

Using Transformational Learning Theory to Understand Immersion Semester High Schools

Adolescence is a developmental period where the experiences a person has yield lasting effects (Steinberg, 2014). Each encounter contributes to their identity, the formation of which has long been seen as the goal of adolescence (Erikson, 1956). When adolescents have profound experiences, they are prone to say they were changed or even transformed. This raises questions about whether adolescents can experience transformational learning (TL) as defined by (Mezirow, 2000).

Immersion semester high schools (ISHS) market themselves as providing TL (SSN, 2018). They offer a little studied educational experience that shares similarities to boarding schools, study abroad and outdoor education semesters. They are limited to three months in duration, are comprised of a geographically diverse cohort that is previously unknown to one another, students live away from their families with faculty in a bounded social system, and the curriculum is based in experiential pedagogy. Students typically attend them during their junior year, and have anecdotally described their ISHSs as transformational. The purpose of this study, then, was to understand whether the ISHS experience fits with Mezirow's (2000) TL theory.

Methods

Students at 11 ISHS completed the Learning Activities Survey (LAS) before and after their semester in spring 2018. The LAS consists of a set of statements to which the participant responds yes or no, and determines whether they had TL (King, 2009). We also embedded a readiness to change scale (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992) into the survey. We conducted semi-structured interviews based on the LAS with 30 students in summer 2018.

Results/Discussion

We performed an exact sign test on a matched sample ($n = 74$; average age = 17) who completed the LAS, and found significant difference in TL between students' originating and ISHSs, $p = <.001$. An exact sign test on the ten TL stages revealed significant differences in nine, $p = <.001$. A chi-square test of independence showed significant differences in frequency of readiness to change stages, $X^2 = 7.84$, $p = .02$. Semi-structured interviews showed that ISHS largely allowed students to uncover their existing values and beliefs, although students also felt that they gained in confidence, their understanding of themselves and of themselves in relation to others. Some did report TL in terms of their values.

The findings indicate that adolescents enrolled at ISHS experience transformational learning as captured by the LAS. Students report higher rates of the ten stages of transformational learning with the exception of self-examination in which they maintain their existing beliefs and critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural and psychic assumptions. The LAS is a mixed methods instrument, the quantitative portion of which serves as a coarse measure of transformation while the follow-up interview allows the researchers to delve into the participant's experience. The interview data suggest that adolescents learn to see their existing frameworks, which does not fit especially well with TL theory. That said, the process of TL appears to be present and potent for them. Perhaps rather leading toward TL, it accelerated their identity formation and led towards a self-authored identity.

References

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