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**Portfolio II**

**Section 2: Professional Update and Reflection Essay**

My foundation in embarking on a PhD in International Education/Education Leadership (IEEL) is found in my original Goals Statement, “I am passionate about integrating global awareness, understanding, and shared compassion among our next generations in the hope of minimizing bias, prejudice, and assumptions in our communities” (Mikulasek, 2020). This passion has not abated; in fact, it seems the thirst for identifying common ground and ways to communicate effectively and constructively has only grown in an increasingly polarizing, divisive society. I grapple with our lack of intercultural competency, often evident in our continuous critique and suspicion of the other, which is further exacerbated by the pervasiveness of social media’s narrowing of our field of knowledge and information. When I began my doctoral program, my research interests focused on school leaders, particularly teachers, and seeking ways to spark and sustain their intercultural competency; I also looked to immersion programs as a powerful tool to generate meaningful intercultural competency development. My core questions followed these interests: what components of an immersion program experience optimize the developing of intercultural and global competency among participants? And secondly, how can we leverage these teased out components and apply them to domestic and local “immersion” experiences with the goal of achieving some or similar growth in these competencies?

As I have mulled over these two questions, several consequential personal and professional developments have occurred that have refined my focus and research question. For example, my coursework has pushed me to dig deeper into these questions and consider different factors. Specifically, **EDRS 812: Qualitative Methods in Educational Research** provided a platform for an exploration into immersion programs and their unique ability to serve as a vehicle to instigate and sustainably and positively increase intercultural competencies among participants *when done well* – but what does ‘done well’ look like? To address this question, I turned my research to the student participants’ perspectives. How might they describe their immersion experience and its effect on developing, or not, their intercultural and global competencies? Using purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews, my objective was to explore participants’ perspectives and experiences to determine what aspects of their immersion programs resonated as most impactful, and why. By directly engaging the participants, I gained a more informed understanding of what worked and what did not work in developing intercultural competencies during an immersion program.

One of the themes raised during these interviews was the impact of the participant’s role in a developing world context, particularly as several of them were volunteering in schools as part of their immersion experience. Participants were, in part, grappling with their presence as a form of colonization, the messy intersection of social justice and politics, and how education is intertwined in this cauldron of perspectives. We examined these questions from several angles in **EDUC 892: Social Justice and Equity in International Education**, during which we explored social justice; gender justice; and decolonization of development and education, among other topics. Were students offering access to knowledge for the “common people” that would lead to their active engagement to address the needs of the society (Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall, 2009, p. 19), or converting people to “republican machines” as access to education “renders the mass of the people more homogenous” (Ayers et al., 2009, p. 27)? Or, were immersion program participants helping to engage citizens as “agents for social change in a participatory democracy” (Ayers et al., 2009, p. 30), and bolstering learning as a form of civic responsibility? These questions shed light on the conundrum of immersion programs and the complicated role we play when entering the space of the other.

Shifting to another point of view, in **EDLE 895: Emerging Issues in Administration and Supervision**, I explored how leaders, whether in academia, business, civil society, or government, face interpersonal challenges within their classrooms or organizations that require a dynamic, multi-faceted approach. These challenges often are rooted in how to shift human behavior and gain other perspectives, and as such, can be highly complex. Educators, for example, must contend with a diverse set of stakeholders, including students, parents, school boards, community members, local and state governments, civic organizations, national organizations, and so forth, all of whom have varying levels of influence and engagement. How do leaders use multidisciplinary interventions to generate paradigm shifts?

A method to analyze meaning-making more deeply was found through Reconstructive Horizon Analysis (RHA), which we examined in **EDRS 822: Advanced Applications of Qualitative Methods**. RHA helps to untangle what is being said or perhaps more importantly, what is not said, by distinguishing between the Objective, Subjective, Normative and Identity claims underlying responses or statements. A significant learning from RHA was illuminating assumptions and the cultural norms made by the speaker – who may also not recognize what messages were/are being conveyed. This importance of unpacking the language and cultural norms during intercultural engagements was further discussed by Ebbutt, Ferguson and Meyer, Ghaffar-Kucker, Francis, and Kennedy, among others, in **EDUC 815 Research Inquires in International Education**. These authors dug into the critical role of listening, cultural assumptions, norms and expectations, and the cultural background of the researcher.

Collectively, these courses pushed me to reflect more deeply on meaning-making; the complexity of intermixing cultures; and the dynamic issues of social justice and equity. These reflections were enriched when I completed certification in Executive Coaching from the Institute of Transformational Leadership at Georgetown University. This nine-month program added a significant layer to my personal and professional development by embedding adult development theory and the concept of growth edges into my thinking; these growth edges seemed to offer another way of understanding the dissonance that occurs in an immersion program, which can be the catalyst to develop deepened self-awareness when combined with reflection. As a result, my subsequent independent studies explored and teased out the relationship between intercultural competency development and adult development theory (ADT), which was greatly informed by direct practice on the application of ADT on individuals in coaching sessions under the guidance of Jennifer Garvey Berger (Conversations on the Edge). My efforts were rewarded when my CIES proposal titled **Dissonant Edges: Exploring how adult development theory informs intercultural competency development** was accepted.

My research into adult development theory and unpacking the concept of dissonance continued. I dived more deeply into exploring that moment of discomfort, and what is needed to use that discomfort as a catalyst for curiosity, empathy, constructive listening, and compassion rather than a platform for fear, judgement, suspicion, or derision. My research questions evolved into: (1) what makes the difference between the two reactions – and what other reactions exist, and (2), what is the role of a leader during these engagements? These questions led to a deeper inquiry into transformational theory largely associated with Jack Mezirow. Mezirow (2000) affirms that the act of reflective self-inquiry is instigated by a disorientating dilemma, or an incident of dissonance, which may subsequently lead to transformation of perspective or identity (Trilokekar and Kukar, 2011). The idea of “transformation” became my next area of exploration as I sought to untangle the definition and understanding of transformation and what it looks like when it’s happening. This question led to research (and in some cases direct engagement with) Richard Schwartz on Internal Family Systems, Richard Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership, Marcella Cox and Amanda Blake’s work on somatic and neuroscience research, and informal queries with coaching clients and students engaged in study abroad programs. The result from this body of research and reflection is a new model I have developed that I call the Transformative Servant Model (TSM), which I am loosely applying to a course my doctoral chair, Dr. Mattix Foster, and I will teach in Spring 2026. Collectively, these experiences and research have significantly modified and refined my research interests, a need identified during Portfolio I by my committee.

Personally, the last three years have been particularly consequential. Following a divorce, two international moves, and ultimately the abrupt elimination of my employer – USAID – I am taking my research and interests and launching a company called The ServantEDGE. This company incorporates and integrates international immersion experiences, public speaking, and executive coaching with the goal of helping individuals and teams uncover, discover, and rekindle their purpose and meaning. The method is rooted in sparking curiosity, creativity, compassion, and connectedness through transformative and catalytic experiences – such as international immersion experiences. The ServantEDGE thereby encapsulates my doctoral work through application. I also will be pursuing teaching opportunities at universities in the United States and abroad as well as publishing articles and a forthcoming book on the Transformative Servant Model.

**References**

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