

**Beyond the classroom: Examining study abroad's role in shaping pre-service teachers'
thinking about teaching**

by

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Abstract

The educator workforce in the United States is predominantly white and female, and thus many educators lack cultural awareness to support the increasingly diverse student population, as indicated by the achievement gap and disproportionate academic discipline rates. Studying abroad is one opportunity for pre-service teachers to expand their cultural awareness and likely influences how they will interact with their future students of varying backgrounds; however, it is not a highly sought-after opportunity amongst education majors despite its many benefits. This study explores how pre-service teachers' thinking about teaching is affected by their study abroad experiences. Seven students from a teacher preparatory program at a university in the Southeastern US participated in one of two focus groups to reflect on and discuss their study abroad experiences and teaching views. The focus groups provided a space for critical reflection and highlighted participants' development of intercultural competencies including open and respectful attitudes, cultural and academic knowledge, skills such as observing and evaluating, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, and overall self-awareness. Participants also created art pieces to explicitly connect their teaching views and study abroad experiences, providing a culminating multimodal reflection component to the focus group. The focus groups were transcribed, and qualitatively coded, and common themes were organized. These outcomes suggest that there are many instances of commonality between studies abroad and teaching including flexibility, reflection, and bias confrontation. This study demonstrates the importance of study abroad experiences with critical reflection components for pre-service teachers and how they influence culturally relevant teaching practices.

Beyond the Classroom: Examining Study Abroad's Role in Shaping Pre-service Teachers'

Thinking About Teaching

When I reflect on my study abroad in Copal AA, Guatemala, many images and experiences populate my mind. I see the view from my host family's home that overlooked the main road into the community with its luscious landscape of trees, the depleting levels of the river and heat waves dancing off the gravel roads due to the harsh realities of climate change, and the beautiful, contagious smiles of the indigenous Maya people despite their violent history as a returned refugee community. I hear the sound of various birds squawking and dogs barking, the rhythms of Spanish, Mam, Q'eqchi', and K'anjob'al as words were exchanged contrasted with the silence of my thoughts and inability to communicate. I taste the freshly made corn tortillas, cardamom ripe from the naturally fertilized, pesticide-free plant, and the cold Pepsi, a taste of home in the unfamiliar environment and sweltering heat.

I think about conversations that I had with students and teachers at the middle school which made me think about the education system in the US and how I will teach in the future. Learning from the middle school students and teachers in Copal AA, I was exposed to a way of teaching that I'm not used to, one that prioritizes education about environmentalism and their indigenous values through hands-on, experiential modes. This contrasts with the education system in the US, where it reflects our society's capitalist values through competition, standardization, and efficiency. We push the traditional reading and math subjects and rely on rote learning. I was able to have these conversations with the students and teachers in Copal AA through an interpreter where I otherwise would have been utterly lost and unable to communicate. That aspect of it made me reflect on how difficult it is to feel silenced; as a

teacher, I will have students whose first language is not English, and I now have experiences to empathize with them and will do better to support them.

This trip to Guatemala was packed full of new places, various languages, lovely people, moments of laughter, and moments of hardship and reflection. As I continue to reflect and find ways to put my experiences into words, some things hold true: this trip was very profound and unique. It has changed the way I think about and approach several things, and I would unquestionably do it all over again. As a pre-service teacher myself, this study abroad program was just one of three in which I have participated during my undergraduate studies. Each trip was remarkable and provided an intense learning experience, opening my eyes to other cultures, ideas, and people, and shaping my mindset.

Based on my experiences abroad, I became intrigued by how international experiences might shape future teachers' perspectives on teaching. Through qualitative analysis of focus groups centered around general teaching views, teaching diverse students, and studying abroad, I aimed to facilitate critical reflection for other pre-service teachers through discussion and art-making. Critical reflection is a challenging and ongoing process and one that I felt heavily while experiencing reverse culture shock after leaving Copal AA and entering a more urban, capitalist setting. Using art-making to engage in multimodal reflection gave participants in my study an opportunity to deepen their critical reflection and come to their own conclusions about how their study abroad experiences play a role in their teaching views, and it was also an opportunity to express themselves in a way that perhaps words couldn't get across as effectively. Studying abroad has been and continues to be incredibly valuable to me as a person and as a pre-service teacher, and the study detailed in this paper shows how other pre-service teachers feel similarly.

I created art in response to the same prompt that participants responded to in my research: When you think about your teaching career, what part(s) of your study abroad experience comes to mind? My piece below (Figure 1) represents how my experiences in Copal AA opened my eyes to a plethora of new perspectives and initiated critical reflection of my own culture, what it means to be a white, female US citizen, and how those lenses shape my work as a future teacher. My art also represents how, in the field of teaching, possessing this newfound cultural knowledge, respect for people who are different from me, and willingness to confront my personal inherent biases and assumptions will help me to be a more effective teacher for my future students who will inevitably come from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Figure 1

My art expresses the interaction of diverse perspectives on my study abroad and in a classroom.



It is widely agreed upon that there are many gains from studying abroad. With the increased globalization of our world, studying abroad is a direct pathway to discovering and connecting to different places around the globe. Study abroad programs, which involve college

students taking courses for credit in foreign countries, range in destination, focus, and duration of time. Research has consistently shown that students who study abroad exhibit growth in confidence, independence, problem-solving, flexibility, and academic performance (Lickteig, Rozell, & Peterson, 2019).

As people continue to study abroad and travel, both global and local communities are becoming increasingly globalized. This is reflected in the growing diversity of student populations across the United States which also holds true more specifically in the state of North Carolina, where 55.1% of students identify as students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Yet despite this student diversity, the educator workforce is largely white females. In 2017-2018, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 79% of public school teachers identified as white and non-Hispanic. This cultural and racial mismatch can lead to misunderstanding in the classroom, especially around student behavior. Data from North Carolina reveal that students of color are disproportionately disciplined compared with their White counterparts (Ford & Triplett, 2019). Furthermore, mathematics and reading achievement data reflect a consistent disparity in supporting white students vs. students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2020); this is generally referred to as the achievement gap. This trend in inequality in discipline rates and achievement has been prevailing over the past decades and remains unchanged across the United States.

In order for teachers to close the achievement gap and change the disproportionate discipline rates, they must create an inclusive learning environment for students to feel valued and supported. Before teachers can do this, they must first be aware of their personal cultural identity, as well as the inherent biases and prejudices that they bring with them into their classrooms (Gay, 2018). Culture includes a group of people's customs, languages, values, beliefs,

and achievements. One way for pre-service teachers to develop and deepen this cultural understanding of themselves and others is to engage in international study abroad programs. Study abroad programs provide pre-service teachers with exposure to diversity, and through that, they can develop intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence (ICC) is the ability to interact with others from different backgrounds (Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Deardorff & Jones, 2012). ICC can affect how teachers perceive diversity and likewise their teaching pedagogy. Teachers who have higher levels of ICC will be able to foster a greater cultural understanding and general acceptance of differences among their students. This definition of intercultural competence used in my study is of a Western context and varies to some degree in other places around the world (Deardorff, 2009). Throughout this study, in addition to intercultural competence, I draw on culturally responsive pedagogy as my theoretical framework (Gay, 2018). This theory aims to make schooling more effective for marginalized student populations. It is rooted in understanding student cultural diversity and communication styles, using culturally relevant curricula and connecting them to students' prior knowledge, and having high expectations for all students (Gay, 2018). Additionally, in my study, I use arts-based pedagogy theories to support my choices in art-making as a means of reflection. The use of arts-based inquiry can facilitate reflection in ways that oral and written communication cannot (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018). Through the inclusion of art-making in my research, participants had the opportunity to reflect on, make direct connections, and create meaning between their study abroad experience and future teaching careers in a multimodal way.

Studying abroad can be a way for pre-service teachers to interact with different people, acknowledge other perspectives, and check their own biases in order to more effectively serve

the diverse students in their future classrooms. The purpose of my study is to encourage pre-service teachers to reflect on their study abroad experiences and teaching philosophies to recognize patterns and connections between the two. This study uses Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence as a framework because it aligns nicely with the goals of culturally relevant teaching; however, the goal was not to measure and pinpoint participants' ICC because it is a dynamic, ongoing process. The following paper begins with a review of the current literature on study abroad's influence on pre-service teachers, followed by the methodology and results of my study, a discussion of the findings, and lastly, concluding remarks on the implications for the education and education abroad fields.

Literature Review

Study abroad experiences have become increasingly popular as unique opportunities for personal and professional growth. Support for global experiences in teacher education programs is moderately gaining, but there is still significant opportunity for more. Many pre-service teachers do not take advantage of study abroad opportunities, or can't fit them into their program. According to the Institute of International Education (2022), education majors are one of the lowest percentages of study abroad participants in the US; at its highest in 2000-2001, education majors represented only 4.4% of all US study abroad participants. That number was steady until 2013-2014 when it declined until it hit an all-time low of 1.9% in 2020-2021. Much of the existing literature suggests that pre-service teachers' identities are shifted by study abroad experiences, such as international student teaching or immersive teacher education experiences, to reflect teaching pedagogies that are more culturally sensitive and recognize the collective aspect of teaching (Akpınar & Unaldi, 2014; Barrow, 2023; Northcote et al., 2014; Rodriguez,

2011). Additionally, there is growing support for teacher education programs to incorporate multiculturalism into their curriculum, but course content alone does not sufficiently equip teachers to be culturally responsive (Barrow, 2023; Northcote et al., 2014). The participants in my study did not engage in study abroad programs with specific teacher-education focuses; however, they still experienced personal and professional growth.

While study abroad experiences themselves are powerful, other lasting benefits come from reflection on those experiences. Post-trip reflection is key to developing cultural understanding, different perspectives, and new meaning; these reflections are also what shows their implications on teaching practices (Akpınar & Unaldi, 2014; Arthur et al., 2020; Barrow, 2023; Acquah & Commins, 2015). This is an unfortunate missed opportunity because time for post-trip reflection is often not provided nor encouraged by study abroad programs (Arthur et al., 2020). This is reflected in my study as only four of the seven participants engaged in reflection as part of their study abroad program's requirements.

The benefits that come from studying abroad mentioned earlier, can transfer into culturally responsive teaching practices for pre-service teachers who participate. Culturally responsive teaching, also referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy, makes learning more effective both socially and academically for students of diverse backgrounds (Howard, 2003) and places emphasis on teacher knowledge and appreciation of cultural diversity, culturally relevant curricula, and high expectations for all students (Gay, 2018). This theory was first posited by Geneva Gay in 2000 and it, along with other similar asset-based theories, stems from Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy that came about in the early 1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Even having empathy and establishing meaningful relationships with students of diverse backgrounds can make a difference in student learning (Warren, 2013).

Enacting culturally responsive teaching requires critical reflection (Howard, 2003), just as study abroad programs do. Thus, study abroad programs are a time for pre-service teachers to critically reflect on their experiences, strengthen their intercultural competence, and develop the potential to implement culturally responsive teaching practices in their future classrooms.

ICC affects teachers' attitudes in their classroom and is one of the most common lenses through which to assess study abroad experiences, yet there are also controversies within the topic. As cited by Akpinar and Unaldi (2014), Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) define ICC as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 1157); Ruben (1976), claims ICC is the "ability to function in a manner that is perceived to be relatively consistent with the needs, capacities, goals, and expectations of the individuals in one's environment while satisfying one's own needs, capacities, goals, and expectations" (p. 1157); and still Byram (1997) and Bennett (1993) similarly define ICC as an understanding and relating, or sensitivity, to people from other countries or people of different cultural backgrounds (p.1157). Although there are differentiations between researchers' definitions of ICC, it is largely agreed upon that ICC involves one's ability to interact with people who have different cultural backgrounds than themselves. This is relevant for educators because their students will have different cultural backgrounds.

This study adopts Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence which posits a gradual move from personal to interpersonal levels beginning with attitudes followed by knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and lastly external outcomes, each component building off of the previous. Attitude is the respect, openness, and curiosity that shows you value people who are different from you and helps you to step outside your comfort zone. Knowledge means

understanding the world from other people's perspectives including cultural self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, deep cultural understanding, and sociolinguistic awareness. Skills such as observing, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating, among others, help you process and understand knowledge. Internal outcomes consist of flexibility, or using appropriate communication styles and behaviors, adaptability, or adjusting to different communication styles and behaviors, empathy, and ethnorelativity; each of these allows you to see others' perspectives and respond accordingly. The overarching goal, or external outcomes of ICC is to be able to communicate and interact with people from other cultures effectively and appropriately (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). The ability to communicate and behave with diverse cultures extends to pre-service teachers' teaching future students of diverse backgrounds.

Methodology

Research Participants and Context

Seven students volunteered to participate in this study examining the role of study abroad on pre-service teachers' thinking about teaching. Of the seven, five are currently enrolled in the undergraduate teacher preparatory program at a comprehensive university in the Southeastern US while the other two are on track to be admitted into the program. With these students being at various points in the program, they have had varying levels of experience in a classroom, ranging from Sophomores with little to no time in field placements to Seniors completing their second and third field placements. This affects the development of students' teaching philosophies and knowledge of classroom procedures and student learning. Five participants are female elementary education majors and two participants are male secondary social studies education majors; all identify as white, except one who identifies as Hispanic. All participants participated

in a study abroad through the university within the past two years; three students spent a semester abroad in European countries, three students participated in the same short-term faculty-led program in Central America, and one student participated in a high school exchange program and a faculty-led program through the university, both in Europe. None of the study abroad programs that participants participated in had a specific teacher-education focus. Most participants had had previous international travel experience. Participants with previous travel experience have the potential advantage of having progressed further in their intercultural competence at the beginning time of their study abroad experience. To protect participants' anonymity, participants have been given pseudonyms and location names have been changed.

Data Collection

In order to recruit participants, I sent out a brief survey to elementary education students who had completed the Learner Diversity course since Fall 2021 and study abroad alumni who were affiliated with the College of Education to gather interest and preliminary logistical information on their study abroad experience. From this original survey, 14 students responded, and of those, seven students agreed to participate in a focus group reflection. Focus groups are an effective way of gathering qualitative data and initiating reflection amongst a group of people (Akpinar & Unaldi, 2014; Barrow, 2023; Deardorff, 2006; Savicki & Brewer, 2015). Two focus groups were held, each lasting approximately three hours; the first took place on May 9, 2023, with Maria and Eric; the second took place on August 29, 2023, with Emma, Mia, Addie, Eleanor, and Daniel. Before the focus group, participants filled out a pre-focus group survey (see Appendix A) that gathered information about their study abroad experience: length and location of the program, previous travel experience, training before their program, reflection components, language components, living situation while abroad, initial arrival feelings, cross-cultural

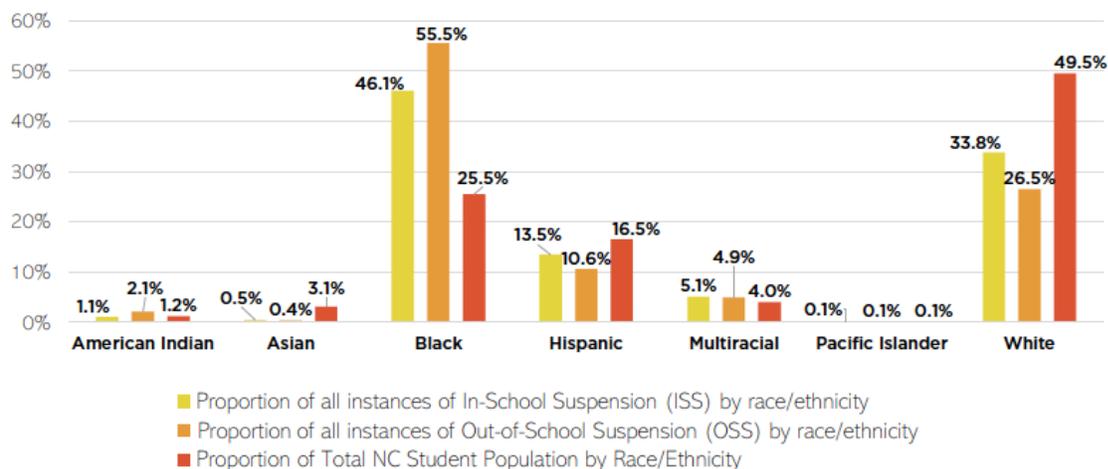
comparisons, and transformational learning experiences (Barrow, 2023). This data was analyzed alongside the focus group data to help understand participants' intercultural competence.

Participants were asked to submit a photo from their study abroad experience to a Padlet that captured a moment that taught them more about themselves than anything else. These photos were shared at the beginning of the focus group as part of the introductions. The discussion in the focus groups centered around three pillars: general teaching views, teaching diverse students, and studying abroad. To gauge participants' teaching perspectives, participants responded to these prompts: 1) Tell us why you want to become a teacher. What appeals to you about teaching?; 2) Describe what you anticipate being one of your biggest challenges as a teacher. Why?

Participants were then handed the following datasets displayed in Figures 2-4 and asked to make sense of them. Figure 2 shows suspension rates by race/ethnicity while Figures 3 and 4 show reading and mathematics achievement scores by race/ethnicity, respectively. By having participants respond to this data in an open-ended format, it elicited their opinions, initial reactions, emotions, and personal stories on these prevalent issues in education, giving insight into how they respond to racial discrepancies and potentially interact with diverse students. These responses were later analyzed for the biases, or lack of biases, that surfaced. Most participants were apt to discuss these issues of race, displaying open minds and a willingness to check their own biases. These datasets demonstrate the ways structural racism moves through public institutions like schools, as is evident in the disproportionate numbers of Black students cited for disciplinary action compared to their White counterparts. Additionally, the decades-long achievement gap between White, Black, and Hispanic students indicates how these constructs shape learning for students in critical ways (Ford & Triplett, 2019).

Figure 2

Proportion of All Incidences Resulting in Suspension by Race/Ethnicity

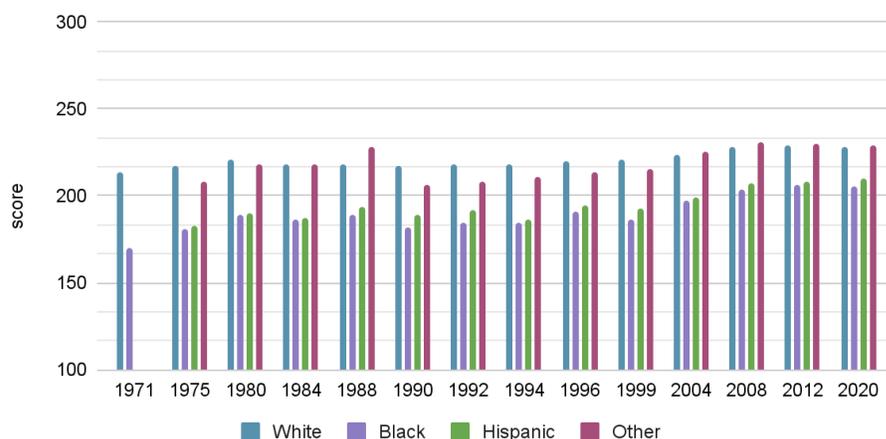


Note: Graph from 2016-17 NC discipline data reported by districts to NCDPI (Ford & Triplett, 2019).

Figure 3

Trend in NAEP reading achievement scores for 9 year old students by race/ethnicity

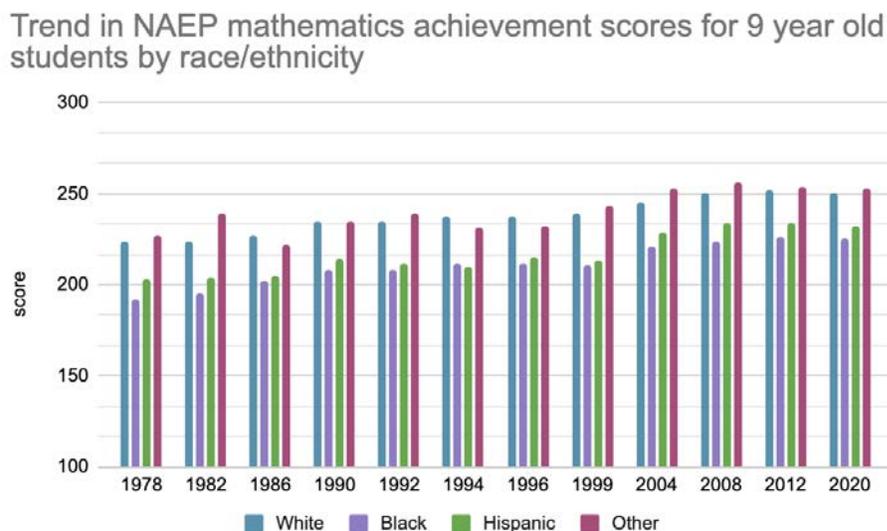
Trend in NAEP reading achievement scores for 9 year old students by race/ethnicity



Note: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1971–2020 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessments. Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, and “Other” includes Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and unclassified (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Figure 4

Trend in NAEP mathematics achievement scores for 9 year old students by race/ethnicity



Note: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1978–2020 Long-Term Trend Mathematics Assessments. Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, and “Other” includes Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and unclassified (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Lastly, the focus group discussion moved to study abroad experiences. I posed these questions: 1) Why did you want to study abroad?; 2) Tell us about your expectations going into your study abroad experience; 3) Describe your most challenging experience or a moment that really challenged your thinking during your time abroad; and 4) Write down as many words as you can that describe how you felt and what you experienced while studying abroad in one minute. Based on the words you generated and your responses to the previous questions, what was the biggest takeaway from your study abroad experience? Through these questions, participants displayed their attitudes, knowledge, and skills which then evoked internal outcomes of intercultural competence (Deardorff & Jones, 2012).

Focus group questions were devised based on the cross-cultural reflection model (CCR) (Dressler et al., 2018) which suggests elements for successful post-sojourn reflection. I

incorporated elements to support describing significant experiences, reflecting on the feelings and values associated with those experiences, and making meaning and understanding the significance of those experiences. Each of the questions asked throughout the focus groups aimed to facilitate participants' reflection in order to surface potential biases and help participants recognize the connections between their personal study abroad experiences and their professional actions in teaching future diverse students (Dressler et al., 2018).

To conclude the focus group, our discussions culminated in an art-making activity responding to this prompt: When you think about your teaching career, what part(s) of your study abroad experience comes to mind? Participants had 30 minutes to create something using the materials provided—watercolor, acrylic paint, magazines, colored pencils, and crayons—and 30 minutes to share their art. Here, participants had the opportunity to explicitly think about how their study abroad experiences will shape their teaching practices. Art is a multimedia mode of expression that can foster reflection in ways that traditional modes of communication cannot (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018). Expressing oneself through art requires taking multiple perspectives, and being observant, which are both aspects of intercultural competence and culturally responsive teaching.

Data Analysis Process

Data analysis was conducted in several steps. Each focus group session was recorded and later transcribed. Using the transcripts, I manually coded both inductively from the data itself and deductively from the existing literature around intercultural competencies (Saldaña, 2021). The components of Deardorff's intercultural competence model (2006), like attitudes and flexibility, for example, were useful in deductive coding. Each transcript was read several times and new codes were added. After coding the transcripts, I transferred the recurring themes into a data

assertions table (Figure 5) organized by the findings where I compiled common codes. This data assertions table allowed me to look across participants' responses to identify salient themes related to the ICC model. Themes were identified in memos which I then analyzed alongside the existing research. In this paper, I organized the data collected in the focus groups in terms of Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence framework and articulated the findings with the most prevailing presence. I separately analyzed participants' artwork in conjunction with the intercultural competence findings from the focus groups.

Figure 5

Data Assertions Table Excerpt

<p>Diversity, Student Learning</p>	<p>Inherent biases affect teaching. Being aware of your own biases (sometimes ignited by study abroad), can help teachers better connect/support students.</p>	<p>[A] "I don't know the ins and outs of discipline. That's something I need to learn more about. But for my idea, um, it's, I think of out of school suspension as worse. And I think of in school suspension as like a one day thing, You go and you spend time with whoever is leading your in school suspension, and then you go back to the classroom the next day after doing your work in that like, contained environment. Out school suspension, I think of, as you're like, it gives the perception of you're so bad, We can't have you in our building, You need to go home and figure it out and then come back, um. And I just think that's really interesting that you see that reflected in the data of black students getting more out of school suspension. I would have, I guess this is my own bias, and just what I thought was reflected in the school systems. I would have thought that the percentages for the Hispanic population of students would have been a bit higher." - Student B echoed these thoughts. (pg.11)</p> <p>[B] "I was in [REDACTED] this semester, and a lot of our conversations about equity always returned back to inherent bias and there were students in that classroom that, like, reflected on their inherent biases. And then there were students in my class who really struggled to um, get over the hurdle of their biases. And I'm thinking about how that's gonna play out in the classroom, and it genuinely worries me that some of these people are gonna be teachers if they can't, UM, and I have hope, right? But like, if they can't reflect their biases and, like, acknowledge them, overcome them, um, and do best practices for their students, then, um, then they're only going to contribute to their self-fulfilling prophecies. And I think people think, oh, like, it's a bad thing to like, stereotype somebody, but unless you acknowledge what that stereotype is, you're not going to be able to overcome it." (pg.17)</p> <p>[A] "I thought that Hispanic students made up a lot larger portion of our student body. UM, so that was, I guess, surprising. And I thought that they would be reflected more in incidences, kind of similar to black students, because there is that stereotype. But that could also just be the area that I've grown up in, I see that reflected, unfortunately." (pg.11)</p>	<p>Focus Group 1 & 2</p> <p>- teacher cultural competence leads to more awareness of discrimination - "best predictors of suspension were not numbers of misbehaviors but rather teacher referrals, school characteristics, academic bias, racial inequalities, and teacher disinterest." (pg.309) Cushner, K., & Mahon, J. (2009). Intercultural competence in teacher education: Developing the intercultural competence of educators and their students. In D. Deardorff (Ed.), <i>The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence</i> (pp. 304-320). Sage.</p> <p>- ICC knowledge: cultural self-awareness Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. <i>Journal of Studies in International Education</i>, 10(3), 241-266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002</p>
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Note: This section of the data assertions table shows, from left to right, one of the themes, statements of finding, data excerpts, source, and literature connections in my data analysis.

Results

In this study, I aimed to investigate how study abroad experiences shaped pre-service teachers' perspectives on teaching. Being immersed in a new culture, like during a study abroad experience, provides individuals with an opportunity to interact with, communicate with, learn about, and learn from a different culture(s). In accordance with the foundational literature on intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Deardorff & Jones, 2012), participant responses contributed to five main findings. Immersing themselves in a different culture provided participants with exposure to diversity and new perspectives to build their intercultural competence in terms of attitude, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and self-awareness. Each finding is described below with evidence from the focus groups.

Attitude

When traveling to and living in different countries, participants expressed curiosity, open minds, and respect for varying lifestyles and cultures, each of which provides a foundation for intercultural competence. There's a certain amount of curiosity that accompanies signing up for a study abroad program. Participants claimed they wanted to study abroad "for the experience" as one participant put it. Other participants cited the experience of learning a new language, learning the history of new places, traveling in an immersive context, and stepping outside of their comfort zones as important elements that impacted their attitudes and outlook. As Eleanor stated, "I just love traveling, love being a part of different cultures and seeing how different people live." Many participants also mentioned hearing about others' experiences abroad which then sparked their own interest in the endeavor.

Furthermore, open-mindedness and respect go hand in hand and are vital aspects of attitude and intercultural competence. For the most part, participants in my focus groups demonstrated open and respectful outlooks when reflecting on their study abroad experiences

which showed value for people and places that are different from themselves. In order to truly immerse themselves in a new culture, participants talked about being open to new ideas, new languages, new schedules, new foods, and ultimately new ways of life. Addie constantly reminded herself during her study abroad that the locals were just other people, not necessarily better or worse than her, helping her to maintain an open mind. Many participants talked of language barriers and how that was a struggle, but in the end they figured out new ways to express themselves. Participants also talked about trying new foods that were common in their host cultures, although some were more averse to this than others. Emma claims her main goal of studying abroad was to feel what it's like to "not know" something, so she went in with a very open mind. Based on this evidence, participants' open minds and respect for their host cultures set them up for appropriate attitudes and thus stronger intercultural competence down the line.

However, despite this overarching openness and respect, some participants' responses seemed shadowed by their biases and were more close-minded. For example, Mia commented that "there's just other parts of the world that aren't as great as the United States" which reflected more of a deficit mindset. Another participant, Eleanor, reported that "they wouldn't let us lounge in class at all" with frustration, showing reluctance to be open to cultural differences when they clashed with familiar ways of doing things.

All of these aspects of attitude—curiosity, openness, and respect—are necessary building blocks for the following intercultural competence components.

Knowledge

The knowledge component of intercultural competence comprises cultural self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, deep cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). Several of these factors were evident in my focus groups.

Participants learned about the place to which they traveled through different coursework and living with host families. Maria said, “I lived with [locals] and got to experience lots of their culture. During Feria, a big celebration in April, I got to go into one of the tents which are private and you can only enter if you know people.” Eleanor, who also studied in Western Europe for a semester, said, “Since my program was an international program for students from all countries, I frequently befriended and socialized with students from all over the world.” Daniel enjoyed being in a big city because “there were so many different cultures there, so that was cool” and he was able to “just travel and learn and soak it all in,” but he did not elaborate past that. Through these cultural interactions, participants were exposed to different world views and perspectives, widening their knowledge of the world.

Participants also learned from diversity; as Eric stated:

I lived in [a Western European city], which was a very diverse place. And I didn't learn just about Swiss people, I learned about the Portuguese. I learned about Africans and Indians and things around the world that I had no idea that were going on until I was in the same town where the United Nations was. (Focus Group, 05/09/2023)

Addie found interest in how the people in the community where she studied abroad “had strong political opinions that were centered around the earth” which contrasts that of the US.

Participants also called on how they were exposed to differing educational styles during their study abroad experience, broadening their perspectives about teaching more specifically. For instance, the Central American middle school that Addie, Mia, and Emma visited focused on educating students about their Maya heritage and environmental activism through modes of theater and art. This was a new way of thinking about the role of school for them. For Maria in Western Europe, her elementary school-aged host siblings were learning the French and English

languages and studying for tests, which Maria claimed was not what you would see in a general classroom in the US. Eric talked of the classroom setting as a high school exchange student in Western Europe, stating:

Being a high school student in [Europe] was very eye-opening to me because I had always understood that [it] has the best, one of the best education systems in the world and so when I went [there], I was really confused [...] it was very much you sit down and you take notes the entire time. And the teachers were not very good at classroom management. And this is a cultural difference. They really didn't relate or make any efforts to relate to the students. And again, a cultural difference, so I don't really fault them for that. And there was definitely more of a hierarchy between teacher and student.

(Focus Group, 05/09/2023)

This evidence shows that the participants were introduced to divergent perspectives, helping to broaden their own horizons and world knowledge. This quotation also demonstrates awareness of and respectful attitudes toward cultural differences.

Additionally, studying abroad provided participants with opportunities to grow in their academics and increase their knowledge of language and communication skills. Participants expressed different levels of language barriers and confidence in their host country's languages. Maria, Eric, and Eleanor were the only ones in my focus groups who had previous background in their host country's primary language. Maria said, "I spoke my second language every day and was able to form relationships using that language. My confidence with my Spanish no doubt grew immensely." She noted that this was an environment that couldn't have been recreated in the US. Eric similarly added that living abroad allowed him to practice and build his proficiency in French. Even knowing the language, participants encountered situations where they struggled

to communicate effectively; when this happened to Eleanor, she remembered the stress that came with working through “all the different ways I knew how to say those words to find a way to communicate” and found it difficult to speak in Spanish full time.

On the other end of the spectrum, even participants who didn’t know any of the host country’s languages were able to learn and grow in their communication skills. As Addie commented:

I definitely was completely out of my element Spanish-wise, like speaking Spanish. But I think by the end of the trip, I was picking it up more than I expected. I definitely couldn't talk in depth about much of anything, but reading conversations I could easily follow, even if I couldn't speak back. (Focus Group, 08/29/2023)

Participants who didn’t know the dominant language remarked how not being able to communicate was incredibly challenging, and even if they picked up some words along the way, it wasn’t an effective form of expressing their thoughts and emotions. Daniel confessed that because he didn’t speak the same language as his host family, it “felt like living in a stranger’s house” and he was never able to form an authentic relationship. He had to learn to be patient with himself when it came to his attempts at speaking Spanish and appreciated it when locals showed him patience as well. Because of these language barriers, participants saw the vitality of language in communicating thoughts, feelings, and emotions and the role it has in connecting with others.

Skills

To successfully acquire and process knowledge of other cultures, there are many skills involved. These skills, such as observing, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating, had strong evidence throughout the focus groups. Participants didn’t necessarily

explicitly name these skills, but it was evident that these skills were constantly in action throughout their study abroad experiences based on the knowledge they learned and reflected on. Participation in this research also helped participants enact some of these skills during their reflection to make more meaning from their experiences.

Most participants developed many of these skills through making cross-cultural comparisons as participants compared their host culture with their home culture. Participants noticed differences in schedules and timeliness, so Maria, Eleanor, and Daniel had 2-hour siestas and ate dinner much later than they're used to while in Western Europe, and Emma, Mia, and Addie operated on a more relaxed schedule with less urgency and penalty for being late in Central America. Types of food were also contrasted to those of the US. Participants evaluated cultural values in comparison to their home culture as well. In Central America, Emma, Mia, and Addie commented on the greater sense of community and the sense of urgency to care for the environment, and this was gathered from participating in community meetings and listening to host families' stories of their lives. Maria said interacting with diverse people, locals or otherwise, "was an experience like no other" because she always learned something new about people.

Participants also developed skills by interacting with the locals in their host country, sometimes living with host families, and they listened to what they had to say and observed their actions to learn what the "norm" was in that new place. Being able to communicate with people in the host culture, helped participants to learn from the locals due to greater conversational ability (Eric, Focus Group, 05/09/2023). In Eleanor's experience, even though she could communicate with people in her host country, she learned that Spaniards are racist against Latin Americans and she discovered this through her dialect. When Spaniards would give her judgy

looks and tell her her Spanish was “wrong”, she had to analyze what was happening until she figured out it was the small language differences that made them discriminate against her. Skills such as observing, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating, built upon participants’ attitudes and knowledge and helped them grow in the internal qualities described below.

Figure 6

Maria’s art captures cross-cultural comparisons and communication development



Note: Through homework help sessions with her host siblings, Maria learned about schooling differences between the US and Western Europe. This piece also represents expanding her verbal and written communication skills while abroad.

Internal Outcomes

Participants built upon their attitudes, knowledge, and skills to express flexibility, adaptability, and empathy which showed that they can not only see others’ perspectives but respond accordingly, too. These components occur within a person and are therefore classified as internal outcomes.

Flexibility and Adaptability

Studying abroad allowed participants to learn and practice flexibility and adaptability in new, unpredictable situations. Deardorff and Jones (2012) distinguish adaptability as the adjustment to different communication styles, behaviors, and new cultural environments while flexibility refers to the willingness and actual selection and use of appropriate communication styles and behaviors. Arguably, almost everything is new and unfamiliar at the start of a study abroad program. From adjusting to travel cancellations and delays to living with host families to speaking new languages, and more, every participant engaged in adaptability during their study abroad. Eric, for instance, adapted to living with a Swiss-German host family during his exchange program and was so willing to conform to their cultural norms and please his host family that he was blind to the toxicity of the situation, and after months of living with them realized he needed to remove himself from that toxic environment and subsequently had to be flexible and problem-solve out of his original host family, re-adapt with a new family, and then re-adapt again when returning home to the US. On a similar note, dealing with anxiety about unfamiliar situations was a frequently mentioned challenge for participants. Maria said while she was abroad:

I got homesick and was trying to navigate being in a new city and having to use my Spanish all the time. I would always get really anxious in the morning and figuring out how a new country and university works is overwhelming but with time I figured it out.

(Focus Group, 05/09/2023)

It is this action outside of participants' comfort zones and normalities that brought about growth in their flexibility and adaptability. Addie provided another example of adaptability when recounting a moment of calm in all the newness:

I just remember that day, there were a lot of intense emotions going on with just being completely out of my element [...] And then physically, the heat was incredibly intense. And there was not really any way to cool down, other than walking to a river. And so I think this moment was just a nice calm moment that I hadn't had in many days. [...] And then physically, I was feeling better, and emotionally, I was feeling better and settled.

(Focus Group, 08/29/2023)

This coping mechanism relates to how several participants described their reverse culture shock experience when returning to the US. Taking a step back and absorbing everything going on around them helped participants adjust to the situations and environments at hand.

Figure 7

Addie's art piece illustrates a "calm moment" during her study abroad where she often reflected



Participants' expectations going into their study abroad programs also affected their adaptability and flexibility. For example, Mia “thought it was going to be easy” living in Central America for 10 days. Quickly after arriving in the country, she described how those expectations

were immediately changed and therefore she had to reevaluate her expectations and be flexible to survive during her time abroad. This shows that flexibility helped participants adjust their expectations regardless of whether those expectations were met or not.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, participants were exposed to several teaching styles during their study abroad program's courses. Participants adapted to the educational norm of the dominant culture. Classes were different than what they were used to in the US; some participants experienced less homework and more class time while others witnessed varying levels of classroom management and curriculum organization. While all participants proved their adaptability in these educational settings, one participant expressed low flexibility, or willingness to adapt to the dominant culture. Eleanor claimed her university professors in her program were very strict about formality in class and would yell at students if they were lounging around or if they weren't speaking Spanish and she wished they were more lenient and understanding of differing cultures.

Participants conversed directly about flexibility and adaptability in teaching as well. Learning is incredibly complex and a variety of factors are in play, many of which are out of teachers' control so it is important to be flexible. Participants also commented on how students' home lives and cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and language, for example, are all diverse aspects of classrooms and teachers have to accommodate these to make an inclusive and successful learning environment. In terms of daily lesson planning and schedules, too, you have to be ready to "roll with the punches" (Maria, Focus Group, 05/09/2023) because you will be faced with different conditions every day and you can't always accurately predict what will happen in your classroom (Eric, Focus Group, 05/09/2023).

Empathy

Throughout the focus groups, participants demonstrated empathy in relation to each other's experiences. Some examples in which participants related to each other included food experiences, stressful travel situations, similar emotions and attitudes towards studying abroad, and interactions with diverse nationalities of people.

Throughout participants' study abroad programs, they gained many experiences, especially those related to teaching, learning, or diversity, that will help them build empathy with their future students because they have now experienced it for themselves. Emma explicitly recalled, "I wanted to know what it kind of feels like to not know. So, that's why I did it. I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone so I had, maybe not full perspective, but something more than what I already had" in terms of gaining a better understanding of what it feels like to be an English language learner in the United States. Her study abroad experiences gave her first-hand experience of language barriers and how difficult it can be to learn a new language and adjust to new environments simultaneously. On a related note, Eleanor experienced her professors' pressure for her to assimilate and adapt to their culture, the dominant culture, instead of accepting the cultural differences that she brought to the classroom. Moreover, Eleanor also experienced language discrimination during her study abroad. She grew up speaking Latin American Spanish, and when she attended her classes in Spain, people told her her Spanish was "wrong" when it was slightly different from the Castilian Spanish spoken in Spain. In addition, participants confronted stereotypes during their study abroad and acknowledged their oftentimes detrimental presence in the classroom. Knowing this, and having personal experiences with stereotypes during their studies abroad, may contribute to participants' capacity to see this in their classroom.

Self-Awareness

Studying abroad allowed participants to learn about themselves—their identity, values, and biases—and develop self-confidence. This is an indispensable finding that is extensively supported by the data. Eric talked about how his growth exceeded just aspects of cultural knowledge and language skills. “I also grew tremendously emotionally and as a person;” Maria echoed this conclusion in her recounting of an experience navigating the local bus system:

I was walking to the train station in Florence, I was actually going to meet [a friend] in Paris eventually. And I was like, oh, I'm gonna look at my ticket, just like, triple-check that my train is at this time. And I'm so glad I did because then I realized that my train left in five minutes, and I had 15 minutes until I got to the station. So I was like, oh, that's not going to happen. So I got to the station, walking really, really fast. I went to the platform. I was like, hey, did the Rome train leave yet? And they're like, you mean the one that supposedly 10 min ago? Yeah it did. So then I had to figure out how to get to Rome still because I had a flight to catch. But the next train to Rome wasn't until 09:00 p.m. So then I had to change my flight, change my train. The way it worked out, my next flight was at 07:00 a.m. the next day. So I made it to Rome and made it to the airport, but then I was like, well, I'm not gonna get a hotel room, because I'm gonna be back at the airport in four hours, so I slept on the floor. And that was an experience, but I made it to Paris.

This taught Maria about herself in that she can act sensibly under pressure. Many participants made cross-cultural comparisons, which required awareness of their own culture and the new one they were living in. Participants discovered that when displaced from their home culture, they became more aware of cultural differences that may have originally been “ordinary”

tasks to them. For example, Daniel learned that Spanish culture had a more relaxed view of timeliness than he was accustomed to. For example, he recalled a conversation he had with one of his professors about the siesta, a two-hour lunch and rest period in the middle of the day. This caused dinner to be eaten significantly later, too, which was initially difficult for Daniel to adjust to. Emma found comfort in some of the cultural similarities, such as hospitality and familial values, amid the cultural differences in her study abroad.

Figure 8

Emma's artwork depicts self-awareness



Note: This art shows the walk from Emma's host family's house into the village that she walked daily during her study abroad program. This emphasizes the community and routine aspects of her study abroad that she wants to incorporate into her own culture and her future classroom.

A robust topic of conversation during the focus groups centered around stereotypes and biases, which participants confronted during their study abroad experiences. Many types of biases were discussed including racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious. The first focus group talked more about stereotypes while the second focus group focused more on biases, but both were acknowledged by all participants. Maria and Eric had experiences where stereotypes

were upheld and debunked by groups of people. Eric lived with Swiss Germans who seemed to him as cold and work-oriented like the common stereotype, but the Francophones he interacted with were not as arrogant and pretentious as their stereotype. Similarly, Maria recounted a conversation she had with a French person in Spain about the same French stereotypes:

He 100% debunked that for me because he was the most social, willing to put himself out there person [...] And I thought it was also cool because I saw how [my friend] and I were breaking some of his stereotypes about Americans. And he was like, you guys are really polite, and I wasn't expecting you to be so polite. (Focus Group, 05/09/2023)

Interactions like these allowed participants to rethink their biases against other people.

Participants further discussed how stereotypes can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies which is why self-awareness is so important. Emma stated, “typically people are going to believe what is told to them about themselves” whether the stereotype is positive or negative. Participants voiced how facing biases is uncomfortable and difficult, but also incredibly necessary and an ongoing process. Because of biases, participants wrestled with the difficulty of recognizing cultural differences as only differences and not something to look down upon or put on a pedestal. Eleanor compared American and Hispanic cultures in that in the US, we have a materialistic culture and we live to work, whereas many Hispanic cultures work to live and enjoy simpler things in life.

Stereotypes and biases also play a role in education settings. As Eric said:

If [pre-service teachers] can't reflect on their biases and acknowledge them, overcome them, and do best practices for their students, then they're only going to contribute to their self-fulfilling prophecies. And I think people think, oh, it's a bad thing to stereotype

somebody, but unless you acknowledge what that stereotype is, you're not going to be able to overcome it. (Focus Group, 05/09/2023)

Addie likewise expressed the importance of educators' awareness of bias because they could be unknowingly passing it on to their students. Understanding people's backgrounds more before jumping to conclusions is what Mia thought would help her confront her own biases. Maria also claimed:

I've had much less experience with black students, and I notice that lack of exposure will lead me to lean more towards those stereotypes, and that's something I have to work on, is exposing myself to all types of students, because it's important that I don't move away from a group that I might feel more uncomfortable around because I don't have that experience with that group. (Focus Group, 05/09/2023)

Socioeconomic status and racial bias were frequently mentioned aspects of diversity in schools, especially concerning discipline and achievement. As participants discussed, oftentimes cultural background and socioeconomic status correlate. For example, they claimed families of color are more likely to be in a lower socioeconomic bracket, so they have fewer resources to support their students' education in extra ways like hiring tutors. Because of this, these families usually live in similar neighborhoods that are all zoned for schools that reflect their socioeconomic status and are underfunded, lacking the resources to help narrow the achievement gap. Participants further iterated that teachers have the power to interrupt the self-fulfilling prophecy tracks, show students their potential and worth, and teach students about different stereotypes and biases as not to perpetuate them. To repeat, self-awareness gained during study abroad experiences allowed participants to check their attitudes and biases and further reflect on those in terms of their intended teaching careers.

The process of reflection is often where people learn from their actions and experiences, and many students participated in some manner of reflection during their study abroad to contribute to their overall self-awareness. Only four participants' experiences, three of which were from the same study abroad, required reflection as part of the program. These participants seemed to have drawn more meaningful conclusions from their experiences prior to the focus group. Mia explained she particularly liked the group reflection discussions during her study abroad:

I was confused about some things and being able to talk to people who saw the same things as me was nice because they knew what I was dealing with. [...] I loved getting different perspectives from people and I liked thinking about things that maybe I did not think about. (Focus Group, 08/29/2023)

All but two participants engaged in journaling of some kind during their study abroad experience to help them process their experiences and build self-awareness and the two who did not shared regrets of not writing their thoughts down in the moment.

Multimodal Expressions

The latter section of the focus groups consisted of time for participants to think about the relation between their study abroad experiences and teaching by responding to the following prompt in a creative format: When you think about your teaching career, what parts of your study abroad experience come to mind? Participants were given a white piece of paper and materials including watercolor, acrylic paint, magazines, colored pencils, and crayons to create something in 30 minutes. Art was used as a multimodal method of critical reflection and allowed participants to express their experiences in ways that perhaps words could not. In the following

section, I have analyzed the artistic products. All participants' artwork can be found in Appendix B.

Several intercultural competencies evident in the artwork amplify the earlier discussed results. Many participants' pieces illustrated the knowledge they gained about the culture in which they were immersed and connected it to teaching because they learned of new education styles or wanted to use that knowledge to bring a global perspective into their future classroom. The most common intercultural competency displayed in participants' artwork and explanations was self-awareness. Many of the participants' pieces illustrated how they developed self-awareness and emphasized the importance of being aware of culture's role in the classroom setting, similar to how they had to be aware of culture during their study abroad experiences. Daniel's piece (Figure 9), represents how different cultures, the collage cutouts, interacted during his time abroad, the blend of paint in the background; he related this to teaching because his classroom will have different people whom he will have to cater towards. Being able to do so successfully will require him to be aware of himself and his students.

Eleanor's creation was another example of intercultural competency development through her study abroad experience. Her collage (Figure 10) shows different types of diversity to communicate that she wants to be accepting of all cultures in her future classroom to create an inclusive environment. During her study abroad program, she experienced what it was like to not be accepted by another culture and implied that having this experience will help her to build empathy with her future students and keep an open, respectful attitude towards them.

Figure 9

Daniel's art expresses diverse cultures interacting with each other



Figure 10

Eleanor's art captures her desire to be accepting of all of her future students



While the art supports the previously discussed results, it also sheds light on other results. Creating art strengthened participants' reflections by allowing participants to explicitly connect their study abroad experiences to their future career path. For example, Eric's creative piece (Figure 11) took the form of a tree which is symbolic of his growth that related to his study abroad and his views on teaching. The roots of the tree represent factors that supported his growth in his study abroad and what supported growth in the classroom, such as community, parents, relationships, equity, and social and emotional skills, which he claimed were especially critical for his experience. The trunk portrays factors that led to growth such as guidance, self-esteem, and opportunity. Eric explained that the distribution of opportunity affects who can study abroad and the resources students have access to for learning. Lastly, the leaves of the tree depict the individual and community end goals of growth including personality, identity, learning, language, diversity, culture, exchange, and understanding. Eric described that the exchange of these growth end goals occurred to him during his study abroad and they also occur in classroom settings; and, ultimately, the understanding of culture and the exchange of ideas is how it all came together. In order to produce this beautiful art, he had to reflect on and evaluate his study abroad experiences first alone and then in terms of teaching.

Figure 11

Eric's art uses a tree as a symbol of different aspects of growth



Discussion and Implications

Research indicates study abroad opportunities as a major component for fostering internationalization and cultural understanding for pre-service teachers (Arthur et al., 2020; Barrow, 2023; Northcote et al., 2014; Rodriguez, 2011). Although the participants in my research did not participate in teacher education-focused study abroad programs, they were still able to

have many learning experiences that can be beneficial for their future education careers. During the conversations in each of the focus groups, many connections emerged between aspects of studying abroad and aspects of pre-service teachers' thinking about teaching. These connections centered around three major themes: flexibility, reflection, and bias confrontation.

In study abroad and teaching experiences, travelers and teachers alike are faced with unpredictable situations that require flexibility, adaptability, and quick thinking. As described above in the results, participants mentioned several instances, especially related to travel, in which they had to act on their feet and go with the flow during their study abroad (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017). In teaching, educators must be flexible in many situations throughout the day in their classroom and it is vital that they adapt the learning environment to individual students' needs. The most effective teaching occurs when educators meet students at their ability level to help them learn, despite any extra elements. Learning is a complex process, and several factors are out of teachers' control, yet they still have to adapt. By taking part in a study abroad program, participants in my focus groups practiced and developed their flexibility which they can later apply to their teaching to respond to students' needs accordingly no matter the circumstances.

Another key connection between study abroad experiences and teaching is engaging in the process of critical reflection. Partaking in these focus groups was exactly that: an opportunity for participants to create meaning from their study abroad experience and their thoughts about teaching, talk with others who may have had similar experiences, and ask questions (Barrow, 2023). As participants reflected on their time abroad in the focus groups, the levels of reflection varied from surface-level, like describing what happened, to more critical, like processing their thoughts and feelings in relation to a larger social, political, and/or cultural context and coming

to different conclusions about what they learned and how they had grown, thus building their intercultural competence (Akpinar & Unaldi, 2014; Deardorff, 2006). The reader may recall that many participants developed stronger language and communication skills and cultivated personal self-confidence and independence, among others; all of which were brought about by participants' reflections. While many participants engaged in some manner of reflection during or after their study abroad, critical reflection has clear implications for teaching as well (Arthur et al., 2020). Teaching is a reflective profession; the most effective teachers can reflect on their teaching practices to address challenges, guide future instruction, deepen understanding, and generate new insights (Russo & Ford, 2006). Not only does critical reflection help build intercultural competence so teachers are more inclined to interact with diverse students, but it can also help pre-service teachers develop their teaching pedagogies (Akpinar & Unaldi, 2014; Lickteig, Rozell, & Peterson, 2019). Participants shared their experiences with different styles of teaching in their classes abroad, adding methods and insight to their repertoire.

Likewise, engagement in creative expression in the focus groups added a multimodal aspect to participants' critical reflection. Participants directly connected their study abroad experiences and teaching views when responding to this prompt: When you think about your teaching career, what parts of your study abroad experience come to mind? I chose to incorporate this into my research as a deeper mode of reflection because, in terms of studying abroad, it can also "decenter students' assumptions and perspectives to feature the voices of those around them" (Moreno, 2021, p.1). Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated the ways that arts-based pedagogy facilitates language and learning. Harman and McClure's (2011) research asserts that theatre and performance can be used as a multimodal teaching method to challenge social inequities in cultures and educational contexts and serve as a basis of discussion for both

students and teachers. The use of multimodality is beneficial for students as well, especially English language learners, because it scaffolds learning and students can express themselves even if they don't have the words to do so (Smilan, 2017). In either context, teaching or studying abroad, reflection is an ongoing, dynamic process that is essential for participants to engage in to make the most of their experiences.

Through the process of reflection, participants were given the opportunity to confront biases and stereotypes. Participants in my focus groups detailed interactions with diverse groups of people during their study abroad experiences and displayed open attitudes in realizing and confronting the stereotypes and biases they held. As outsiders, participants were able to acknowledge and appreciate the complexities of culture in foreign communities (Leutwyler & Meierhans, 2016; Rodriguez, 2011), and they could then return home with their new perspectives and apply them to communities in the US and their future teaching. Regarding teaching, participants expressed concern about how minority students are served by their teachers; they are inadequately supported because educators lack exposure and experience with diverse populations (Johnson, 2021). Just as it's important to accept differences when in a foreign country, it's equally important to accept differences in your home country, especially as educators because we have the power to perpetuate and/or disrupt stereotypes and biases, both positive and negative. Educators who practice culturally relevant pedagogy and display the qualities of intercultural competence, facilitate and support the achievement and inclusion of all students regardless of their background (Johnson, 2021). According to Cushner and Mahon (2009), the "best predictors of suspension were not numbers of misbehaviors but rather teacher referrals, school characteristics, academic bias, racial inequalities, and teacher disinterest" (p. 309). This means that if pre-service teachers have opportunities to build their cultural awareness, through studying

abroad for example, they can better understand their personal identity and those of their future students. Having a greater sense of one's cultural identity can help teachers decrease the discrepancies between students of color and White students in achievement and discipline. Cognitive dissonance, brought about by reflection, positively influences pre-service teachers' cultural awareness (Acquah & Cummins, 2015). Study abroad programs are one way pre-service teachers can gain experience interacting with people who are different from themselves.

When participants stepped out of their comfort zone during their study abroad, they practiced skills and attitudes that brought about growth in their intercultural competence which can help build a more inclusive classroom environment and better support their future diverse students.

This study is not without its limitations. First, there was a small sample size of seven students from one medium-sized university making the findings largely ungeneralizable. Within the small sample size, there was limited demographic diversity because six participants identified as white, and two participants identified as male. Similarly, all participants were pre-service teachers, so they hadn't taught full-time in a classroom yet, affecting their views on and experience with teaching. Additionally, this study relies on self-reported data collected after participants' study abroad experience potentially affecting the results. Participants may have only said, or not said, things in the focus group because other strangers were listening and discussing topics with them in the focus group. Moreover, participants volunteered to participate in this study, so they may have done so because of their already existing interest in studying abroad and/or teaching; they may, too, have volunteered because they already spent some time reflecting on their study abroad experience so they were more prepared and inclined to participate. More research is needed to see how teachers' intercultural competence develops after study abroad

experiences and how that affects teaching. For future studies, I would recommend a larger sample size and qualitative data collection before, during, and after pre-service teachers' study abroad experience because intercultural competence is a constantly evolving process and is best evaluated over time (Deardorff, 2006).

Conclusion

This study confirms the literature on general study abroad benefits (Lickteig, Rozell, & Peterson, 2019), study abroad benefits for pre-service teachers (Akpinar & Unaldi, 2014; Barrow, 2023; Northcote et al., 2014; Rodriguez, 2011), and the importance of reflection (Akpinar & Unaldi, 2014; Arthur et al., 2020; Barrow, 2023; Acquah & Commins, 2015). This study also presents new implications that pre-service teachers can develop intercultural competence in any immersive study abroad experience, even if it doesn't have a teacher-education focus. Based on what was shared in the focus groups, by the end of their study abroad experiences, participants utilized their attitudes, knowledge, and skills to respond to others' needs and interact and communicate appropriately with people of diverse backgrounds. Additionally, participation in this study gave these pre-service teachers an opportunity to critically reflect on their study abroad experiences, their views on teaching, and how those two things interact to derive more meaning from their experiences. Study abroad programs catalyzed reflection for pre-service teachers to start thinking about their experiences, perspectives, and values, which then allowed them to also reflect on how that supports their teaching in this focus group and with expressing themselves artistically. The growth in intercultural competence further supports culturally relevant teaching because as participants observed and analyzed cultural differences and lived in a new environment during their study abroad, they were exposed to

diversity and practiced interacting with people who were different from them. This cultural- and self-awareness can then translate into how they interact with their future diverse students.

Participants voiced their goals as teachers to ultimately connect with and support all of their students, regardless of their background; this sentiment also showed how valuable their study abroad experiences were to participants.

Given this value, my study also provides evidence to support a heavier emphasis on study abroad opportunities in education programs. Because such low percentages of education majors do participate in study abroad programs, it seems that administration in teacher preparation programs lacks the awareness of how much studying abroad can facilitate pre-service teachers' development and growth at the personal and professional teaching levels. Studying abroad allowed pre-service teachers to be exposed to varying teaching styles, cultures, groups of people, and perspectives. This could look like more partnerships between education programs and international universities to provide pre-service teachers with classroom observations and experience in other parts of the world; this could also look like a restructuring of the education program so that pre-service teachers have more accessibility to general study abroad opportunities in their schedule in addition to the already existing diverse learners class. Moreover, this study also supports a call for increased reflection opportunities before, during, and after study abroad experiences. Reflection is essential in study abroad experiences similar to how reflection is a vital pillar of teaching; without reflection, both of these areas lack full effectiveness. The exposures to diversity and subsequent critical reflection helped build pre-service teachers' intercultural competency in my study, therefore exemplifying open attitudes, knowledge of other cultures, a sense of flexibility and empathy, allowing pre-service

teachers to better connect with and teach their diverse students, contributing to culturally relevant teaching practices.

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Appendix A

Pre-Focus Group Survey Questions

- 1) What is your major (and minor, if applicable)?
- 2) Where are you in your program of study? What year are you? Have you participated in any field experiences, if so please list them here.
- 3) What kind of study abroad program did you participate in? (If you've participated in more than one study abroad, please select all that apply.)
 - a) ISEP exchange
 - b) [University] Exchange
 - c) Faculty-led
 - d) Other
- 4) When and where did you study abroad? For example, Spring 2022 England.
- 5) How long was your study abroad?
- 6) Prior to your study abroad experience, did you have any previous travel experience outside of the country?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
- 7) What kind of training or support did you receive from OIED or your host university before, during, or after studying abroad? Was there a reflection component (required or that you chose to engage in)?
- 8) If you had training/support, which sessions or topics do you feel best prepared you for your time abroad?

- 9) If there was a course attached to your study abroad experience, how did it impact your time abroad?
- 10) Did your study abroad have an education focus? For example, was it part of your teaching program? Did you have classroom field experiences or education-specific courses?
- 11) Describe how you felt when you first arrived in country.
- 12) Describe your living situation while abroad. Did you live with a host family during your time abroad? On-campus? Off-campus? What was it like?
- 13) Did you interact with locals and/or people from different cultures? How often? Describe what that was like.
- 14) What cross-cultural comparisons did you make between your home culture and the host country's culture(s)? For example, this could be in regard to schooling, people, schedules, values, politics, food, economy, etc.
- 15) What was it like when your attempts to speak the local language failed (if applicable)?
- 16) Did you have any transformative learning experiences while abroad? Describe them here.
- 17) Did you participate in reflection during or after your study abroad experience? This reflection could take a variety of forms (journaling, group discussion, etc). If so, do you think that it benefited you? In what ways?
- 18) Overall, how was your experience abroad? Select as many as you feel applicable.
 - a) Transformative, inspiring, rewarding, exciting, educational, collaborative, neutral, stressful, challenging, horrible, traumatic, other

Appendix B

Focus Group Art



Figure B1. Allison's art (Focus Group, 05/09/2023).



Figure B2. Maria's art (Focus Group, 05/09/2023).

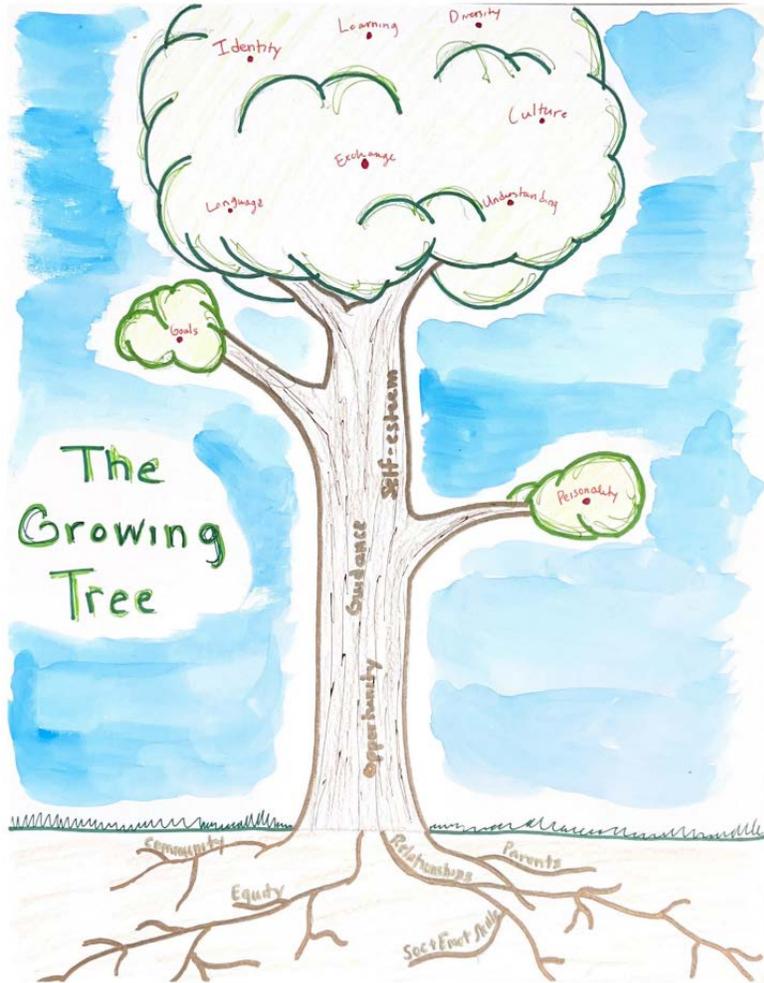


Figure B3. Eric's art (Focus Group, 05/09/2023).



Figure B4. Emma's art (Focus Group, 08/29/2023).



Figure B5. Mia's art (Focus Group, 08/29/2023).



Figure B6. Addie's art (Focus Group, 08/29/2023).



Figure B7. Eleanor's art (Focus Group, 08/29/2023).



Figure B8. Daniel's art (Focus Group, 08/29/2023).



Figure B9. Allison's art (Focus Group, 08/29/2023).