A Work Abroad Experience in Israel: Evaluating Participants’ Motivations, Attitudes, Identities and language proficiency

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There are numerous reasons to join a work abroad program such as learning new skills and enhancing employability, experiencing different cultures and languages, proving ones independence, taking some time out and in some cases earning money. Israel constitutes a unique work abroad environment as it is typically Jewish volunteers from all over the world who choose to take part in these programs. The added value for the participants includes strengthening their Jewish identity and heritage, familiarizing themselves with the Jewish homeland and Israeli culture and improving their Hebrew.

The current study focused on a group of 68 college-graduates from North-America who participated in a twelve-month work abroad voluntary program whereby they served as hands-on-English teachers in Israeli public-schools. Following a 6-week training period, they lived in small groups within the local communities and served for a minimum of 20 weekly hours as teacher’s aids, whilst receiving ongoing pedagogical support.

The objectives of this study were: (1) to understand the participants’ motivations to join the program; (2) to measure changes in their attitudes towards the local culture, identities and Hebrew language proficiency, as a result of the work abroad experience; (3) to identify the variables which best predict Hebrew language proficiency.

Data were collected through self-report questionnaires which were distributed upon arrival to Israel (pre), after the training period (while) and at the end of the year (post).

Findings revealed varied motivations, especially intrinsic, to join the program including the desire to contribute to the improvement to the level of English in Israel. The experience significantly impacted participant’s knowledge and attitudes towards the host country and its culture, as well as their Hebrew language proficiency. Yet, no changes were detected in students’ self-ascribed identity. Predicting variables of Hebrew language proficiency were found to be different in the pre and post contexts.

Keywords: motivations, identities, proficiency.