

## **The socio-cultural meanings of overseas educational travel for adolescents**

Dr Heike A. Schänzel

Senior Lecturer in Tourism Studies, School of Hospitality & Tourism, AUT University,

Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

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### Introduction

The meaning of holidays for children and adolescents and the role of travelling in constructed subjectivities are largely absent in academic research (Small, 2008). Even less is known about educational tourism, and particularly international school excursion tourism (Cooper & Latham, 1988; Larsen & Jenssen, 2004) which is organized as opportunities to learn and interact with other cultures (Byrnes, 2001). As future tourists, the children's views of their holiday experiences are significant (Cullingford, 1995). Adolescence (puberty to age 19) is of particular interest here, as travel-related competences, beliefs, habits and much of what is later taken for granted, are established in this phase of life (Frändberg, 2010). Short-term study trips abroad can be perceived as creative, engaging and transformative learning experiences, but require further research (Perry et al., 2012). The potential for cross-cultural learning is particularly high when there is high interaction with local people and elements of culture shock (van't Klooster et al., 2008) or culture confusion (Hottola, 2004). This is especially when Westerners are exposed to a non-Western culture for the first time and the educational trip is organised by the hosts, as is the case here. There are, however, health and safety considerations that need to be taken into account when children travel to developing countries (Richter, 2005).

The aim of this study is to understand the socio-cultural experiences and meanings gained by adolescents on an overseas educational trip. Educational overseas trips are increasingly being offered through secondary schools in New Zealand but not much is known about the meanings and experiences gained by the participating adolescents. In the past, research more broadly in the social sciences has been conducted *on* adolescents. More recently, there has been a move towards research *with* adolescents, engaging them as active subjects rather than objects, recognising their rights and giving them a voice (Grover, 2004; Greene & Hogan, 2005) but this is mostly absent within tourism research. This research

project is based on 11 secondary school students (aged 16-18 years) that took part in a three week educational trip to Chiang Mai in Thailand in January 2013. The students volunteered to represent their New Zealand school and teach English at a private college in Chiang Mai which exposed them to many cultural and educational experiences related to Thai customs. The trip was termed 'Language Immersion Program (LIP) – Inbound – Thai Culture Immersion' by the Thai hosts. For most students this was their first travel experience in a developing country. However, more recent critical scholarship has questioned the benefits of volunteering holidays and instead highlighted negative outcomes, as debated in an upcoming conference on volunteer tourism (RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, August, 2013). It is claimed that the volunteering experience is not always meaningful, but sometimes an indulgence for middle-class, sheltered people, who don't always engage deeply with the community.

### Methods

Initial short interviews were conducted by the Thai hosts with the 11 New Zealand secondary school students (aged 16-18 years) that took part in the educational trip to Chiang Mai which is reported on here. The second-round of this research is based on semi-structured interviews four months after the trip in May 2013. It is proposed that a conversational interview will be conducted with any students willing, and with the consent of their parents and cooperation of the school, to participate in a public space at the school library taking about 15-20 min. This location allows privacy to allow the teen to speak freely yet with public visibility to address concerns for safety as recommended by Bassett et al. (2008). The researcher is a parent herself and had a daughter participating in the school trip, thus is familiar with the participants. It has been suggested by Bassett et al. (2008) that prior contact with the teenagers is useful because it helps them to see the interviewer/researcher as an approachable person. A NZ\$ 20 gift voucher will be offered to the participants to compensate for their time and effort. Adolescents want to be taken seriously and ideally this should involve a form of incentive (Stafford et al., 2003).

The choice of qualitative methodology is underpinned by the philosophical perspective of interpretivism with the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The emphasis of the interviews will be upon an exploration of the more personal context of educational travelling, which lends itself to qualitative research (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Research with adolescents requires recognising and reflecting on the inequalities of power and authority between researcher and adolescent participants. Qualitative research, with its focus on shared construction of meaning with participants, and flexibility in design and process can partially alleviate these imbalances and give participants their own voice (Bassett et al., 2008). The interviews will be digitally recorded, partially transcribed and manually collated and coded by the researcher. A more flexible constructivist approach to grounded theory methodology will be used for the analysis (Charmaz, 2000). This allows for a more holistic understanding of the meanings gained by the adolescents. The research is significant in that the findings can better inform secondary schools, academic knowledge and thus aid in the provision of educational tourism experiences through empowering young people.

### Discussion

This section reports on the initial interviews conducted by the Thai hosts in Thailand which will be followed up in the later interviews. Overall the overseas education experience was perceived as positive, valuable and mostly exceeded the students' expectations. There are two themes that come through from the interviews: first, how the students benefited from being exposed to a different culture and second, how the interaction with the Thai students had affected them. All the students reported on how they had changed in some way by their participation in the educational experience.

Reporting here on the students' cultural experiences; their favourite cultural activities were elephant camp, Muay Thai (Thai boxing), Thai cooking school and night markets to give an indication of some the activities the students engaged in while in Chiang Mai. These are some quotes from the students:

*“Things I never would have thought about doing in my life were done.”*

*“The most diverse and different experience of my life, loved it!”*

*“Something awesome happened every day! I feel like this experience has enriched my life and I can never forget how great of a time I have had!”*

All the students reported that they found the experience of teaching English to Thai students as very valuable and commented on how it made them realise the value of education. Here are some quotes from the students:

*“I value my education more after seeing the children at the orphanage and government school really wanting to learn.”*

*“I thought that overall it was an amazing journey and my favourite part was the English camps because the kids were great and even though I was the one teaching, I learnt from them as well. At Lamphun [orphanage] especially, they all had an intense eagerness to learn and do so much as they could in that short amount of time and I admired their desire for knowledge because in their situation, knowledge is power. It gave me a new perspective on my education that I shouldn't take my opportunities for education for granted.”*

A final thought on the Thai educational experience by one student:

*“My Thai culture immersion experience was an emotional roller-coaster. I found the culture shocking, the language barrier, the homesickness and the physical sickness pretty hard to overcome but the program itself was amazing. All the sickness and culture shock was worth it in the end as that is all part of the journey. I have had the time of my life riding elephants, learning Thai cooking, teaching English, visiting temples, etc. I don't regret any moment of it.”*

It was reported by the Thai hosts that the Thai students valued learning about New Zealand and about Kiwi culture, such as playing rugby, learning songs and kapa haka (Maori performing arts). This was something that would not have happened without the New Zealand students.

## Conclusion

There has been some debate on the positive outcomes of volunteering in terms of personal development of volunteers and better cross-cultural understanding between hosts and guests but not with regard to adolescents. Preliminary results from research conducted at the destination indicate that teaching English to Thai students and getting immersed in the Thai culture was beneficial and potentially life-changing for the adolescents. This is in terms of appreciation of education, respecting and relating to Thai culture and developing a broadened perspective about Asian culture. In turn, the Thai students learned about New Zealand culture and improved their English language skills. The second stage of this research study aims to follow up on the socio-cultural meanings gained by the students longer term. Adolescents are a unique age group as for most it represents their first independent overseas travel experiences away from their families. These new cultural and educational experiences gained are part of the process of forming mind-sets which then become a background to the judgements formed about people and countries (Cullingford, 1995). These experiences can also be transformational in terms of how the students had to overcome personal challenges, culture confusion or intercultural adaptation (Hottola, 2004) and reassess their belief systems. However, not much is known about the first immersions of young people into a different culture and foreign education system and the personal changes these can entail. Overall, educational school tourism is a poorly researched and understood segment within tourism studies, not only with regard to its scale but also its specific nature and needs (Dale & Ritchie, 2008), and what it means for the students involved. This research project explores the meanings for the students, the value of international educational school tourism and benefits of volunteering for adolescents in particular.

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