The Impact of a Cultural Immersion Experience
on High School Students’ Perceptions of Self and Identity

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This research was supported through grants provided by the Department of Counseling and School Psychology at the University of Wisconsin - River Falls.

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact that study abroad/cultural immersion had on 14 high school students from the Upper Midwest in terms of their self-concept, self-efficacy, cultural competence, worldview, and concepts of national identity. This study analyzed aggregated data from the Global Perspectives Inventory and also qualitatively analyzed student’s reflections about their time abroad through the use of a 10-question guided interview. The assessment tools aided the author in concluding that the participants’ experiences influenced their perceptions of self and identity.

*Keywords: study abroad, high school, self-concept, worldview, cultural competence*
The Impact of a Cultural Immersion Experience on High School Students’ Perceptions of Self and Identity

Study abroad/cultural immersion experiences have existed as a facet of academia since the late 19th and early 20th century (Reilly & Senders, 2009). The significance of study abroad programs has long been viewed as an investment in character that sets the individual apart in terms of gained social capital (Reilly & Senders, 2009). Setting oneself apart bears particular emphasis in our fast-growing and highly competitive global marketplace. According to Bellamy and Weinberg (2006), the greatest challenge students face today is coming to terms with living as responsible world citizens. Remaining competitive in a global marketplace and balancing that with similar development in cultural competence will ensure students are best prepared for future challenges.

Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) stated the simple experience of being abroad is not enough to create significant change in terms of a person’s cultural sensitivity. Anderson et al. stressed that creating a dialogue about the issues with which a student comes into contact with is crucial to building a rounded perspective. Creating this dialogue is often best done through combining study abroad and service learning experiences. Grusky (2000) argued service learning can transform the classroom by creating a forum for discussion on real-life concepts and issues. Today, many post-secondary study-abroad programs emphasize service learning as a critical component of their curricula.

The academic literature surrounding the impact of post-secondary study abroad experiences is vast. Various studies look at both the economic and social impact that study abroad has on students. Wright and Clarke (2010), in their study on preparing marketing students for the global economy, encouraged study abroad as an option because of the insight it gives
participants into various worldviews and the interconnectedness of humanity. Braskamp and Chickering (2009) highlighted how students built self-confidence and strengthened communication skills after returning from study abroad. Ishii, Gilbride and Stensrud (2009) noted student’s significant gains in cultural awareness, a broadened worldview, and development in values of cultural empathy.

What is missing in the literature, and that is echoed by Bellamy and Weinberg (2006), is large scale investment in study abroad access during students’ high school years. Sung, Padilla, and Silva (2006) examined how the Academic Performance Index (API) was influenced by foreign language education. They found that higher APIs were found in high schools that offered study abroad programs (Sung et al., 2006). Since little research has been done concerning the direct impact of study abroad on high school students, developing a study attempting to identify those impacts is pertinent.

**Historical Context of Study Abroad**

The perception of study abroad has shifted significantly over the last century. Once viewed as an investment of social value, it came to be seen as a means to an end in terms of post-WWII peacekeeping (Reilly & Senders, 2009). During the Cold War the emphasis for study abroad shifted to winning that war based on economic development, information politics, and intercultural development (Reilly & Senders, 2009). Themudo, Page, and Benander (2007) examined the impact study abroad had on language acquisition, culture shock and personal growth. The authors contended the study abroad movement shifted towards an emphasis on personal benefits and self-actualization. While the promises of personal benefit are still lauded, recently, there has been a shift again towards the importance of study abroad as a global form of
diplomacy (Reilly & Senders, 2009). The Lincoln Commission (2005), part of NAFSA: Association of International Educators described this shift as:

We no longer have the option of getting along without the expertise that we need to understand and conduct our relations with the world. We do not have the option of not knowing our enemies—or not understanding the world where terrorism originates and speaking its languages. We do not have the option of not knowing our friends—or not understanding how to forge and sustain international relationships that will enhance U.S. leadership and help our values prevail (p. 6).

Currently, the expectations for the use of study abroad are to compete in the global marketplace and enhance the personal and cultural growth of individuals.

**Globalization**

Globalization and the multicultural workplace are a reality in the 21st century. Study abroad, because of its ability to foster sophisticated development of worldview can help facilitate students’ preparation for this environment (Smith & Metry, 2008). Bellamy and Weinberg (2006) posited students will continue to learn languages, improve awareness of other cultures, increase self-confidence, and build a commitment to view the world globally. Cann (2000) emphasized this point when stating that marketing students who participate in short-term study abroad are better able to appreciate the subtle dynamics between business and culture and then apply those lessons. All these aspects speak to the importance of having a holistic view of our world.

Wright and Clarke (2010), when looking at how to prepare marketing students for the global economy, looked at study broad as a means to achieve cultural pluralism, efficacy, and interconnectedness. They used the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) to
frame students on a spectrum of ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism and highlighted that the simple experience of study abroad was not enough to engender significant change. Cann (2000) noted the nature of study abroad requires integration of approach, just as the business world. These statements suggest the experience of study abroad should be accented with pertinent curricula that highlights reflection and the student’s ability to think critically about his or her place within a global society.

**Study Abroad’s Positive Effect on the Individual**

There have been numerous studies examining how study abroad affects the individual. Some of those effects concern a broadening of worldview, heightened awareness of cultural relativism, and nonjudgmental perceptiveness (Themudo et al., 2007). Ross, Thornson, McDonald, and Arrastia (2008) completed a study into the ways in which the U.S. military could better prepare its soldiers for nation building and humanitarian aid by building soldier’s cultural competence. Though nation building with soldiers is not the same as students participating in study abroad, the common link between the two is that each aims to build cultural competence. Ross et al. (2008) highlighted nine factors that influenced cultural competence: a) Self-efficacy; b) ethno-cultural empathy; c) openness to new experiences; d) willingness to engage; e) cognitive flexibility; f) self-monitoring; g) emotional self-regulation; h) low need for cognitive closure; i) tolerance of ambiguity. Braskamp and Chickering (2009) added that valuing reciprocity, compromise, and sacrifice are also components of cultural competence.

Students participating in study abroad develop their self concept. Dolby (2004) expressed the significant struggle through which students often go when they begin to examine themselves and their own national identity often having to reframe themselves as the “other.” Kenny and McEachern (2009) stated that a student’s self-concept is often derived from reflections upon
their interactions with the environment and people around them. Additionally, Kenny and McEachern positively correlated self-concept with school and academic success. Anderson et al. (2006) corroborated this idea while also highlighting four areas that are often enhanced through study abroad: academic/intellectual, professional, personal, and intercultural. Though the positive outcomes and effects of study abroad are many, it is important to entertain the positive and negative impacts that study abroad may have on participants and the host communities, especially when exposing younger high school students.

**Potential Pitfalls of Study Abroad**

Studying abroad can be exhausting physically and mentally because one is challenged in so many areas. Tonn (2005) examined the difficulty that students had when trying to transfer credits from foreign classes or not being able to meet the graduation requirements of the home school because of time missed. The financial burden is another issue that often affects students, especially low-income, first-generation college students, and the historically underserved (Devarics, 2008). Smith and Mitry (2008) added that affordability and inflexible curriculum were deterrents to studying abroad.

For those students who are able to overcome obstacles and participate in study abroad, it is crucial to weigh the impact on host communities students visit. Schroeder, Wood, Guliardi, and Koehn (2009) looked at the impact that study abroad programs have on host communities contending there are some negative economic, social, environmental, and cultural impacts. Guo (1989) stated that international service learning was “allowing relatively well-off people in this world to travel long distances to experience other people’s misery for a life-enriching experience” (p. 108). Schroeder et al. (2009) cautioned that if the impact of the proposed study abroad trip is too great for the host communities then those trips should not be led. Despite
criticism, the overwhelming belief is study abroad and service learning build a solid foundation for global understanding for both the visitor and the host community.

**Processing the Experience**

A corollary to study abroad is experiential education; both are centered on the power and influence of doing an activity. Passerelli, Hall, and Anderson (2010) suggested that activities that involve exploration and adventure generally elicit a positive emotional response. Most student participants will store those emotional responses for later and then apply those teachings to intra/interpersonal challenges in the future. They argued that much of the adventure experience revolves around placing students in areas that create cognitive dissonance, which in turn enhances the growth of the individual self-concept (Passerelli et al., 2010). Passerelli et al. also stated that in order to engender much of this growth, one key learning principle must be kept at the forefront: mindful learning. Mindful learnings requires that a student should go into an experience with set goals and expectations and work to achieve those aims through the course of the experience. Much of service learning is based on these same principles.

Nadler and Luckner (1992), in their foundational arguments on the processing of experience, concluded that in order for a student to digest fully and to grow from an experience they need to actively reflect, process, and apply the principles of the experience. Some aspects that were suggested to help facilitate this experience were group discussions, journal writing, dyads, written activity sheets, isolation, and drawing (Nadler & Luckner, 1992). In similar fashion to service learning, the adventure experience puts the student in a unique and new area, creates a cooperative and supportive environment, presents challenges, builds a sense of accomplishment, follows this up with processing opportunities and eventually allows the student to generalize and transfer the lessons to future endeavors (Nadler & Luckner, 1992).
The adventure experience and the greater application of exploratory study abroad are closely linked with service learning. They both allow the participant to experience newness, process the environment, work through challenges, and extrapolate the lessons learned.

**International Service Learning**

Mbugua (2010) advocated for the use of international service-learning trips because of the way it helped students create relevance and meaning in their lives. Those trips improved both the students’ and teachers’ appreciation of cultural diversity, expanded their notions of community, and increased their awareness of global issues and cultural competence - all of which are transferable to the classroom (Mbugua, 2010). Grusky (2000) argued international service learning helps students experience new political settings, local families and communities, and allows the students to experience problems and successes first hand. Additionally, service learning fosters and improves academic performance, increases understanding, increases civic responsibility, and encourages a greater understanding of social problems and their respective implications (Grusky, 2000).

Grusky (2000) emphasized the power of critical analysis and reflection when participating in study abroad. She stated that this analysis is usually done in regards to seven junctures:

a) Attitudes towards beggars and poverty; b) female gender politics - potential double standards; c) male gender politics - concepts of inherent privilege and power; d) money matters - dollar economy vs. local economy; e) money matters - if, when, and how to give it away; f) mentality of a superpower - relationship of home country vs. host country; g) impact of U.S. policy - how U.S. economic/political decisions impact the host country. Though these are excellent starting points, they do not exhaust the opportunities for dialogue. The true significance of international
service learning comes from its ability to help students digest issues of cultural arrogance, racism, stereotypes, privilege, and economic disparities (Grusky, 2000).

Study abroad clearly affects students in terms of their self-concept, worldview, and sense of cultural diversity. It also clearly impacts students’ academics, future life in a global world, and the host communities they studied in. Assessing the degree to which these factors correlate with each other require capable tools.

Assessment Techniques

Many assessment techniques have been effectively utilized to judge the impacts of study abroad/cultural immersion. They included Kelley and Meyer’s (1995) Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), Braskamp, Braskamp, Merrill, and Engberg’s (2008) Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), and Hammer and Bennett’s (2002) Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) which is based on a theoretical model called the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The two most pertinent were the GPI and the IDI, based upon their foundation in theoretical constructs.

The GPI is purported to measure scales of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal student development (Braskamp & Chickering, 2009). These scales are examined in eight areas - knowing, knowledge, identity, affect, social responsibility, social interaction, well-being, and global citizenship.

The IDI was championed by Vande Berg (2010) as an apt descriptor of teacher and student dynamics. Specifically, the IDI examines intercultural competence and the ability of people to apply it (Ross et al., 2008). It helped to characterize people in six categories - perceived orientation, developmental orientation, orientation gap, trailing orientation, leading orientation, and cultural disengagement (Ross et al., 2008).
Wright and Clarke (2010) used an assessment tool to examine where students fall within the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS estimated where a person would fall under six categories - denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). These six categories helped to place students on a continuum of ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (Anderson et al., 2006).

**Purpose Statement**

A plethora of literature is available evaluating the benefits of the study abroad experience for post-secondary students. However, there were few studies examining the effects of study abroad on high school students self-concept, self-efficacy, worldview, cultural competence, and national identity. The author hoped to add this information to the existing literature. By administering a pre- and post-trip cultural immersion test using the *Global Perspectives Inventory* to 14 sophomore students at a private, college preparatory high school in the Upper Midwest, one can ascertain whether there are measurable outcomes that add to the case for study abroad access in the high school setting. The following specific research questions were evaluated:

**Research Questions**

1. After students participate in study abroad/cultural immersion in high school, to what extent are self-concept, self-efficacy, and cultural competence influenced, as measured by a qualitative analysis of pre- and post-trip test scores using the *Global Perspectives Inventory* (GPI)?

2. How have worldview and concepts of national identity changed, as a result of high school students’ participation in study abroad/cultural immersion, as measured by a
qualitative analysis of themes present in students’ reflections about their international travel experiences obtained via interview?

**Hypotheses**

1. The study abroad/cultural immersions experience will positively affect the participating student’s definition of self-concept.
2. The study abroad/cultural immersion experience will positively affect the participating student’s self-efficacy.
3. The study abroad/cultural immersion experience will help to increase the participating student’s cultural competence.
4. The study abroad/cultural immersion experience will help to broaden the participating student’s worldview.
5. The study abroad/cultural immersion experience will help the participating student develop a greater sense of national identity and its global impact.

**Method**

**Participants**

Students who met the criteria (i.e., currently enrolled in high school and participating in a study abroad/cultural immersion experience) were recruited by the author after he contacted the Director of International & Off-Campus Programs at a private, college preparatory high school in the Upper Midwest. The author was provided access to 14 high school sophomores. These students all volunteered to participate in a cross-cultural service learning study abroad trip to Sierra Leone prepared by the high school during the month of June 2011. All 14 participants were 16 years of age at the time of the study. The group consisted of three male students and 11 female students, all of whom listed English as their primary language. Among this group one
female student identified as African American. The remainder of the group identified as Caucasian. Two of the students came from a different private high school located in the same metro area in the Upper Midwest. The students who attend these high schools are traditionally from middle to upper class socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Materials**

The nature of this study necessitated participant access to the *Global Perspectives Inventory* (GPI), as well as to a computer with Internet access. This inventory is commercially based and was published in 2008. Each student was emailed an access code to take the inventory online. The students did so either at school or at their home.

The GPI is a 48-question assessment tool. Based upon the structure of the study, the students took the GPI one time prior to their departure for Sierra Leone. Upon the students’ return to the U.S., they waited three weeks and then took the GPI a second time. This time interval helped the students re-acculturate and allowed for the study abroad/cultural immersion experience to form in the students’ minds. This time interval was based on research compiled in the field of experiential education (G.P. Herman, personal communication, April 16, 2011). The purpose of using the GPI was to build a picture of how the student’s cultural competence was influenced by the study abroad/cultural immersion experience.

Additionally, students were asked to participate in a semi-structured audio-taped interview/conversation about the broad effects of their experiences in relation to worldview and national identity. The author, in collaboration with the Director, designed a selection of 10 questions (see Appendix) to help guide and prompt the students’ reactions. These interviews took place at the high school over the course of the fall 2011 semester following the students’ return from Sierra Leone. An analysis of the themes present in student responses allowed the author to
frame the importance of study abroad/cultural immersion in terms of worldview development and definition of national identity but also found additional areas of interest regarding students’ growth in terms of self-concept, self-efficacy, and cultural competence (research question number one themes).

Procedure

Data collection. Since the author aimed to work with minors, informed parental consent was necessary prior to any administration of the study. A dual informed parent/child consent form was given to each parent/child and they were required to grant permission before participating in the study. Once permission was given, the students were given the necessary access codes in order to complete the GPI discussed in the Materials section. Upon the student’s completion of the second assessment the data results from the GPI were aggregated. Secondly, the audio-taped interview/conversation were transcribed and analyzed in order to bring out themes based on worldview, national identity, and other unknown themes pertinent to the students’ responses.

Data analysis. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected respectively using the GPI and the interview questions.

For data analysis regarding the GPI the research study was largely reliant on the central tendency data provided by the GPI assessment team.

Data analysis concerning the interview questions loosely followed concepts of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) pioneered by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997). The research study did not use a team of coders per se but the author did partner with Dr. Todd Savage, an Associate Professor of Counseling and School Psychology, in order to compartmentalize students’ responses and draw conclusions about the data and designate themes. Dr. Scott
Woitaszewski, a Professor of School Psychology, served as the auditor for the study and whose primary role was to review and provide feedback for the researcher and Dr. Savage. The pair met a number of times to discuss the themes present in early transcripts and then developed a scoring sheet to code each transcript. Once the themes were developed the author extracted matching examples from the transcripts in order to highlight how worldview, national identity and other pertinent themes were affected by the study abroad/cultural immersion experience.

**Results**

Upon aggregation of all data associated with the GPI and the development of themes associated with the interview questions, the following analysis concerning the research questions apply.

**Quantitative Results**

Of the 14 total students participating in the study, seven respondents completed the pre-test and two respondents completed the post-trip test. In addition, due to some coding errors, the data collected were unable to be interpreted on a student-to-student basis for the pre- and post-trip tests. This means that it was inconclusive whether any of the seven students who took the pre-trip test also took the post-trip test. However, there were a number of interesting themes among the data collected that are worth noting.

The GPI consisted of eight sub-scales in which the data were compartmentalized. Of the 48 questions on the inventory some questions fell under two or more categories; some of the questions were closely linked to each other and could fall under several different sub-scales. Ultimately, the primary researcher assigned each of these sub-scales to the three themes identified in the first research question: Student Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy, and Cultural Competence. The self-concept theme included the sub-scales of Intrapersonal Identity and
Intrapersonal Affect. The Self-Efficacy theme included the sub-scales of Intrapersonal Identity and Well-Being. Finally, the Cultural Competence theme included the remaining sub-scales of Cognitive Knowing, Cognitive Knowledge, Interpersonal Social Responsibility, and Interpersonal Social Interaction, and Global Citizenship.

Pre-trip test data. Of the seven students who took the pre-trip test, six of those students identified as female and one student identified as male. Of those seven, one student identified as African American and the other six identified as having European ancestry. The mean scores for each sub-scale along with the respective standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) Pre-Trip Test Scale Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPI Scale Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Social Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Social Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Citizenship</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The values represent summed sub-scale scores. All items were on a 5-point scale with scores closer to 5 representing an individual/group that has a more global perspective.

Self-concept points of interest. Under Intrapersonal Identity, six of seven students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I have a definite purpose in my life.” All seven students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I can explain my personal values to
people who are different from me.” In addition, all seven students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I am developing a meaningful philosophy of life.”

Similarly, under Intrapersonal Affect, six of seven students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I feel threatened around people from backgrounds very different from my own.” Likewise, seven students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I do not feel threatened emotionally when presented with multiple perspectives.” An outlier in this category was a lower average response (\(x = 2.86\)) to the statement, “I prefer to work with people who have different cultural values from me.”

**Self-efficacy points of interest.** This theme encompassed the Intrapersonal Identity sub-scale addressed under self-concept and echoed its points of interest. Under the sub-scale Well-Being, seven students shared that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I put my belief into action by standing up for my principles.”

**Cultural competence points of interest.** Under Cognitive Knowing, three of seven students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “When I notice cultural difference, my culture tends to have the better approach.” Furthermore, four students agreed with the statement, “I rarely question what I have been taught about the world around me.”

Under Cognitive Knowledge six students agreed with the statement, “I understand the reasons and causes of conflict among nations of different cultures.” An additional five students agreed with the statement, “I understand how various cultures of this world interact socially.”

Under Interpersonal Social Interaction, six students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I am open to people who strive to live lives very different from my own life style.”

Under Global Citizenship, students showed lower average scores to the statements, “I often get out of my comfort zone to better understand myself” (\(x = 2.86\)) and “I intentionally involve
people from many cultural backgrounds in my life” ($x = 2.71$). Finally, six students agreed with the statement, “I am able to take on various roles as appropriate in different cultures and ethnic settings.”

**Post-trip test data.** Of the two students who took the post-trip test, both identified as female. Of those two, one student identified as African American and the other as having European ancestry. The mean scores for each sub-scale along with the respective standard deviations are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) Post-Trip Test Scale Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPI Scale Results</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Knowing</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Knowledge</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Identity</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Affect</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Social Responsibility</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Social Interaction</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Citizenship</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The values represent summed sub-scale scores. All items were on a 5-point scale with scores closer to 5 representing an individual/group that has a more global perspective.

**Self-concept points of interest.** Both students either agreed or strongly agreed with these statements, “I have a definite purpose in life,” “I can explain my personal values to people who are different from me,” and “I am developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” In addition, both students disagreed with the statement, “I feel threatened around people from backgrounds very
different from my own.” Finally, one student agreed and one student disagreed with the statement, “I prefer to work with people who have different cultural values from me.”

**Self-efficacy points of interest.** Both students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I have a definite purpose in life.” Also, both students agreed with the statement, “I am confident that I can take care of myself in a completely new situation.” Finally, both students agreed with the statement, “I put my beliefs into action by standing up for my principles.”

**Cultural competence points of interest.** One student was neutral and one student strongly agreed with the statement, “When I notice cultural difference, my culture tends to have the better approach.” Additionally, both students agreed with the statement, “I rarely question what I have been taught about the world around me.”

Under Interpersonal Social Responsibility both students strongly agreed to the statement, “I think of my life in terms of giving back to society.” They followed this by either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement, “Volunteering is not an important priority in my life.”

Under Interpersonal Social Interaction both students agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, “I enjoy when my friends from other cultures teach me about our cultural difference,” and “I am open to people who strive to live lives very different from my own lifestyle.” Conversely, both students either disagreed or were neutral to the statement, “People from other cultures tell me that I am successful at navigating their cultures.”

Lastly, under Global Citizenship both students strongly agreed with the statement, “I think of my life in terms of giving back to society.” Likewise, both students agreed to the statement, “I intentionally involve people from many cultural backgrounds in my life.” Finally, both students either agreed or disagreed with the statement, “I enjoy when my friends from other cultures teach me about our cultural differences.”
Qualitative Findings

The nature of the second research question revolved around the ways in which national identity and worldview were affected by the study abroad/cultural immersion experience. While those themes surfaced upon examination of the students’ interviews a number of other themes came forth that were noteworthy and ultimately helped form a greater definition of the impact the trip to Sierra Leone provided these students. The research tandem identified 14 themes present in the transcripts and ultimately congregated those themes within four major domains: Contextual Factors, Action/Impact Experiences, Meaningful Connections, and Consequences and Outcome.

**Contextual factors.** The themes present in this domain were related to how the conditions of the students’ experiences affected their feelings and reflections. The themes present in the transcripts under the domain Contextual Factors along with the percentages of occurrence are noted in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Contextual Factors’ Themes Present in Students’ Reflections*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Struggles with overcoming language/communication barriers</td>
<td>6/14 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host buddies serving as cultural brokers</td>
<td>10/14 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of culture shock (i.e., personal space, hygiene, language, etc.)</td>
<td>12/14 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of awareness/insight by openness/hospitality/caring/friendliness of host culture with strangers/new community members</td>
<td>11/14 (79%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Struggles with overcoming language/communication barriers.** When attempting to communicate with new people, six of the 14 (43%) students mentioned having difficulty overcoming those barriers. For example:

**Participant 1:** I don’t think I understood while I was there cause it was just something [language barrier] you had to deal with because it was there but there were so many things you wish you could have said because you had to dumb it down with your vocabulary to be able to convey it. I think there were conversations…this could be more of a regret for me…I think there were conversations that could have been awkward that you wish you had had but you didn’t… it’s just awkward because of difference and because of the language barrier. Sometimes you say something and it comes across differently.

**Host buddies serving as cultural brokers.** A facet of their time spent in Sierra Leone that was connected with overcoming language barriers was the influence that their host buddies had on the experience. Ten of the 14 (71%) students shared reflections regarding the impact their host buddy relationship had.

**Participant 8:** I didn’t expect such a like great bond between the buddies, I didn’t really know it was going to be that strong.

**Participant 6:** I guess one of the things about the trip that has really stuck with me just in general has been like the similarities between me and my buddy and just the people there and the people I know here. You think of it as really different and they live lives that are very different than ours but like there were little things I would discover during the trip that we would have thing in common where I was like “Whoa-what?” So like my buddy for example knew who Justin Bieber was and I am a huge Justin Bieber fan so that was just one of those moments where we were just like…I was like “That’s weird” I wouldn’t
expect you know this fifteen year old who lives in a small village in Africa to be a Justin 
Bieber fan and it kind of brought us together and it was just interesting to see those 
parallels and kind of see how she got really giggly and stuff when she talked about her 
boyfriend and I get the same way when I talk about boys like that was just one of the things 
that, Bill you know, beforehand was like you are going to find you are really really similar 
you were just born in different places and I was like “I mean whatever you say Bill” like 
they live in the middle of Africa, we are really different but he was like totally right there 
was just so many things were we’d just be like “Oh me too, I love math. That is my 
favorite subject.” So that was one of the things that you know everyday on the trip I would 
notice those things and even coming back are still kind of mind boggling to think about.

**Feelings of culture shock.** Culture shock is a typical part of each person’s experience with 
new environments/cultures/communities. Twelve of the 14 (86%) participants highlighted 
aspects of their experience that met these confines.

**Participant 4:** Something I immediately struggled with when I got to the villages and even 
before that in Freetown in Sierra Leone was the amount of touching that happened . . . I 
didn’t know how to handle it and at first I would move away laugh it off and things like 
that and I got over it though and I just knew that by the third day in the village I needed to 
get over it because it’s not something that goes away . . .

**Participant 13:** I think probably the hardest part for me besides that was that there was no 
personal space. Constantly there were always people around you, grabbing you, or just 
wanting to touch you, always wanting to talk to you.

**Participant 3:** Over there you hold hands with your friends and give them lots of hugs. 
There wasn’t a whole lot of that here, isn’t, so I guess it was just a...it was weird going over
there having that happen but I got used to it and it was great hanging out with all my friends over there the holding hands walking down the road and I sort of got used to it and then it just sort of went away when I got back so…

**Feelings of awareness/insight about hospitality of host culture.** Many of the students were touched by the open and caring nature of their host communities. Eleven of the 14 (79%) students shared these similar thoughts.

**Participant 1:** I thought some of the differences in their community values were things that really could stick with me for a while. Just things like everybody sharing and people relying on each other, people being grateful, just things that everyone talks about “should be” but until you are surrounded by them all the time it never become apparent the degree to which you can be all those things.

**Participant 2:** I felt like I was accepted as part of the community which was really nice because sometimes I don’t even feel accepted in my own community so to go to some other country in Africa and fell accepted was really really great.

**Participant 5:** I just really appreciated their willingness to be opened and to share their own stories with people they’ve only just met and when I found that when I came home I noticed everyone is just a lot more closed and private.

**Participant 11:** I don’t even know if they know what the term “judgment” means. Like they just don’t...they are themselves the entire time... I like how everyone is like their sister or their brother or like their family.

**Participant 13:** I was shocked at how quickly I made relationships there and how after just a couple of days they looked at me as family and I looked at them as family and they would tell me that they loved me and it was just crazy to see how much they valued
relationships and how important they were and it really just…coming back it made me think like how I should be more considerate in the relationships that I have with others, with friends, with family or whatever.

**Action/Impact experiences.** The themes present in this domain were related to how specific experiences influenced their actions or feelings surround their time in Sierra Leone. The themes present in the transcripts under the domain Action/Impact Experiences along with the percentages of occurrence are noted in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Actions/Impact Experiences’ Themes Present in Student’s Reflections*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resilience practices (i.e., use of non-verbals, patience, etc.)</td>
<td>5/14 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressions of guilt/concern over their own privilege/wealth/power</td>
<td>7/14 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of learning/gaining more than they gave</td>
<td>3/14 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Resilience practices.** When encountering challenges during their time abroad some of the students spoke of ways they overcame those obstacles. Five of 14 (36%) students shared such experiences.

**Participant 3:** I guess by the end I you know realized that you don’t really need verbal communication to speak with the people so just you know like seeing like the kids playing this game with rocks so it was just sort of watching them and just going in there and try at it.

**Participant 1:** We were asked to keep a journal and a couple of us started a dictionary of words we could start to figure out and learn and it was cool to be able to pick up and learn. People always saw when you are learning a foreign language that you won’t be fluent until
you go to a foreign country and I never really got that but in two weeks there I didn’t get structure but I was able to pick up words and everything.

_Expressions of guilt/concern over their own privilege/wealth/power._ This theme brought forth some powerful reflections. Half (50%) of the participants noted the impact of these realizations.

**Participant 2:** It’s still kind of difficult to think about that’s how people live day to day and I get to live here and I don’t feel as privileged as I think guilty, so I struggle with that a little bit. . . More often than I thought I would coming back from the trip. I thought I would come back and be really appreciative of what I have but I come back and see everything I have and think of the people who don’t have what I have. I don’t feel good I feel really bad that I can’t give people that.

**Participant 3:** It’s so hard for me to really realize I am in the 1% of the world and realize that because I go to a great private school my family has an income with money in a bank account and I’m going to be able to go to college and all these different things have sort of closed me off from everyone else and I can’t see past this tiny little Spanish quiz I have so that does frustrate a little bit, I’m just trying to see how good I’ve got it.

**Participant 2 (again):** The main things that changed me about Sierra Leone it’s about seeing the poverty there and not experiencing that poverty but almost wishing that I had so that I could really understand, because empathy is really important to me so I was able to empathize with the people living in poverty but while I was there I almost wanted to be put in that position to really get what it was like and living in the villages was hard but it was by no means as hard as some of the things I saw people doing while we were driving through the villages.
**Feeling of learning/gaining more than they gave.** Many of the students felt like they were going to “help” the communities they visited. Three of 14 (21%) students expressed great surprise at feeling the exact opposite.

Participant 2: Before we went it was kind of like an us them dichotomy thing like we are the U.S. group and they are the Sierra Leoneons and we’re superior even if we didn’t say it outright we did kind of have that mentality of we are above them and we are going to give and to help but coming back it’s like…it’s like we learned so much more than we gave it’s just that we are all people and not to preach equality but we recognize our differences and it’s important that we appreciated them and that we do live differently but it was good for me to see that everyone is just living. It was kind of like seeing the grand scheme of things and kind of stepping back and yeah that was big for me.

Participant 4: I felt the majority of the learning like I learned because just experiencing a whole different lifestyle and a whole different world like taught me so many more lessons than I think I could have ever taught them without them coming to America and seeing my lifestyle. . . Everyone I talked to has felt the same that they learned more than they could have ever taught them.

**Meaningful connections.** The themes present in this domain are reflected by the students search for connecting their experience with others or reflecting on connections that were missing. The themes present in the transcripts under the domain Meaningful Connections along with the percentage of occurrence are noted in Table 5.
Table 5

*Meaningful Connections’ Themes Present in Students’ Reflections*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in communicating the depth of their experiences</td>
<td>14/14 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of pictures as a facilitation tool for sharing depth of experience</td>
<td>2/14 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing family and friends</td>
<td>7/14 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not missing material possessions or connectedness to technology</td>
<td>10/14 (71%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Difficulty in communicating the depth of their experiences.** This theme was the most present in all of the transcripts. Students spent a great deal of time trying to communicate the strong impact of their time in Sierra Leone. Along the way, all students seemed to struggle in doing so.

Participant 7: They would react to things like wow that’s crazy but still I was frustrated because I feel like they still just don’t get it, like some of the experiences I had were like so scary or incredible or like I wouldn’t even picture like going through that here but like when my mom or my dad or someone like reacted to it they would be like “Wow, that’s incredible” but I still feel like they just don’t understand. Like they could still go on doing their normal lives like living their normal life and not even think twice about the things that I’ve done. I don’t know, it just doesn’t really hit them as hard as it hit me.

Participant 8: I would definitely say that it was really tough, like coming back. Like everyone, like everybody would just ask “How was Africa,” and want to hear all about it and it was really hard to, ‘cause there was like so much to take away from it, like it was hard to like, I don’t know, say what the trip was like.
Participant 13: I found it difficult to just explain how much it really did affect my life when I came back.

*Use of pictures as a facilitation tool.* While students spoke of the difficulty of communicating that experience, two of 14 (14%) students felt like photos were/would have been helpful to enhance their descriptions.

Participant 7: My camera was stolen and so it was hard to come home and I was so excited to get home a tell like show my family my host family and everything and I didn’t get the chance to like show them my pictures and it was hard to like describe everything to make them like understand.

*Missing family and friends.* Half (50%) of the students expressed missing family or friends but didn’t tend to elaborate much on its effects.

Participant 7: Yeah, I think [missing] my family was a big one. It was just so far away and we had so many plane hours, hours in the airport, on the plane, traveling in cars and everything.

Participant 14: [Missing] my family and home were the most.

*Not missing material possessions or connectedness to technology.* Despite students’ admission they were addicted to social media (e.g., Facebook) or their cellphones, having that form of communication removed seemed beneficial.

Participant 2: I didn’t miss many material things because they weren’t a big deal in Sierra Leone.

Participant 12: It was really nice just to not like be in constant communication, like texting and Facebook and all that stuff and just to like let it go and enjoy like what you’re doing in the moment and who you’re with.
Participant 14: I didn’t miss kind of the stressors, the go, go, go lifestyle. For me that was really nice to get away from Facebook, my phone, like you know, all those obligations and just concentrate on what you are doing at the moment. That was really really something I did not miss about being in the U.S.

Consequences and outcome. The themes present in this domain bring forth the ways in which the cultural immersion experience continues to form and influence the students’ lives. The themes present in the transcripts under the domain Consequences and Outcome along with the percentage of occurrence are noted in Table 6.

Table 6

Consequences and Outcome’ Themes Present in Students’ Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaining new perspectives on their own privilege/wealth/power</td>
<td>12/14 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing commitment for continuing to do service learning/international travel/study abroad/experience new cultures</td>
<td>13/14 (93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of processing the experience (constantly reframing)</td>
<td>14/14 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gaining new perspective on their own privilege/wealth/power. This theme is where the implications about shifting views of national identity and worldview come into focus. Most students (i.e., 12 of 14; 86%) made statements that enveloped this theme.

Participant 2: I thought about privilege before but more in like a really U.S. specific, like there is privilege in the U.S. It was mostly like white/versus black for me was how it was framed but now it’s on a much broader scale that there are so many other privilege…I don’t know how to frame it…privilege differences in the world and I even…I feel like in the U.S. I felt like I was in a position that wasn’t very privileged but going to Sierra Leone
really changes that because you realize you’re extremely privileged. It changes my relationships.

Participant 4: I feel lucky to be an American and luckier than I ever have to be an American but I don’t necessarily feel proud to be an American.

Participant 5: Definitely more appreciative of my education. . . there are so many more ways to be educated than in school and in a text book and my whole experience in Sierra Leone I was always learning whether that was landing on a tarmac with no lights or going through Freetown which was super crowded, actually living in the villages, pumping the water or whatever it was there was always a culture exchange and it allowed me to appreciate how my education at school set me up to really appreciate my travel in Sierra Leone and how my experience in Sierra Leone embellished my perspectives.

Participant 13: It was hard coming back just because I remember when I first pulled up to my house it was so weird. I just remember thinking going into my house that I have actual walls, like actual walls, and an actual toilet, and actual floors. Like it was just crazy to think that I have this entire house filled with such valuable things and I didn’t appreciate and know how lucky I was to have all of these things and I look back at the people that are living in Sierra Leone and I stayed in Punjahun and they are living in a house with dirt walls, a dirt floor, and a tin roof and two rooms in their house. It was just…the contrast was overwhelming really…big.

Growing commitment for continued cross-cultural exploration. All but one student specifically mentioned being excited about or committed to a continued pursuit of service learning/cultural exploration.
Participant 1: It’s brought a focus for me on that I want to do something with service in the future whether it be long-standing or just something, by doing that I feel that everyone should have a personal responsibility to help somebody else in someway and also as a country to help other countries too.

Participant 2: I think with service trips some people…for some people it’s kind of a one shot thing and I think that people need to realize that this is a continuing relationship not just with me and Sierra Leone but with the community and Sierra Leone. . . Sierra Leone made we want to go back to Sierra Leone, not just anywhere but go back to the villages that I have already visited and different villages in Sierra Leone and experience that country more because I feel committed to it now.

Examples of continually processing the experience. Ultimately, the experience was continually being processed by each of the students in different ways. All 14 students spoke of the ways in which the thoughts and experiences of the trip continued to inform their lives.

Participant 3: I do think that even though our country isn’t perfect, like nobody is perfect, we really do a lot of great things and so I guess my view of the U.S. and being an American has shifted in a more positive way.

Participant 4: A lot of my friendships and relationships changed when I came back. I don’t know if it is because I changed as a person but my consciousness and my ability to understand what other people were saying in a new light just changed how I felt about some people. . . moving forward it’s like when I look at people’s characters and personalities I am searching for a new attribute. An attribute of understanding of I don’t know at least having an opened mind to the world and things like that.
Participant 14: Things were very kind of “Go with the flow” on our abroad trip and you know I’m usually very persnickety and precise and you know it just really taught me like patience and to let things go and it’s going to go how it’s going to go so when I returned I took a lot of that stuff with me.

Extra nuggets. In addition to the four domains mentioned, there existed a few outlying examples that the research tandem felt were powerful enough to merit mention. The first included the impact of the group itself and the support it provided.

Participant 6: I miss the like bonding I had like with the group as far as like it was one of those environments where it was just like we could honestly tell each other anything and so I became kind of close with people . . . I miss having that environment where we could literally tell each other like anything and I saw people who were really really home sick and who were just leaning on each other for support and it’s not like I couldn’t do that here it’s just that there it was kind of the norm and everyone was like “This is what I am struggling with today, like I need help” and people would be like “Yeah, of course like I totally understand” it’s just the environment that you experienced with the people there is different than it is here.

The second nugget was regarding the impression one student had when being asked about how their experience in Sierra Leone was. This participants’ response was in contrast to those made by other participants.

Participant 10: I guess lots of people when they ask that question it seems like they kind of had already had like presumptions and they like already had an impression to what my answer was going to be so that kind of caught me off guard . . . I guess going back to an earlier question people asked how was Africa with the intention of me responding like
“I’ve just had this completely new outlook on life-like I’m going to devote my life to doing service” but I guess I didn’t experience that and actually in a way it made me feel sort of guilty because I felt like an expectation of mine was to have that and to just like become a philanthropist but I guess I actually felt kind of bad when they would ask that question and I wouldn’t be able to respond with “I feel so bad for everything I’ve been given in life and these people don’t have it” and I guess I just felt bad I didn’t have that feeling.

Discussion

The intent of this research was to add to the already extensive literature surrounding the impact that study abroad/cultural immersion has on the individual. Much of this research has been geared towards a more time-intensive study abroad experience for post-secondary students. The author examined how a short-term international service learning/cultural immersion experience impacted high school student’s lives in regards to a growing self-concept, self-efficacy, cultural competence and an expanded worldview and national identity. Tonn (2005) argued one difficulty students had when studying abroad is the transfer of credits to their home schools. It stands to reason that if great impact can be seen in a shorter period of time than the study abroad/cultural immersion experience may be better marketed to students in high school. Given the results of the quantitative and qualitative data contained in this research project, it is fair to say there was an impact on the way these students reframed the way they saw themselves and the world around them.

Quantitative Results

As a result of such a small sample size for both the pre- and post-trip tests, caution must be used when applying the findings of this inventory. It is also important to note that though there was an increase in average score in each sub-scale between the pre- and post-trip tests, the
primary researcher was unable to gather whether each individual student showed gains due to the coding error. However, there were still meaningful areas within the data that merit further discussion.

**Self-concept points of interest.** As noted in the results section, students showed strong scores in terms of defining a purpose in their lives, confidence in sharing personal values, and being on a path towards developing a personal philosophy of life. In addition, they showed little sign of being threatened by other viewpoints or cultures. For the pre-trip test data these scores seemed surprisingly high given the developmental age of the students, especially in regards to having a definite purpose in life. This trend of high scores in terms of self-concept held through to the post-trip test as both students continued to show signs of having a meaningful and confident vision for their futures.

An outlier in this category was the students’ pre-trip test responses towards having to work with someone who had different cultural values. Most students were either neutral or did not want to work with people who had different cultural values. Given their other responses related to acceptance of people with different religious, spiritual, or cultural backgrounds, this was odd. Perhaps, the question about working with someone who does not share your cultural values is a sneakier way to address issues of acceptance and cultural empathy. In doing so, the inventory may have exposed some deeper issues of cultural awareness these students are still grappling with as they create their own self-concepts.

Given the high scores in regards to self-concept on both the pre- and post-trip tests, it stands to reason these students have already begun to develop the strong levels of self-confidence needed to remain successful. Dolby (2004) noted significant struggle awaits students as they continue to examine themselves. The GPI data remained inconclusive but the trends identified
suggest that these students are beginning to address these issues from a place of comfort and confidence within themselves.

**Self-efficacy points of interest.** In many ways there is overlap between the categories of self-concept and feelings of self-efficacy. The important distinction is that self-efficacy is emphasizing the confidence a people have to put their thoughts into action through meeting goals and completing tasks. Given this distinction, these students again showed high scores in questions related to feelings of strong self-efficacy. In both the pre- and post-trip tests, there were high positive responses to the feeling that students could put their beliefs into action. Additionally, the notion of having a definite life purpose applied to strong feelings of self-efficacy. An area of distinction that differed slightly between the pre- and post-trip test was in regards to feeling like the students could take care of themselves in new situations. There was a slight bump in confidence for the two students who took the post-trip test. This echoed Braskamp and Chickering (2009) and their contention that students built self-confidence upon returning from their time abroad. Though the GPI data were inconclusive, by combining the strong scores in self-concept and self-efficacy, these students’ scores suggested they have the ability to apply their ideas in a meaningful way.

**Cultural competence points of interest.** Students in this study showed confidence with issues of international affairs. The pre-trip test data showed under the Cognitive Knowledge sub-scale that students were well informed of current international affairs and felt they understood the causes of conflict among nations of different cultures. This general confidence held through the post-trip test as well. Likely, this observation may be attributed to the monthly meetings the students had in preparation for their trip to Sierra Leone. It would also be worth noting the
international focus and level of education the students had while enrolled in their respective high schools.

As a corollary to this theme, three students who took the pre-trip test responded in the affirmative that when they notice cultural differences they tend to see their own culture as having the better approach. In addition, four students agreed they rarely questioned what they had been taught about the world around them. Themudo et al. (2007) suggested cultural immersion broadens a students’ worldview, increases their awareness of cultural relativism and their non-judgmental perceptiveness. Surprisingly, one student who took the post-trip test strongly agreed with the statement that their culture tends to have the better approach. In addition, one student in the post-trip test also agreed she or he rarely question what she or he had been taught. Given the complexity of international issues and the experience the students had in Sierra Leone, these responses were quite contrary to expectations.

Since the GPI data cannot be conclusive, one explanation for this discrepancy is students felt they had been well educated about international affairs and had a strong sense that what they have learned is correct. It is quite reasonable that the experience in Sierra Leone affirmed what they have been taught to that point was true. The same general rule could apply for feeling like their cultural upbringing is the better path. In such a short period of time, culture shock may not have been able to be overcome and thorough analysis may not yet have taken place.

Regardless, we know that the students were prepared for this trip both in terms of what to expect environmentally but also about the myriad cultural differences they might experience. This was all done prior to the student’s taking the pre-trip test. Their pre-trip preparation, their existing education, the trip to Sierra Leone, and certainly the processing that has happened since
the end of the trip have influenced their cultural competence. In the absence of more conclusive data from the GPI, we are left with the students’ own stated reflections.

**Qualitative Data**

The purpose of analyzing the students’ interview transcripts was to address the second research question: looking at how the students’ views of national identity and worldview had been changed by their experiences in Sierra Leone. Those themes, among many others, were addressed under the four domains outlined in the results section. Without a doubt, the study abroad/cultural immersion experience these students participated in affirmed what Mbugua (2010) stated were critical outcomes of international service learning experiences: an appreciation of cultural diversity, expanded notions of community, increased awareness of global issues, and cultural competence.

**Contextual factors.** As was expected, many students struggled with overcoming language barriers and the general feelings of awkwardness as each party was trying to figure out where that person was coming from. In addition, students faced examples of cultural shock with the areas concerning personal space, privacy, and issues of hygiene. Despite these struggles, two additional contextual factors played an important role in helping students overcome their difficulties and build resilience strategies. The role the buddies played for the many of the students cannot be overstated. That relationship allowed the students to see how alike they were in many ways and in doing so, embrace the differences for simply being differences rather than challenges. Likewise, the generally open and welcoming feel the host communities played for the students played a key role in how the students felt about being abroad and they informed and expanded their views of what community and relationships could be. The students seemed to want to incorporate those lessons in their own lives upon returning to the United States, perhaps,
applying those lessons to a burgeoning self-concept. For some, it proved to be a cognitive disconnect between such vibrant communities/relationships with little material wealth juxtaposed against their own upbringing that was full of material wealth but lacked some of the richness in community relationships they saw in Sierra Leone. These contextual factors expanded the students’ views of their own culture and broadened the scope of what they might expect to see in other cultures/communities in the future.

**Action/Impact experiences.** Some students shared stories about how they were able to overcome some of the culture shock and language barriers. This ability helped them move beyond the unfamiliar and delve into some deeper issues of cross-cultural immersion. Patience and perseverance played a large role in these situations as students worked through the dictionary with their buddies or kept trying to communicate even if it had to be nonverbally.

Some of the foundational conclusions students made about their time in Sierra Leone were seeing the poverty characteristic of the communities to which they were exposed. It impressed upon them the reality of their own privilege/wealth/power and in many instances was met with feelings of guilt. Students continued to struggle with feelings of inequity upon returning home and attempted to find ways to make that inequity right in their own mind/world. One way this manifested itself was finding ways to learn from it.

Three students weighed the new perspectives and experiences against what they felt they brought/shared with Sierra Leone. In all instances, the students felt like they gained so much more than they gave. This experience expanded their beliefs about where knowledge can be derived from. It shifted their concepts of worldview and in effect expanded their cultural competence.
Meaningful connections. As a testament to the impact of their experience, all 14 students spent considerable time trying to impress upon others how the experience was for them. In some instances, they were met with people who were seemingly uninterested or who did not seem to comprehend the impact they wanted to share. This proved debilitating in some ways as students chose only to share the simple things or they did not broach the difficult topics to explain. This experience speaks to the impact that processing the experience has on the individual. Nadler and Luckner (1992) argued for the necessity of actively reflecting on the process to fully digest the contents of that experience. These students assuredly sought out that processing but perhaps were unfulfilled by the fora to do so. Providing these students multiple opportunities during and after the experience to address pertinent issues may prove beneficial.

Of particular note in this domain was the students’ insistence they were happy to be away from technology, especially social media, texting, and the Internet. Many students noted technology’s influence on their lives and how being away from it for some time was enjoyable. Similarly, one student spoke of the “stressors” of their lives in the U.S. and how being in Sierra Leone allowed them to be in the moment. Some students noted checking social media less and trying to incorporate the lessons learned from the experience into their lives. Ultimately, these students tried to incorporate the experiences they had in Sierra Leone into who they wanted to become.

Consequences and Outcome. Each of the three previous domains have highlighted the subtle ways that students are incorporating the lessons and teachings from their service learning/cultural immersion experience. This domain pinpoints some direct ways in which the experience has changed the student and altered their worldview. For some, it was further informing their identity as citizens of the Untied States. For others, it was noticing the power a
full education brings a country and people. In many instances, it was about creating a new
definition of what privilege meant. In all cases, the students’ perspectives had been changed and
they were searching for ways in which to invest or apply their new knowledge.

The students were invigorated by the prospect of continuing to do service
learning/international travel/cultural immersion. In general, their experiences in Sierra Leone
either inspired a new-found commitment or expanded a definition of what service to a
community means; however, it is possible some students said they were interested in doing
future service trips because the question led them to answer in the affirmative. The conclusion
this study makes is that students had positive experiences with service learning/cultural
immersion and would seek it out again in the future as a result of their experiences.

Mbugua (2010) stated international service learning trips help create relevance and
meaning in the lives of its participants. All of the students on this trip showed ways in which
they are incorporating their experiences back home, ultimately reframing their lessons many
times over. The trip helped students analyze relationships, their own self-concept, ways in which
they interacted with other cultures at home and abroad and definitely informed their feelings of
national identity and worldview. The transcripts affirm the literature espousing the benefits of
study abroad. In addition, it confirms that the impact can be seen in shorter periods of time as
well.

**Extra nuggets.** The area regarding group chemistry and bonding was of special
importance because of how it helped some group members get through difficult challenges. The
monthly preparation these students had likely contributed to there being strong morale and
willingness to help other group mates. It warrants paying attention to or replicating as this kind
of group bonding can be integral to the success of any trip.
Secondly, issues of processing the experience came through in another way in this section as one student felt like they had not been changed by the experience but felt the expectation that they should have been changed. The judgment this student may have felt could have been harmful to their overall experience and ultimately to the reflection on the trip as a whole. By giving this student and other students multiple opportunities to process the experience as Nadler and Luckner (1992) suggested, a potentially volatile issue could be worked through.

**Implications for School Counselors**

Smith and Metry (2008) contended study abroad/cultural immersion helps facilitate readiness for the globalized marketplace of the 21st century. The opportunity these students had as sophomores in high school set them on a path to developing the skills necessary to compete in this marketplace. For example, these students are now more able to appreciate the knitted framework of business and culture and apply those skills, as Cann (2000) suggested. Bellamy and Weinberg (2006) continued study abroad/cultural immersion will help students continue to learn languages, improve awareness of other cultures, build self-confidence, and commit to viewing the world globally. Either with their responses to the GPI or through the reflections they shared in their interviews, there was a marked impact on their self-concept, self-efficacy, cultural competence, national identity, and worldview.

As school counselors and educators who are constant witnesses to the importance of this growth, it is our duty to help facilitate that journey. Whether it be creating fora for processing experiences students have already had, organizing service based trips ourselves, or connecting interested students to those opportunities outside our care, that should be our call. It is also an obligation to help support each student as they encounter the inevitable challenges of taking on such an experience. That means supporting their needs academically, socially, and ultimately as
they develop a vision for their careers. Most importantly, it means working to provide these opportunities for all students, especially low-income, first-generation, and historically underserved populations. The benefits students may see certainly necessitate the effort and support school counselors and other educators can provide.

**Limitations**

A limitation associated with this study was the low response rate for both the pre- and post-trip administrations of the GPI measure. Additionally, due to a coding error, it was difficult to make generalizations about the quantitative data. More effort should have been given in making sure the students had what they needed to complete the GPI inventory, especially as the trip had ended in the middle of summer vacation. Furthermore, the students were involved with monthly preparation nearly five months prior to taking the pre-trip test. In retrospect, a better time for the pre-trip test would be prior to any pre-trip planning. Similarly, it would be interesting to revisit the interview questions with each student a year removed from their trip. Since the experience was still fresh in the students’ minds when the original interviews were conducted, it would be interesting to see how much of the experience they retained and ultimately implemented a year later. Despite the limitations in regards to the quantitative data, the qualitative data touched on and demonstrated each of the five themes earmarked in the two research questions developed by this study. One final limitation was the low demographic diversity among the students. In addition, the research team that reviewed the transcripts were both white, middle class, adult males. Stronger demographic diversity in both areas would help the transferability of this study to multiple communities.
Directions for Future Research

As mentioned in the limitations, it would be a fascinating follow-up to revisit the interview questions one year removed from the students’ experiences. Additionally, any replication of this study, especially in regard to the quantitative data, will help build a broader case for a continued investment in international service learning/cultural immersion in high school. Historically, study abroad has not been as accessible to underserved populations (Devarics, 2008). A potential corollary study would be to track the accessibility that these populations are having to study abroad/cultural immersion experiences in high school. Ultimately, this study would be looking to address what more can be done to connect these populations to experiences that are helping build personal growth and resilience strategies.

Conclusion

The goal of research question number one was to look at the impact the trip to Sierra Leone had on students’ self-concept, self-efficacy and cultural competence. The initial hypotheses surmised that each of these three areas would be positively impacted by the study abroad/cultural immersions experience. The goal of research question number two was to analyze how students’ concepts of national identity and worldview were changed as a result of their experiences. The initial hypotheses suggested students would return with a broadened worldview and a more informed sense of national identity. Broadly speaking, the experience upheld the expectations of these hypotheses. Students were indeed affected by the nature of their time spent in Sierra Leone and continued to constantly reframe and apply those experiences to their lives at home. The impact short-term service learning/cultural immersion have for high school students cannot be overlooked.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions

This interview process should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. However, you as the student are encouraged to take as much time as you feel necessary to answer the question or elaborate on any story or thought that you feel is necessary to communicate the value of your experience.

1) Describe the process of communicating your experience to people who did not participate in study abroad.

2) Tell me about an experience that met your expectations and an experience that did not meet your expectations.

3) Describe an experience you struggled with in the beginning of your trip and how that experience changed over the course of your trip.

4) What seemed different upon your return to the United States?

5) How has the image of yourself changed, if at all, as a result of your experience?

6) Describe your reaction to others’ impressions of Sierra Leone in relation to your own.

7) Identify some aspects of your home country that you missed/did not miss while studying abroad. Were there unexpected areas?

8) How do you view yourself and your home country in relation to Sierra Leone? In relation to other countries/cultures?

9) Would you ever want to participate in study abroad again? Describe how your experience in Sierra Leone influenced your decision.

10) How do you see your experience with Sierra Leone and studying abroad impacting your life moving forward?