching offers a multidisciplinary approach to facilitate the adoption of the character traits necessary to allow for intercultural competency to germinate and grow. Loughran and Brubaker (2015) offer that “personal learning about self and individual leadership patterns is important in developing deeper understandings,” particularly in challenging situations (p. 266). Executive coaching, distinct from instructional coaching more commonly observed in education, offers a professional development methodology (Grant, et al., 2010) defined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) as a partnership between clients and coaches in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, to evoke excellence, and to holistically transform the way they think.

Executive coaching is underpinned by adult development theory. Jennifer Garvey Berger (2012) refers to our developing way of qualitatively understanding the world as “self-complexity,” also called “forms of mind,” which is the shifting or transforming capacity of humans “to cope with complexity, multiple perspectives, and abstraction” (p. 10). The capacity of that leader to effectively navigate the new environment is directly tied to their self-complexity growth. Kegan (1994) refers to this theory as constructive-development theory, which is centered on an individual’s meaning making. Further, Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) explore study abroad programs through the lens of transformative learning theory. The authors lean into Mezirow’s three forms of reflection, one of which is called the “premise reflection,” which refers to the act of reflective self-inquiry instigated by a disorientating dilemma, or an incident of “dissonance,” and the subsequent possibility of transformation (p. 1142).

Making sense of the world and experiencing the transformation when that sense making shifts are at the core of intercultural competency. Integrated within this sense-making are the attitudes and awareness that allow this sense making to effectively, meaningfully, and productively to occur, with curiosity as the “lubricant of the learning process” (Berger, 2012, p. 164). Said another way, constructive-development theory is learning the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to gain new perspectives, self-awareness, and the traits of curiosity, humility, empathy, and compassion – the foundation of intercultural competency, which I argue here is discovered and uncovered through executive coaching.

**Conceptual Framework**

Conceptualizing my research question begins with the question, “How do we effectively develop intercultural competency among leaders?” Before tackling this question, I first explore the term of intercultural competency and measurement tools, by examining what the definition of intercultural competency and how we measure it. To define the term intercultural competency, I lean on the work of Cushner (2011) and Deardorff (2006). Cushner (2011) defines this competency as the “capacity and ability enable people to be successful with a wide range of culturally diverse contexts” (p. 206). Deardorff articulates three components of intercultural competency: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Whatley, Landon, Tarrant, and Rubin (2020) also emphasize the importance of reflection and self-awareness. Paras, Carignan, Brenner, Hardy, Malmgren and Rathburn (2019) use Vande Berg’s development framework to define intercultural competency as a process of “cultivating cultural self-awareness, development awareness of others, managing emotions, and bridging cultural gaps” (p. 24). I also highlight my constructivist and social constructivist epistemological lens, meaning I attach validity to the experiences, stories, narratives, ontologies, and epistemologies of others, and further, that we gain knowledge of the world by interpreting and understanding the meaning that individuals attach to their actions.

I examine my question of how to develop intercultural competency among leaders through the framework of immersion programs, a recognized tool of developing intercultural and global competencies. Immersion programs offer a unique forum to shift paradigms, ways of thinking, perceptions of normal, and sense-making that can have significant effect on students’ competency and capacity to engage effectively with other cultures (Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, & Lundahl, 2014; Ritz, 2011; Sharma et al., 2011). Bennet (1993), Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006) and Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) note that immersion programs can move participants to a new way of being and knowing – that is, a transformed ontology that facilitates the recognition and value of other epistemologies, and subsequently accepting, adapting, and integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes of intercultural and global competencies. However, immersion programs do not automatically develop intercultural competency; rather, this competency must be deliberately built into the design and execution of a program and facilitated by an interculturally competent leader (Cushner, 2011; Niehaus & Wegener, 2018; Patti, Holzer, Brackett, & Stern, 2015; Paras, Carignan, Brenner, Hardy, Malmgren & Rathburn, 2019; Whatley, Landon, Tarrant, & Rubin, 2020). These two components – design factors and leadership – will principally determine if an immersion program will build and deepen intercultural competency among participants.

Of these two components, I focus on the leader, who, while recognized as instrumental in the process of intercultural competency development during an immersion experience, is not the subject of extensive research (Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020; Niehaus and Wegener, 2019). To further narrow my research, I focus on faculty-led immersion programs, which are trending as the most popular form of immersion program (Whatley et al, 2020). Faculty-led programs are generally two to eight weeks; contain an academic course component; and usually, although not always, include the objective of developing intercultural competency (Whatley at al, 2020).

Niehaus and Wegener (2018) assert that faculty members play a pivotal and essential role on the students’ development of intercultural competency and experience during a study abroad program, but that limited research examines how faculty members approach international immersion programs. How faculty interact with students and design their courses, including their pedagogy, epistemologies, disciplines, prior experience, and objectives, will negatively or positively effect a student’s development of intercultural competency (Niehaus & Wegener, 2018). My research interest focuses on the faculty’s own level of intercultural competency, and critically, how to increase that competency prior to leading the immersion program.

Faculty-led programs also generally imply a group of students accompanying a faculty leader. This group, I argue, becomes its own organization. As an organization, certain norms, cultural expectations, and group dynamics develop and evolve through the course of conversations occurring within that group (Shaked & Schechter, 2016; Suchman, 2011). The leader of the group, that is, the faculty member, is therefore not only introducing a group of participants to a different culture and environment but is also leading a newly created organization. Moreover, the faculty leader serves as a leader and facilitator of the change process that occurs within individuals and the group dynamic.

These two elements, the individual participants and the group, increase the complexity and needed skills by the faculty leader when a disorientating dilemma occurs and launches the possibility of intercultural competency growth (Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner & Lundahl, 2014; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). In a European study, Dunn et al. (2014) find that a participant’s transformational experience results from a disorienting dilemma complemented by an opportunity for critical reflection and conversations with others only with “meaningful instructor feedback” (Dunn et al, 2014, p. 298). To generate meaningful feedback and model the level of self-awareness necessary to foster in-depth self-examination, I assert that the instructor requires specific support for his/her professional development to be effective in this practice.

Part of this support includes deeper understanding of the dynamics of the immersion group itself, and how to stimulate change among the group participants, that is, growth in intercultural competency ,while supporting the transformation of the group as a whole. For example, the inclusion of culture, diversity, and stories must be used to recognize patterns of how knowledge, attitudes and habits are developed and expanded in a group or organization (Suchman 2011). Further, as organizations are conversations, reflecting patterns of meaning and relating, the role of a leader is to interrupt existing patterns to initiate change; leaders, adds Suchman (2011), therefore should integrate appreciative inquiry and encourage not just recognition of difference but also responsiveness to those differences.

The role of the leader is to foster a group who can identify, reflect, and respond to change and difference within a particular context and culture; understanding the life story of a leader is a helpful tool to illuminate the leader’s ability to navigate organizational change and the re-creation of an emerging culture (Nkomo and Kriek, 2011). Tsoukas and Chia (2002) also note the leader’s role 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 is particularly visible; the leader’s role to support and legitimize these shifts can ensure group cohesiveness and the absorption of new stimuli, senses, and emotions.

A logic approach may be as follows:

1. Immersion programs consist of a student group traveling together to a foreign culture.
2. Immersion groups become their own organization with expected norms and culture based on the group’s members.
3. The leader of the immersion group organization becomes the change manager.
4. The group’s success in productively responding to change integral to the immersion program is due in part to the leader’s ability to help the group navigate that change.
5. Navigating that change includes reducing the group’s resistance to change, including the contextual environments, habits, patterns, and myths.
6. To understand that context, a systemic, holistic-based leadership approach allows for the reduction of resistance and an increase in acceptance and effective engagement with the new culture.

As such, the leader’s acumen to embody, model, and practice intercultural competency is critical if student participants can trust the leader and risk the vulnerability to develop their own competency (Nkomo & Kriek, 2011; Oreg, 2007; Shaked & Schechter, 2016). Here, systems theory is a helpful lens as it articulates the interweaved, interrelated, and interdependent aspects of a group; while each aspect is a part, the combination of the parts is greater than the individual parts (Shaked & Schechter, 2016). In practice, an organization is made up of various individuals with different and unique backgrounds, skills, knowledge, experiences, and traits. While these individual components exist independently, their interdependence and interaction are what stimulates something greater than the individual person (Dugas & Humbles, 2018). Great ideas, in other words, arise through engagement. This engagement occurs through conversation; organizations emerge, become, and evolve, therefore, through language (Oreg, 2007; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) with reflection as an integral part of this process. The leader of this organization, in this case the faculty member, is participant, facilitator, and teacher. S/he both represents what is possible and facilitates greater growth and deepening awareness within the system.

At the same time, the immersion program is a learning experience; this experiential learning engagement can be observed and understood through Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, which includes critical reflection, the centrality of experience, and rational discourse (Baumgarnter, 2012). In part because an immersion program is more than knowledge acquisition, these programs can offer a transformational experience of identity (consisting of cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and somatic selves) that can create paradigm shifts in participants (Grant, Green, Rynsaardt, 2010). To maximize these consequential shifts a program must intentionally create opportunities for this transformation to emerge (Grant, et al, 2010). The leader of the experience is a pivotal point to ensure these opportunities are well-designed and integrated into the program, and that s/he has the self-awareness and competency to respond to and facilitate this depth of non-academic learning and insight. Self-awareness, noted in the concept map below, is an integral part of intercultural competency.

Carden, Jones, and Passmore (2022) suggest the use of one-to-one coaching as a tool of reflection and building self-awareness as well as experiential education as a “basis for observation, self-evaluation and reflection” (Carden et al., 2022, p. 166). Notably, Carden et al. (2022) point out the lack of clarity among researchers who define and use the term, self-awareness, which can therefore limit the applicability and comparative analysis between studies.

A visualization of the concept map for this study is as follows:



Arguably, an instructor cannot teach self-awareness and these traits if s/he has not experienced the process of developing self-awareness and the potentially possible transformation. As such, instructors cannot provide facilitated or guided processes of self-reflection on different frames of reference if they have not experienced this process (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). What might be an intervention to evoke this self-awareness? This study suggests the integration of executive coaching, an intentional process of engagement described by Grant, Green and Rynsaardt (2010) as a transformation when self-awareness is raised, insights are shared, and purposeful enactment of new behaviors ensures; executive coaching is when a coach keeps the coachee “focused on the goals, helping to monitor and evaluate progress over time as well providing an intellectual foil for brainstorming and self-reflection” (Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010, p. 154). Such coaching offers a multidisciplinary approach to facilitate the adoption of the character traits necessary to allow for intercultural competency to germinate and grow.

**Research Methodology and Methods**

*Framing the Research Study*

Central to my research interests is to discern how executive coaching for faculty leaders offered prior to executing a faculty-led immersion experience will successfully advance the faculty’s self-awareness, an integral part of intercultural competency, and subsequently the capacity to support and model to student participants these skills, attitudes, and knowledge. In this way, my interests explore the intersection between the experiential learning found in receiving coaching and in leading international immersion programs. How can we ensure this tool – executive coaching – is effectively deepening self-awareness and intercultural competency of the faculty leader? How does coaching equip the faculty leader to be more effective in advancing intercultural competency among participants within the immersion program? How does the leader navigate and model self-awareness and intercultural competency within the group dynamic? The results from this research may be helpful to understand the role of the leader and the appropriate interventions to support that leader when seeking to optimize the development of intercultural competency within individual participants and the immersion group.

### *Methodology*

Smolcic and Katunich (2017) point out the depth of inconsistency in methodological procedures, theoretical frameworks, or identification of the mediating factors that drive impact. Without consistency in these areas, general theoretical knowledge is limited as demonstrated in the inability for such research to fairly engage in dialogue, extrapolate new learnings, or credibly apply learnings across studies. My research addresses one of these gaps: the mediating factor of the instructor of the immersion program, and specifically, what difference the instructor’s self-awareness and intercultural dispositions have on the participants development of the same.

My goal is to tease out the effects of coaching for faculty leaders leading immersion programs. Immersion programs are shown to be effective tools in developing these competencies and facilitating an evolving transformation in worldview structure and perspective (Deardorff, 2006; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Parkhouse, Tichnor-Wagner, Cain, & Glazier, 2016), which is not accomplished through coursework alone (Cushner, 2009; Pennington, 2020; Smolcic & Katunich, 2016). The principal methodologies used to guide this study, all of which are relational and dialogic, include Kegan’s constructive-development theory; Mezirow’s transformative learning theory; and systems theory. In addition, experiential learning underpins my ontological and constructivist epistemological view of knowing and how we know.

*Method*

Assessing the development of intercultural competency among faculty leaders would utilize a mixed methods approach. Measuring intercultural competency will begin with a preliminary assessment using the Intercultural Development Index (IDI) (Bennett, 1993; Hammer, Bennet, & Wiseman, 2003) and if possible additional measurement tools such as the Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS; the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI); and Hofstede’s work in cultural indices. These quantitative indices provide a standardized method for comparing results before and after the intervention, and importantly, also offer a platform to compare the outcome of this intervention with other interventions that were measured on the IDI, the DMIS, or the CCAI. The IDI in particular has been used by most researchers in this study. In addition, demographic information will be collected via a survey.

To complement the results from the quantitative study, employing a qualitative approach provides additional information to better inform the effect of the coaching intervention in intercultural competency development. Prior to initiating the coaching engagement, semi-structured interviews to explore the faculty members’ perspectives and experiences will be conducted, and several formative and final summative evaluations will be conducted once coaching begins, all of which will contain targeted questions meant to inspire reflection. Interviews prior to departure and upon return will further be followed by a survey approximately six months after the program’s completion. In preparation for these interviews, a pilot interview with at least one critical friend will be completed to monitor the flow and approachability of the questions. Using purposeful sampling, participants would consist of faculty members who intend to lead a faculty-led program in the next six to twelve months. The number of participants would depend on the number of available coaches to coach each individual faculty member.

**Conclusion**

International immersion programs are recognized tools to help students develop their global and intercultural competencies to become 21st century citizens able to engage productively with other peoples and cultures. Inconclusive is what components of an immersion program optimize the development of these competencies and seem most influential to participants, and more specifically, what self- awareness the instructor needs to role model and develop a sustained and personally integrated intercultural shift among participants. Paras et al. (2015) assert that intercultural competence is not automatic following an immersion program. Leaders must be aware of the attitudes and experiences of student participants, but they do not assess the degree to which the facilitators themselves are aware of their own intercultural competency. “If we understand correctly that skilled interventions yield more powerful intercultural growth opportunities for students, the extent to which this is possible relies heavily on an educator’s own intercultural knowledge and skills” (Paras et al., 2019, p. 42); this point articulates the foundational question of my research, followed by asking, how best do we do this, and how can coaching be a tool in this process.

This research study proposes the integration of executive coaching as an essential component of instructor’s professional development and practice prior to leading an immersion program, and further, suggests executive coaching to evoke awareness and stimulate action is relevant for any intercultural engagement within or out of the classroom setting. The vision is to build peace and compassion while mitigating distrust, prejudice, stereotypes, and antipathy by developing intercultural competency and practices among the next generation.

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