How do we in Christian schools educate students who will be adequately prepared for our intercultural world when we are frequently criticized for protecting and isolating? During an interview with Dawn, a high school senior just returning from a short-term mission trip, she noted, “My worldview has changed, and [the trip] definitely broadened my knowledge of things like the world and what people are going through, and yeah, my heart has changed too.” I was struck by the progression in her thinking from a focus on a perceived intellectual change through increased knowledge to a deeper heart impact.

As I contemplated a focus for my dissertation study, I was influenced by my own life, which missions deeply affected, and by the significant changes I had noticed in others who had undergone various mission experiences. Additionally, current literature accentuates the necessity for students to develop a higher level of intercultural sensitivity in preparation for increasingly diverse communities of the future. Ultimately, I decided to explore the effect of an international, short-term mission trip on the level of intercultural sensitivity in Christian school secondary students.

A qualitative case study provided an appropriate methodology for exploring the abstract human quality of intercultural sensitivity. Similarity in design of international mission trips to experiential education and service learning strengthened the framework of the study. Journals, student pictures from reflexive photography, and interviews provided the data for review. For my sample population, I selected students who would participate in a short-term (7-to-10-day) mission trip organized by the school as an integral component of the school curriculum.

WHY MISSION TRIPS?

Mission trips take place at substantial expense and sacrifice by a school community. Preparation does demand valuable time from faculty advisors, administrators, students, and parents; and each trip requires substantial funding. According to Linhart’s estimates (2005), nearly 250,000 middle school and high school students spent over 100 million dollars in 2003 to participate in short-term mission trips, having the expectation of substantial benefits from the experience. Schools are experiencing increasing competition for limited funds and greater expectations from parents for effective use of resources, and yet Beers notes, “The proliferation of study abroad trips (and in particular, study abroad trips with a missions emphasis) has not been accompanied by indicative research evidence to support the underlying assumptions of the programs” (2001, 86).

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance is a critical concept in understanding mission trips. It occurs when students gain exposure to situations that prompt conflicting thoughts about previous attitudes and perceptions. Students frequently describe this situation as being out of their comfort zone. They may respond by ignoring the dissonance or by changing attitudes and perceptions. Walsh and Golins (1976) suggest that change or adaptation cannot occur without dissonance. S. W. Parker (2007) outlined the correlation of cognitive dissonance theory and biblical principles that guide the development of mission trips for Christian organizations. Although school administrators must guard student safety, a trip that does not require all students to move outside their comfort zone will essentially dilute the impact of the experience. For example, students who are exposed to extreme poverty will feel uncomfortable, but they are also in a setting that could cause introspection and a potential change in their philosophy of life.

THE IMPACT OF MISSION TRIPS: THREE THEMES

All the students in this study perceived change in their lives, and the change was multifaceted. Elizabeth stated,
“With my life I'd like to change things, maybe can't change everything, but I'd like to impact people's lives in some way.”

Three themes of this perceived change emerged from the study: development of relationships, awareness of poverty, and involvement in serving others.

The first theme, development of relationships, included several groups of people, but students spoke most frequently of the impact from their relationships with children. Sam said that the greatest effect the trip had on him was “being with the kids and them teaching me that you don't need a lot to be happy, that all you need is to survive and have each other and you'll be fine.” Holly concluded, “Everyone from our trip said that they wished they would have had more days with the kids.”

The second theme resulted from the participants' awareness of poverty. Students were affected by the disparity of wealth distribution within the host country and between the host country and their home culture. This theme prompted much student reflection on the distribution of wealth, the reasons for the lack of equal distribution, and the ways a nation or a person should respond to the disparity. Elizabeth reflected that “even though it is a beautiful place ... there are a lot of struggles. The people still love and they're happy and they're not worrying about tomorrow, or when to get things done. They're just really satisfied and they love their life, so that spoke volumes.” Dawn wrote in her journal, “It’s hard to wrap my mind around everything I have and take for granted here—like clean water.” Holly reflected on her place in life: “Walking down the streets of La Carpio left me speechless. These people had next to nothing, yet the children seemed content with smiles and excitement.... I could have been born in conditions like that, but God has a reason for why I was born blessed with so many things, and I need to share those blessings with my family, friends, and even the nations.”

The third theme was involvement in serving others. Students helped in construction projects, medical clinics, educational settings, and church programs. This engagement in service projects and activities provided opportunities for interaction with local people and instilled a sense of satisfaction in being able to help others. Allen reflected on how his involvement in meeting the needs of people affected his own thinking about life: “It’s almost like God was saying, you have the power to change the world. Because all these countries, like a lot of countries around the world, are in need and they don’t have anyone helping them.... You can go affect these countries.”

Roger reflected on how he felt during his service project: “It was definitely rewarding to know that you helped, that we built a foundation for one house, poured the floor for another house, and that they’ll put like six or eight people in that house. And they were all crammed into a really, like, 10-by-10-foot shack. And, but at the same time, it was sort of like somebody needs to come back here and do the rest of the houses.” Students frequently wrestled with the deeper questions of how one effectively helps other people and how one deals with the complexity of relating to others in this manner.

THE AH-HA

Students generally go on school mission trips with their class, which is a group of people they know very well. Some have been in school together for 13 years. They have participated in numerous service and mission activities during these years. But something happened on this mission trip that was different from what happened during all the previous experiences. One component of this unique dynamic emerged as the “ah-ha” of the study.

The unexpected finding was the personal impact from the participants’ observation of colleagues. Participants were impressed and surprised to see not only their classmates interacting with the host culture but also the level at which the trip affected their classmates. Holly stated, “It was interesting to see all the guys in my class, like, really open up. I hadn’t seen that side of them, especially the ones I was with for 13 years. I still had never seen how they interacted, and a lot of them were touched in ways that I don’t think they really expected.” Several students remarked how proud they were of certain classmates who worked hard or participated actively. These classmates surpassed expectations by responding in deeper and more mature ways than students had observed before the trip.

Why did this theme emerge? Peer pressure is monumental at this age, and what happens to others is significant. During a mission trip, students experience personal change and subconsciously seek to validate the reality of these experiences and changes. S. W. Parker (2007) suggests that after a person makes a decision or a change in response to cognitive dissonance, he or she will seek affirmation that she made the right decision. To observe a familiar classmate being affected by the experience confirms the reality of the trip’s experience for the participant. The effect of observing classmates served a critical role in solidifying the overall impact of the mission trip. This unique dimension of school-organized trips for classes could offer key benefits not found in other mission trip experiences and would be worthy of further exploration.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

This study transcended any perception I held of a mission trip’s impact. A single, short-term mission trip may provide the most profound, life-changing event our students will experience before leaving our schools.
Christian schools intentionally plan a variety of experiences that encourage students to step out of their comfort zones and to interact with people who are different in age, race, and socioeconomic background. In spite of this intentional focus through 13 years of education, participants perceived that something different happened on this short-term, international mission trip. The impact was substantial and life changing, and it exceeded their expectations even though they had heard many former participants describe their trips. These findings advocate for the increased use of international mission trips and for the enhancement of their effectiveness.

Trips must include plans for intentional processing by students. The trips should maintain a careful balance of fostering guided processing and allowing students to take the initiative for their own learning. Photographs and journals prove to be effective ways for participants to reflect on their experiences. Students should be encouraged to consider the why questions rather than what questions exclusively. Discussions of why poverty exists may lead to solutions or at least to possible individual responses.

Personal interactions throughout the trip are essential. Processing the deeper why questions will take place most effectively in the presence of interactions with people from the host culture rather than as outsiders contemplating these complex issues from a distance. All mission trips should incorporate physical service because it offers a key connection for young people. Service activities should ideally provide opportunities for the students to participate in social interaction while they complete helpful tasks. Several students regretted not spending more time in serving others, preferring service work rather than the recreation planned for the group. This regret was due in part to a changed perception of life priorities as the trip progressed. From this study, it was clear that the students’ perception of impact came more from service activities than from any other segment of the trip.

CONCLUSION

Few secondary schools conduct a required mission trip. School leaders should consider a required trip that is an integral part of the curriculum for two reasons. First, if one believes the significant impact that this and other studies show, all students should participate. Requiring a trip reinforces the importance of intercultural sensitivity through international experiences and service to others. Second, a mandatory trip allows a more complete integration of the trip into the school curriculum. The trip should be woven into the framework of multiple courses. Not only will this integration better serve the academic needs of students, but it will also create a bridge between textbooks and real life.

The findings of this study confirmed the effectiveness of short-term, international mission trips in the development of intercultural sensitivity for secondary school participants.

Although this study began to peel back only a few layers of a complex event, the implications offer significant hope to educators desiring to better prepare students to make an impact on a diverse world for Christ.

References


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