Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

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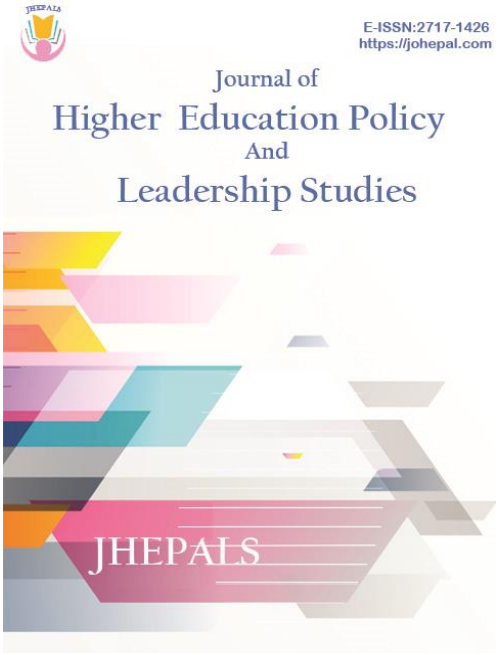

Secondary Short-term Study Abroad Programs as a Pathway for Increased Tertiary Intercultural Competence and Global Engagement

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Article Received **2022/01/12**

Article Accepted **2022/03/24**

Published Online **2022/03/30**

Cite article as:

Manning, M. (2022). Secondary short-term study abroad programs as a pathway for increased tertiary intercultural competence and global engagement. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *3*(1), 7-30. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.3.1.7

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.1.7]

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E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 3 Issue: 1
pp. 7-30
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.3.1.7

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the researcher considered the concept of short-term study abroad at the secondary level as a pathway to increased participation in international programs in higher education institutions (HEIs) and beyond. To effectively prepare students to live and work in a global economy, many HEIs offer study abroad programs as a method of increasing the intercultural competence of participants. However, myriad students in underserved populations perceive study abroad programs as out of their reach, while others have never even considered it. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher interviewed university students who attended high school in an underserved community in the northeast United States. Through a series of interviews, these former high school short-term study abroad participants recounted their experiences abroad and offered numerous examples of the deep impact international programming had on their intercultural competence and its impact on their future international experiences. The results of the study indicated short-term study abroad programs at the secondary level increased the intercultural competence of participants and promoted further international experiences at university and beyond.

Keywords: Global Pathways; Global Learning Outcomes; Intercultural Competence; Short-term Study Abroad; Higher Education Pathways; Internationalization

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Introduction

Educating students to become global citizens in an interconnected world is a critical component of 21st century education (Reimers, 2020). This study was based upon the experiences of recent high school graduates who participated in short-term study abroad (STSA) programs, to determine how they made meaning of their intercultural experiences, the extent to which they believed these programs impacted their intercultural competence (IC) and the impact on their future international experiences.

As employment opportunities are increasingly globalized, it has resulted in competition for jobs that span across continents (Brown, 2000). Having skill sets in IC is attractive to many employers, as, in many jobs, employees need to work collaboratively with others who may have different cultural backgrounds and norms (Inegbedion et al., 2020). This has increased the urgency to incorporate global education curriculum within secondary schools as a means of preparation for tertiary education and the workforce.

Yet some global education programming has faced criticism for not being geared toward the mainstream, raising concerns about exclusivity and elitism (Emert & Pearson, 2007). The benefits of study abroad (SA) programs have been called into question, with some implying that this variety of sojourns is simply glorified sightseeing, wrapped in educational packaging (Pitman et al., 2010). Learning more about how high school students make meaning of their STSA experiences may support the idea that STSA programs are valuable 21st century learning experiences for students that serve as a springboard for further global programming and may provide a counterargument to resistance in the field.

The purpose of this Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was to describe the experiences of current university students who participated in STSA programs while in high school, to better understand how students made meaning of their experiences and the extent to which it impacted their IC and participation in future global programming. For the purpose of this research, high school STSA was generally defined as a period of approximately one to two weeks in which students were living and studying abroad. Winthrop and McGivney (2016) estimated by 2030, 50% of high school graduates will not have the global competency necessary to work in a globalized workforce (p. 10). However, possessing global education skills both increases students' likelihood of finding employment and bolsters America's gross domestic product (Brown, 2000). In this global economy, over 40 million American jobs are connected to international trade (Winthrop & McGivney, 2016). Yet over two billion jobs are projected to become automated in the next 10 to 20 years, transforming the demand for skills from lower-level to higher-order ones compatible with a globally connected world (Brown, 2000). With half of all high school graduates predicted to be lacking in the global education skills needed for employment within the next decade, fostering skill sets in global education is a vital component of both secondary and tertiary educational programming (Brown, 2000). Moreover, as employers are increasingly invested in hiring globally competent employees, and as skill sets around IC are becoming more in demand post-graduation, further research on the impact of STSA programs and how participants make meaning of them is warranted.

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Significance of the Problem

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) asserted the multitude of graduating students lack the knowledge and skills necessary for employment in a global society (as cited in Asia Society, 2018). Employers across the globe have implored HEIs to plan more deliberately to design curricular programs of study that prepare students for the global world they will enter upon graduation (Arghode et al., 2020). If students in the United States (US) are lacking in global skill sets colleges and employers are seeking, such as global awareness, appreciation of diversity, and proficiency in foreign languages, they will be at a disadvantage in the college application process, as well as in the employment sector (Reimers, 2020). To that end, educators must implement cross-disciplinary programming that provides students with the global education skills necessary to give them a competitive edge in the world they will face upon graduation. Ramirez (2016) stated, considering the global economy, employers are increasingly seeking employees who possess high levels of IC. He claimed it is therefore, in large part, the responsibility of educators to offer opportunities for students to increase IC to improve their potential future employment marketability (Ramirez, 2016).

The Asia Society (2018) described global education as a way of building capacity to provide students with critical skills that enable them to be globally minded and globally ready to compete in an interconnected society. The globalization of the workforce has expanded so rapidly this century, that the US can no longer anticipate maintaining its competitive advantage in the world if future graduates do not possess high levels of IC (NAFSA, 2015). The OECD asserted secondary schools fail to graduate students with even marginal knowledge of the geopolitical landscape nor communication skills in foreign languages (as cited in Asia Society, 2018). Moreover, the failure of US schools to graduate an adequate number of Americans with enough proficiency in a foreign language to fill the needs of defense, foreign affairs, law enforcement, and governmental agencies is well-documented and American schools are short-changing its students by failing to prepare them to hold these vital jobs (NAFSA, 2015).

The potential result of the lack of global education programming in schools may be a decrease in the number of students accepted to top-tier colleges and universities as well as a decline in the number of students offered high-paying jobs out of college (Redden, 2018). Both HEIs and employers are continually seeking candidates who demonstrate acumen in global readiness factors (Brown, 2000). Global programs must be designed in a way that deliberately addresses key concepts and skills identified as best practices in the field of global education (Arghode et al., 2020). Short-term study abroad has long been considered a best practice in increasing IC in the field of global education (Jooste & Heleta, 2017). In addition to often increasing proficiency in a foreign language, many students return after STSA programs with new mindsets and novel perspectives on how they view the world (Feast et al., 2011).

Thus, to address this issue, the researcher sought to examine the following question: How do current university students who participated in STSA programs during high school make meaning of their international experiences in relation to their IC and the impact on international experiences during university and beyond?

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Theoretical Framework

Deardorff's (2009) theory of intercultural competence (TIC) centers around the transformational nature of experiences and is trifold, as it addresses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of people, and how they transform as a result of specific experiences. Transformative learning theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 1991) is often applied when researchers are studying disorienting dilemmas, or novel circumstances in which one is placed in a situation that challenges perceived norms. In such circumstances, mindsets can adapt and change, and new viewpoints can be formed. It is precisely in this transformative phenomenon that the TIC is based (Deardorff, 2009). However, the specific disorienting dilemma being studied when TIC is used as a theoretical framework, is rooted in an intercultural experience. This could be within STSA, through interactions with peoples of other cultures, during the learning of a new language, or in any other situation in which mindsets and perspectives may be altered because of an intercultural experience.

Review of Literature

Possessing skill sets in IC is critical for graduating university students to be competitive in a global economy upon commencement (Reimers, 2020). In this review, the researcher highlights central themes that emerged in the literature. The preponderance of literature indicates students who participate in SA programs demonstrate increased levels of IC. As well, there are several compelling factors that deter participation in SA programs for specific subgroups of students, in particular, students of color and students of low socioeconomic status. Yet, underrepresented students often have the most to gain from these programs. In addition, international experiences often beget more in-depth global experiences in the future, thus, serving as a catalyst for further internationalization.

Study Abroad and IC

As a result of SA experiences, students can not only increase their global-mindedness and knowledge of the culture and cultural differences of their host country, but also, they can boost aspects of personal traits such as confidence, self-awareness, patience, and decisiveness (Reimers, 2020). Study abroad students frequently report both the way in which they view the world and the way they view themselves changed due to their international experience (Maharaja, 2018). Moreover, cultural stereotypes students hold about other countries and peoples can change drastically after completing SA programs. As well, many SA students become more aware of the stereotypes their international peers may hold about them, which many believe is an illuminating and humbling learning experience in which self-clarity is heightened (Maharaja, 2018). Improved self-clarity often occurs after living abroad, as SA students gain a better understanding of self in relation to others. Thus, Adam et al. (2018) suggested the closest path to increased knowledge of self may well be found across country borders.

How one handles cultural differences progresses along a continuum, according to Mitchell and Paras (2018), who proffered further investigation of this continuum can lead to improved knowledge around *how* students increase IC, and not just *if* they increase it.

Mitchell and Paras argued regardless of the strength of pre- and post- departure orientation and on-program curriculum, changes in IC are directly influenced by the psychological

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strategies students have in place prior to studying abroad. Students who have multiple strategies can work through the cognitive dissonance that occurs abroad when one's prior beliefs and assumptions are contradicted by one's lived experience in the moment. As such, SA students may benefit from pre-departure work in specific psychological strategies so that pushing through the cognitive differences while in the host country is better facilitated, allowing them to handle culture shock more readily, and increase IC (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Macedo (2017) stated students must use critical thinking and problem-solving skills to apply their knowledge to solve real problems in unique settings that are foreign to them. Thus, the more international experiences students have, the more readily they can assuage cognitive dissidence. Further, there is a direct correlation between SA programming and desired student outcomes in global competence skill sets, which may serve as a justification of the resources behind such programming, which may then increase future program participation (Hanada, 2019; Murphy, 2014).

Prohibitive Factors to Study Abroad

There exists a variety of factors that may hinder participation in SA programs for underprivileged populations (Ecker-Lyster & Kardash, 2022). Some of the issues that may be prohibitive are cost, length of time, family disruption, curricular concerns, concerns about safety abroad, and students' concerns about the implications of their race and gender (Ecker-Lyster & Kardash, 2022). Schutz (2006) emphasized much support is needed, from both within and outside of educational organizations, to combat poverty and eliminate disparities between the opportunities of impoverished students and those of their cohorts from middle and upper socioeconomic statuses.

Ecker-Lyster & Kardash (2022) asserted financial limitations are the primary reason students decide not to study abroad. Many students simply cannot afford the high price tag that accompanies SA programs, with costs that extend beyond the typical price of a semester at university, such as international airline tickets, ground transportation, fees for passports and visas, and other expenses associated with living abroad. To mitigate the inequalities that may prevent students in lower socio-economic tiers from SA program participation, STSA programs, when designed with these concerns in mind, can be a viable alternative to more traditional semester- or year-long programs (Ecker-Lyster & Kardash, 2022).

In addition to the financial dynamics Ecker-Lyster & Kardash (2022) identified, there are often a host of cultural factors that also inhibit participation in SA programming for underprivileged students (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). Cultural and sociological components can deter students from underprivileged families from participation in SA programs. These factors are typically the result of deeply rooted cultural issues, with the rationale for underprivileged students having a significantly lower participation rate in SA reaching beyond financial limitations (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). In fact, the majority of underprivileged students do not possess the intent to ever study abroad, and this lack of intention hampers future participation, even when other prohibitive factors are remedied (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). The authors claimed the lack of students' motivation to study abroad stems from the trajectory of their life events prior to university, which is partly a result of prior choices and experiences throughout their educational careers. Moreover, historically, SA programs can perpetuate social inequities and demonstrate a socially selective practice (Kim & Lawrence,

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2021). In fact, in recent decades, HEIs have offered increased opportunities for students to participate in general higher education programming yet similar increases for SA programs were not parallel (Kim & Lawrence, 2021).

Cox et al. (2014) posited students from underrepresented backgrounds demonstrate the most significant gains in IC when they study abroad, asserting students who travel internationally broaden their mindset, particularly around the topics of social justice, intercultural competencies, diversity, global awareness, democracy, civic engagement, and transformative learning. The authors argued the largest changes in the categories of worldview can be found in students who receive financial aid and first-generation college students (Cox et al., 2014). This result led the authors to consider the notion that the underrepresented in SA have the most to gain.

Gaulter and Mountford-Zimdars (2018) concluded student mobility improves cultural context and cultural cues and heightens the acceptance of "Others" for SA participants. Study abroad students often report a reduction in colloquialisms and an increase in their sense of belonging (Gaulter & Mountford-Zimdars, 2018). In addition, after studying abroad, the temperament of SA participants from underprivileged backgrounds often reflects both the temperaments and aspirations of students of the higher social classes. Thus, exposure to international education in a higher tier of socio-economic status can change the trajectory of students' lives, as it increases motivations and aspirations to move between social classes (Gaulter & Mountford-Zimdars, 2018).

In addition to low-income students, there are myriad other underrepresented populations in the field of SA increasingly being studied, such as minority students, community college students, and students in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community (Brux & Fry, 2010). Brux and Fry (2010) identified inequities in SA programs as an issue that needs to be assuaged. Thus, many post-secondary institutions are implementing practices to increase SA opportunities for the underserved (Di Pietro, 2020). In considering SA programs for underserved populations, Di Pietro (2020) cited a variety of inequities in SA programs, such as access, climate, diversity in the curriculum, and learning and development. He noted a host of minority populations poorly represented in the field of SA, such as low-income students, first-generation students, and students in the gay and transgender community. As such, not only do minority students miss out on valuable learning experiences when they do not study abroad, but also, the schools in potential host countries lose chances to gain more knowledge around inclusive practices when minority students do not study abroad on their campuses.

Methodology

An IPA was selected to consider the human experiences of current university students who participated in STSA programs while attending high school in an underserved community that qualifies for 100% free breakfast and lunch, thus meeting the American federal government definition of low-income/poverty in schools. The purpose of this study was to examine how participants made meaning of their experiences on high school STSA programs and the extent to which STSA impacted their IC and future international programming.

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Participants

An IPA research study typically involves a small number of participants and closely examines each participant's understanding of a similar life experience. Smith et al. (2009) suggested IPA study participants be composed of as homogeneous a group as possible. As such, the researcher studied the experiences of seven recent high school graduates who participated in STSA programs offered by a low-income school district in southeastern Massachusetts. Purposeful sampling was used in order to gather participants who captured a wide variety of backgrounds. Selecting participants purposefully can afford deeper insight into a common experience (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were contacted using what Smith et al. referred to as 'opportunity,' as they were all known to the researcher, having traveled on STSA programs she facilitated (p. 48). All participants signed consent forms to participate in the study and were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity. While the commonality between participants was the specific program in the same school district, there existed variations between participants.

Participants were composed of both male and female students who traveled on one or more of the STSA programs the researcher facilitated during the past seven years. During this time frame, there were eight programs offered and a total of 16 different countries visited. It was the intent of the researcher to study the STSA experiences of a wide variety of students from different demographic backgrounds who traveled on a number of different programs to better understand the STSA experience of high school students and its relation to IC and participation in future international programs.

Data Collection

Data for this study were derived from recent high school graduates who participated in STSA programs during secondary school. In order to collect quality data, the researcher developed and followed an interview protocol that allowed participants to share information about their international experiences in such a way, so as to allow any themes around IC and future impact, as well as any unforeseen themes, to shine through. This IPA research utilized the semi-structured interview method and was informed by the research question. Prior to the interviews, the researcher crafted a loose schedule of topics for discussion. When necessary for clarification, the researcher asked follow-up questions and offered prompts and probes for elucidation on topics that did not originally appear on the interview schedule. These unexpected topics often yielded robust data and vital information. The researcher funneled questions as a way of starting with broader questions or topics and then moving closer to the core experience itself.

Diaries, blogs, and vlogs participants created on their STSA programs were also used in the data collection for this study, as they provided intimate details of the target experience. These data often yield deeply personal accounts of experiences that relay meaningful feelings and reflections. In crafting a diary, blog, or vlog entry, one is having a conversation with oneself, and therefore, may be more candid or forthcoming than in an interview or observation, during which another individual is present (Smith et al., 2009). In addition to interviews and written/recorded reflections, photographs and/or artifacts from the STSA experience(s) were requested from each participant in order to triangulate the data.

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This research consisted of 21, one-to-one, in person, online, or telephone interviews. For all seven participants, each of the three interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes per individual session. The researcher was mindful of the non-verbal cues of participants to gauge their comfort level. As well, the researcher bracketed her positionality and refrained from using the silent spaces in interviews to assert her own understandings or share commonalities of what she had also experienced abroad. Interviewing is an art, a delicate balance of interaction between humans in an attempt to discover truth. There are no perfect interviews but, adhering to best practices in qualitative interviews can assist researchers in producing effective interview techniques that can yield rich data.

Data Analysis

The researcher developed a structure illustrating the relationships between themes and created an organizational chart of the material. An audit of this study was conducted before the development of a full thematic narrative, ending with reflections on the narrative. While these steps were helpful in structuring the IPA process, they were not compulsory or linear. In fact, there existed much flexibility in the process. In IPA studies, these steps are often iterative, as a researcher may continually return to aspects of data to review current interpretations and how and if they converge or diverge from superordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009).

The first step in analyzing data from IPA studies, as outlined by Smith et al. (2009), is the reading and re-reading of transcripts in order to fully engage in the data. The researcher took notes of first impressions and set them aside in order to bracket preliminary thoughts. Initial notes involved a freer textual analysis, but more detailed notes through multiple iterations contained descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, which overlapped, producing rich detail and multiple threads of topical content that was ripe for more in-depth analysis. Throughout the numerous stages of the analytic process, the researcher utilized a variety of techniques such as margin writing, color-coding, and free association writing, all of which were helpful processes in enabling a better understanding of the data in pure form.

In order to consider the main themes that emerged and questions that remained, the researcher created a contact summary sheet immediately following each interview, so as to record thoughts and observations before time faded memories of the conversation. The researcher charted possible connections between the emergent themes that appeared in graph form: from abstraction, to subsumption, to contextualization, to numeration. Finally, after thoroughly analyzing each individual case, the researcher repeated similar steps and analyzed *across* case to identify any superordinate themes as well as instances unique to a particular individual, and analyzed both commonalities, as well as where divergent interpretations existed. Using thick description and direct quotations supported the analysis and interpretation of the data.

There is an ongoing debate about culture in “new” phenomenology, as culture and tradition often have an impact on the interpretation of experiences (Dowling, 2005). The researcher, whose work is embedded in the dynamics of culture and traditions, was mindful of these factors, in order to relay the data in an impartial and unbiased way, knowing, however, that participants each interpreted their experiences abroad as a result of their own culture and traditions they inherently brought to the experience.

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Findings

There is an emphasis in many educational institutions to implement curriculum that aids in developing global citizens who can synthesize complex universal issues and transfer knowledge for its use in practical application (Reimers, 2020). Study abroad programs are often seen as a means to that end, with a preponderance of research indicating that SA fosters increased open-mindedness in participants who have experienced other cultures firsthand (Doerr, 2015). The seven participants were comprised of both males and females who attended high school STSA programs in China, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Greece, and Italy over the past seven years with the researcher. Throughout the course of multiple interviews, each participant offered a rich description of their international experiences. These former STSA students reflected upon how they made meaning of their experiences in the moment while in another country, and also shared contemplations about the meaning they assign to these memories now, as they look back on their international experiences through an adult lens. Two overarching themes that emerged were a) a newfound sense of respect participants had for people, cultures, and traditions different than their own (increased IC) and b) a desire for further participation in global experiences (future internationalization).

Increased Intercultural Competence

As on-program discomfort gave way to increased independence, it also allowed room for the recognition of a heightened respect for others. In traveling and living abroad, most participants indicated they gained a newfound sense of respect as a result of their international experiences. When discussing the concept of respect, participants shared they had gained a deeper appreciation of others from their time abroad (increased IC), which impacted their experiences while on program as well as their interpersonal relationships post-program (future internationalization). Thus, the first overarching theme was *increased intercultural competence*.

In her dialogue about being immersed in different cultures, Jenny's comments indicated her STSA experience had increased both her respect for others and her openness toward engaging in additional international experiences:

> Being in different cultures made me respect people more because you can understand where they came from. It made me open my eyes to different people coming from different cultures: why they think like that, why they're acting like that…And it made me want to travel more and experience other cultures. It definitely opened me up and made me want to learn more about other people.

Similarly, Melanie proffered her presence in a host country, even for a short period of time, offered a far more immersive experience than all the time she had invested in learning about the country prior to her STSA:

> I've always had an eagerness to travel and learn about different cultures, but it's different thinking about it than actually going to different places and experiencing it. *Actually* living there and interacting with students allowed me to really understand Chinese culture and the people beyond things you hear

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> about in the media. That was a really important part of that trip, that human aspect of getting to know people.

Karen also discussed how getting to know students and staff in the international partner school increased both her understanding and respect for them:

> Respect came into play a lot when we were talking to the staff and faculty and other students who go to that school because it's important to understand the different perspectives [of] others. When you are talking to them, and even just being out in the public, it teaches you how other people live and it puts things in perspective, while also respecting their [traditions] and values.

Karen's comments indicated this new perspective was helpful in her understanding and appreciation of others. Likewise, Laura identified she was considerably more empathetic having seen how others lived and having learned about the daily lives of people far different from her:

> After the trip, I noticed I had more empathy towards others and was a much more understanding person. I was also a lot more grateful for what I have and what I go through everyday once I saw what people elsewhere go through.

While Hailey asserted she did not believe she experienced any significant change in her level of respect as a direct result of the program, she indicated her awareness and appreciation of other cultures had, indeed, increased because of her STSA program:

> I'm not sure that my attitude of respect exactly changed. I think of myself as a very respectful person, especially meeting people from other cultures; just being aware that they are from different cultures and not to offend. But the big takeaway I got from [STSA] was opening my mind to other cultures because without [STSA] I don't think I would be the same person I am today. [STSA] opened my mind to other cultures around the world and people from across the world who were different from me.

The responses of participants indicated skill development in the IC skill of appreciation of other peoples and cultures. Most participants made a correlation to this realm of IC in terms of an increase in their respect toward others. A focus on interpersonal communication was also evident in many of the interviews. It was clear students were keenly aware of the cultural differences that surrounded them on program and gained a more robust level of appreciation for these differences, noting they may not have done so, had they not experienced the culture and people of the host country firsthand.

Increased Interest and Participation in Tertiary Global Experiences

The second theme that emerged from this study was *increased interest and participation in tertiary global experiences*. Participants discussed the far-reaching influence their STSA programs had on their lives post-programming. From their responses, four distinct subthemes emerged, each of which indicated time spent abroad had altered the trajectory of their lives. Participants spoke about the extent to which STSA impacted HEI and career choices, plans for future travel, and continued relationships with international peers.

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Higher Education Choices

Laura shared the STSA program she attended in China ignited her desire to study at the HEI she now attends because of its strong focus on international business. In fact, even before officially enrolling in her current university, Laura signed up for a university STSA summer business program in Europe after her SPS international program ended:

> I loved traveling so much that I went to London for two weeks, less than a year from my China trip. I got to study business in London and meet students from around the world. Both experiences truly opened my eyes to the different challenges and opportunities that traveling has to offer. I will always remember how much I learned and saw and how I felt during and after the [STSA] trip [in high school]. It has been a huge encouragement on the rest of my life. I am majoring in International Business. I chose a major that would allow me to continue to experience new places and cultures. I had never been out of the country before the trip to China, and it ultimately led my life in a different direction. I had no idea what I was going to do, what major I wanted to do, which college… really anything! And I went to China, I came back, and I immediately decided I wanted to [study] international business.

Karen also discussed at length how the STSA program in China led her to narrow down her HEI choice and major. She explained when she was in high school, she had always been drawn to the arts. She identified while she was on program in China, the arts classes she took, coupled with her own awakening while taking photographs there, ultimately led to her college choice decision:

> It impacted my choice to go to art school because when we went to China, I had brought my camera with me. I had done photography before, but it made me want to photograph things that were happening outside of America. It was a good opportunity for me to do that because ever since then it made me realize how I could connect photography with informing the world about other things… informing America about other things that are going on outside of it. And that ultimately made me decide I wanted to go to art school.

When prompted to give a specific example of how she made meaning of this revelation while on program and how she made meaning of it later, regarding her choice of studies, Karen offered a rich description of a photo she brought to the interview session. Her picture of the lanterns was colorful and the description she gave of the experience was equally as vibrant:

> I wanted to take [photographs] as I was seeing [things] so that when I went back home, I could reflect on it. I chose to write about this picture in my college essay because I wanted to explain why I was choosing to focus on photography for my future. This [picture] did come of use [in my college essay] because it was a more unique way to explain why I wanted to do this in my future, and I had a real picture to refer to. And I remember the exact feeling that I had every time I see the picture, so that's why this was the most prevalent moment on the whole trip for me. It really did shape what I wanted to do.

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Karen continued explaining her thought process about her desire to share her experiences with the world through art:

> Other people are going to look at [my photographs] and they'll have their own interpretations. But also, they may be able to experience some of the feelings I was feeling but without [them] being [in China] and I'll to be able to expose other people to a culture they might not actually be able to leave the country and [experience]. I can bring it to them so they can have the same emotions and feelings that became important to me as an artist. [STSA] made me realize I want to continue to travel and capture moments like that so I can allow other people to have the same feelings. It truly was the moment I realized I want to do this for the rest of my life and to have people feel emotions through my photos.

Melanie also stated her STSA program in China influenced her choice of university major at the Ivy League institution she currently attends, stating it impacted some of the courses she has since selected, including a future, longer SA program in China in which she intends to enroll:

> I take those experiences and use them in my coursework and reading every day. I think it is special that I have a background from high school of travel and experiencing different cultures because it gives me a more worldly perspective on my coursework. Especially because I am [majoring in] anthropology, which focuses on different cultures and peoples of the world. That's one way I used my experience of traveling in high school [now that I'm in] college. But also, it has impacted the ways I want to take advantage of opportunities in college because there's so many opportunities available to travel abroad and do research and learn about different countries. I want to translate all the travel I did in high school, now into college. [STSA] has given me the experience I need to pursue research and language. My travel experiences in high school really gave me a foundation to now pursue travel that is more research focused.

Career Choices

Laura stated the STSA program in China not only impacted her choice of university and major, but also, she expressed her intended career choice has been influenced by the experience. "My goal for a career is to work at [a tour company] when I graduate so I can truly be involved in helping others study abroad and experience the world."

Likewise, Hailey also indicated her Scandinavian STSA helped inspire the development of her intended future career. While she has long been interested in the medical profession, she asserted her past international programming served as an inspiration to work in developing nations in the future:

> In my future career, I hope to do work abroad, especially because of how much [STSA] has opened my mind to everything that was happening in the world; other cultures around the world. I want to use my medical degree to be an obstetrician and gynecologist. I want to go to developing countries and help women.

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In making meaning of their past STSA experiences, participants spoke in detail about the significance their international exposure in high school had on them, as viewed through an adult lens. Many participants referred to the longing to share intercultural learning with others professionally, whether through art, or stories, or healing. And most explained, while they were unaware of the magnitude of it at the time, they understood they had experienced defining moments on program that altered the trajectory of their future paths.

Future Travel

All seven participants spoke animatedly about either the international travel in which they participated post-program or of future travel itineraries they were planning. They asserted the act of traveling had fueled their desire to travel more. Some expressed an intention to return to the host country of their STSA, and all articulated the aspiration to explore additional international locations they had yet to visit.

Melanie offered a succinct summary of her own experiences based on her extensive travel background. Further, she explained how each travel experience served as a springboard for the next, and that with every trip, her learning deepened and became more integrated:

> Going on my first trip [to Europe in high school], I [thought], 'I'm going to see the whole world!' But then, going outside of a European context sparked my curiosity to learn about all different cultures. China really sparked my interest in language and in a deeper learning of culture, which has really impacted my decision to study anthropology, because I want to incorporate learning about different people into future research. I think that the curiosity that I got from being a part of [STSA] has really impacted what I've done now since being in college. I want to get the most out of all experiences in life now because I have that curiosity. And I want to learn as much about the world as possible and I think the best way to do that is through travel.

Some students expressed a strong interest in participating in a semester-long study abroad program through the HEI they attend. In Sam's dialogue, he discussed researching different SA options offered by his university. "My school has been advertising [SA] trips to Cuba and Spain. I have not been to Spain yet, but I have a feeling that I'd love it, so I am heavily looking into that."

In addition to the summer business program in London about which she had previously shared, Laura also indicated she soon planned to begin a semester-long study abroad program in Europe. "I am currently in preparation for a semester abroad in Germany and London next spring. I am so excited about discovering new places while I'm in Europe!"

Melanie also had plans for continued study abroad and intended to return to China. "[My STSA] is what sparked my interest in in traveling and studying abroad in China in particular. Now I'm taking Chinese and I'm planning on studying abroad there." Melanie was also inspired to spend the previous summer abroad as an au pair in Spain. She shared stories about this experience:

> I was looking at ways to go abroad and I came across being an au pair and [thought], 'This is perfect!' I love working with children, and I love travel. I lived

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> with the host family and would watch the kids while the parents were away for work and help them with their English proficiency.

Other participants also indicated a yearning to continue to explore the world for the pure enjoyment and excitement of travel. Jenny shared sentiments of wanting to explore more destinations, offering she had no present plans to travel for educational purposes, but her STSA program in Italy inspired her to return to Europe. She explained it using her memory of throwing a coin in the Trevi Fountain as an example. After describing her coin toss, which was coupled with a wish to return to Europe, she then spoke about a trip she took to Norway last summer to visit international friends she made post-program. Jenny indicated she had booked yet another flight to return to Norway again this winter. In reference to the photo of Jenny and her friend at Trevi Fountain, she exclaimed, "Just knowing [the wish] actually came true, it's like a dream come true! Like anything can happen!"

Sam shared his future leisure travel plans as well. He explained it as "getting hooked" on travel from his first STSA program:

> [STSA] got me hooked right away. As soon as we were in the airport in Amsterdam on the first trip, I basically was hooked. I think you definitely have to travel first and then you're going to be hooked. I just couldn't see anyone traveling to a foreign country and seeing all the sights and then saying, 'Nah, this isn't really for me.' It's so much fun, just seeing everything different! It's exploring a whole new world each time!

When asked what new world he planned to explore next, Sam had a couple of ideas he was considering:

> I am currently planning a trip to Aruba to be my first real tropical island experience. My favorite color is the color of Caribbean water. I don't know how to describe it... you may call it turquoise, but I feel that it just doesn't do it justice. It's my favorite color, so I've always wanted to go down there and really experience it myself. In terms of the grand scheme of things, I've always said I want to go to every continent, including Antarctica, so I can say I've seen every corner of the world.

Each participant expressed a strong motivation to travel the world. Moreover, all participants conveyed their post-program travels or travel plans were inspired by their past experiences on STSA. The choices in chosen destinations varied tremendously from a return to China, to Europe, to the Caribbean, and even to Antarctica. It is evident these individuals were determined to continue their journeys across the world.

Continued Relationships with International Peers

Jenny's stories about visiting international peers in Norway spoke to a subtheme that was prevalent in the interview series. Participants unanimously indicated an important piece of the STSA program was meeting peers from other countries. They spoke of the development

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of those relationships from awkward first meetings, to ongoing friendships, to becoming a repeat host family for short- and long-term international students.

Jenny had many stories to tell about Per, an international peer with whom she developed a close bond. She believed her STSA experience served as a catalyst to meet more international peers. Therefore, when a Norwegian exchange student enrolled in his senior year in SPS, she immediately made an effort to befriend him:

> There was a foreign exchange student who came to my school, and I really wanted to get to know him because he was from a different culture, and he played sports and I play sports. Being on [STSA] in Greece and Italy made me think about other people from different countries. [I realized] it doesn't matter where you come from, or where or how you grew up; you can still have good connections with people from other countries. And I made a good connection with [Per] and he's impacted my life in so many ways.

As well, Jenny shared a photo of the necklace she was wearing, which was a gift from Per's grandmother. "It's a necklace of a bird [from] Norwegian culture. You give to it to people you really care about. It's a family heirloom and his grandmother sent it from Norway, all the way to give it to me." When prompted to explain how it made her feel when she was wearing it, Jenny added, "The fact that it's a bird… I love flying to different countries…just flying anywhere, traveling. I feel that's a big symbol for me and makes me feel comforted in that I can go anywhere." Jenny found great symbolism in the gift and likens herself as the bird, now that she has had a taste of traveling internationally. "[Traveling] opened my mind that there's more out there than in just America. There's more than in just my town. So just spread your wings! Just like the bird!"

Hailey offered a rich description of how initial international friendships, developed through STSA, led to her family becoming a repeat host family for international exchange students. She described the dichotomy of her upbringing of being surrounded by peers of extremely similar backgrounds, while set in a very diverse town:

> I grew up in a bubble, although being in a very diverse school. We grew up together in the sense that we had similar interests, similar personalities, and we're doing similar things. But being able to go abroad and meet people who weren't in that same bubble, they don't have similar interests, they're not doing similar things, and they don't have similar experiences at all because they grew up in another country…. Being able to meet people like that, and talk to them, and live a day in their life… that was important in shaping my character.

She asserted her first encounter with her "school buddy" from her Scandinavian STSA program gave her the idea to develop more connections with international peers as a host sibling:

> Having my Swedish pen pal really opened my mind. Then when I visited her in her school, just seeing how amazing she was as a person, her different interests…I'd never met anybody like that. And I had never met anybody who knew so many languages. So, it was just more about wanting to meet people aside from the people in my inner circle who… we all were kind of the same. We're in the same clubs; in the same classes; we have similar interests. Just

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> being able to meet people outside of that… very far outside of America, really appealed to me, and I showed that to my family. It would be a really great opportunity to house foreign exchange students and be able to learn about other cultures and give a student a house and a home, to help them in America.

She explained further, because of this first international relationship, she was interested in meeting even more international peers. Thus, when she learned of an opportunity to become a host family, she immediately brought it to her parents and convinced them:

> The Scandinavian [program] sparked something in me to be more curious about culture and my family having foreign exchange students. And I really don't think that that would have happened if I didn't meet the foreign exchange student I was connected to at the Swedish school. If I hadn't met her, I don't think I would have pushed my mom to get involved in foreign exchange housing.

Since hosting their first international student post-program, Hailey and her family hosted over a dozen more exchange students. And Hailey expounded her family's relationships with these students continued to blossom, even when the students returned to their home country or enroll in university. She identified the decision to host international students as a defining moment in her family's life. "That moment when we decided to house international students was a life-changer. I've been able to develop such deep relationships with the students that come in our house."

Summary of Findings

The relationship between respect, culture, and language was also one that was explored by participants and an area of IC in which many believed they had gained valuable skills. All STSA programs attended by participants occurred in countries where English was not the first language. This offered students an opportunity to move beyond their linguistic comfort zones and exercise some of the language learning skills they had been taught prior to program. Participants shared taking classes in a partner school abroad, trying international foods, and exploring the cultural norms of the host countries all led to a greater understanding and deepening respect for others (*increased IC*).

The theme of *increased interest and participation in tertiary global experiences* resounded throughout the interview sessions as well. Participants repeatedly indicated their lives had dramatically changed due to their high school STSA programming. Many participants shared their experiences abroad influenced their choice of university or undergraduate major. Other students spoke of the impact STSA had on their current or intended career choices. Interestingly, although all participants had identified the relationship between their STSA program and their chosen career path, the choices were somewhat unique. One student indicated a preference for work in the travel and tourism field, and another sought to engage in a research-focused career in anthropology. One participant was on the pre-med track, and another student was planning a career in travel photography.

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All seven participants unanimously agreed STSA had increased their desire to continue traveling. They shared vivid stories of post-program travel, including study abroad plans and leisure travel. It was evident STSA served to whet their appetite for both travels abroad and for communication with international peers. The stories they shared of their STSA were only the beginning of their adventures; the first stamps in their passports. These travelers fully intended a lifetime of journeys, of exploring the world, meeting new people, and learning about languages and cultures vastly different from their own.

Discussion

Acquah and Commins (2018) asserted exposure to other cultures, norms, and values is often an entry point for gaining an increased respect and a deeper appreciation of others. Participants overwhelmingly identified respect as an area of personal growth in which they noticed a significant change in themselves. Laura claimed STSA helped her become more respectful and empathetic of others. Acquah and Commins further stated when multiple layers of multiculturalism and diversity are present in SA programs, the opportunity for gaining skillsets in IC increases exponentially.

Jenny offered being in a host country and interacting with international peers gave her a greater respect and understanding of others. "You can understand better where they came from," she stated, claiming STSA offered her a deeper insight into why people speak and behave the way they do. These findings were consistent with the research of Adam et al. (2018) who claimed respect, tolerance, and knowledge of self increases with knowledge of others.

Sam stated getting to know others in the host countries of his STSAs offered him a greater appreciation of diversity and an increased level of respect. He mentioned when he understood more about what people do, and how and why they do it, he gained more respect for them and their way of life. Moreover, he noticed others wanted to get to know him better as well. He said their eagerness to understand him led to an even greater respect for his international acquaintances. The research of Doerr (2015) supported the finding that a greater understanding of others leads to increased feelings of respect.

One of the most significant findings concerned the long-lasting impact STSA has on participants. Maharaja (2018) discussed the post-program influence SA often has on students, stating it can have a dramatic influence on participants' futures. Academic choices made during one's educational career, in particular the choice to study abroad, can have a profound impact on the trajectory of one's life. In line with this body of literature, all seven participants in this study indicated STSA had a profound impact on their post-program decisions and aspirations. Kimberly emphatically stated her STSA program completely changed her life. Laura expressed a sincere gratitude for being selected for her STSA program, because it dramatically impacted her future. The future impact acknowledged by the participants' post-program included an influence on college and career choices, the fostering of international friendships, and the desire for future travel.

Ecker-Lyster & Kardash (2022) indicated SA programs can influence the future career choices of participants. Macedo's (2017) work supports the claim made by some participants that their STSA programs played a role in their career decisions around art. Macedo argued using art as a pedagogical tool in SA programs increases both knowledge of academic content and skills in IC. Both Kimberly and Karen stated a major factor that led to their

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decision to pursue careers in the arts was their STSA program in China, in which the focus of the STSA curriculum was arts-based.

As well, when students are placed in situations on their international programs that cause them to consider the plight of others, it can lead them to continue the pursuit of helping others in the future (Macedo, 2017). This research is aligned with Hailey's revelation after her international exposure, when she decided the goal for her medical career was to help women in developing nations. Marks et al. (2015) discussed the impact studying in a developing nation has on the problem-solving and collaborative skills of SA participants. Although she did not visit a developing nation during her time in high school, Hailey claimed it was the act of traveling internationally and meeting international peers that caused her to consider further international possibilities that included developing nations.

Doerr (2015) highlighted the importance of friendships that form during SA programs. The author stated SA students often perceive their relationships are positively impacted by their experiences abroad and that SA changes the way they interact with others. Friendship was a theme that recurred throughout all interviews, as participants shared stories of their international pen pals, "school buddies," and host siblings.

In line with the existing literature on the relationship between forming international friendships and increasing IC, Hailey offered numerous stories of international peers she has met who hail from over a dozen different countries. She explained STSA fueled her curiosity to meet international peers and described the process of negotiating with her parents to become a host family for international students. She credited her STSA experience with her family hosting many international classmates. "I can't imagine what [our] life would be like without hosting international students. I've learned a lot about different cultures and about understanding different people because of the many [exchange students] who have come through our household," she added.

The intention for future travel was unanimously espoused by all participants. STSA experiences frequently drive personal motivation and future aspirations of participants (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). Kim and Lawrence's (2021) research supports the future travel theme in this study, as all participants asserted their STSA program motivated them to travel more. More than half of the participants traveled abroad post-program, and the others indicated they had earnest plans to travel in the near future. Laura traveled to Europe the summer after her high school STSA program for an STSA opportunity through her university. In addition, she enrolled in a semester abroad in Europe. Melanie became an au pair in Spain after her STSA and intended to enroll in her university's study abroad program in China. Leisure travel was also important to participants. Jenny explained the joy that returning to Europe brought her after having thrown a coin into the Trevi Fountain in Rome and wishing for her return. Sam made plans to visit Aruba to experience the Caribbean blue water he longed to see and has crafted future travel plans to explore all seven continents. This is aligned with the work of Murphy, et al. (2014) who claimed STSA often serves as a springboard for future international travels, including future studies abroad.

Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

The major findings of this study, in addition to being supported by the existing literature, relate to the theoretical framework that served as the underpinning that guided this

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research. This IPA was based on Deardorff's (2009) TIC. Deardorff's TIC has roots in Argyris's (1965) body of work around skill sets in IC. Argyris argued the more a person becomes aware of their place within the world, the better problem-solving capabilities they have. Argyris's research corresponds with Karen's dialogue about encouraging others to learn more about societies and communities outside their own. "It's important to understand other people to understand yourself," she asserted. Melanie's comments also echoed the research of Argyris when she stated, "We're all people, and learning from other cultures can help you learn so much more about yourself and the world." And Kimberly issued a similar statement, claiming, "Learning how to be comfortable around things you aren't familiar with; people you aren't familiar with, [can] open yourself up to the world."

Argyris (1965) maintained motivation plays a central role in one's mindset and the capability to adapt to change. The findings of the study related to his research in this area, relative to the changed mindsets the seven participants reported post-program. Laura spoke directly about the motivation STSA gave her to discover the world. As a result of this motivation, she participated in a SA program after graduating from high school and enrolled in another the following semester. Moreover, she was motivated to take additional classes each semester and summer to finish her undergraduate studies ahead of schedule.

The TIC espoused by Deardorff (2009) is also deeply rooted in Mezirow's (1991) TLT in which knowledge is constructed based on lived experience. Mezirow claimed when people are placed in direct experiences, their thinking is transformed from a concentration on what they know to how they know it. Melanie understood the importance of being placed directly in an experience and shared, "It's different thinking about it than *actually* going to different places and experiencing it…*Actually* living there and interacting with students allowed me to really understand the culture."

Recommendations for Future Research

In conducting this IPA on the meaning former high school STSA students made of their IC and future global experiences, it was the aim of the researcher to fill a gap in the literature that preponderantly considers the experiences of university students who study abroad. This research was limited to seven recent graduates who participated in one or more STSA programs offered by a low-income public school district in southeastern Massachusetts.

Future research could consider the impact that STSA has on private high school students or public high school students from affluent towns Massachusetts, in order to determine if their perceived levels of IC were significantly impacted by their international programming. As well, future research could include populations from different regions of the US in order to determine the extent to which socio-economic status or geographic location influences the findings. Further studies could also exclusively target either male or female students, or an individual country program to better understand better the specifics of a certain gender or region.

With a growing body of research that illuminates the inequities in the field of SA, more research should be conducted around why many minority students elect not to study abroad, even when prohibitive factors are mitigated. The experiences of first-generation students who study abroad should be investigated in future research, as there is not sufficient literature in the field that considers this population of SA participants. As well, specific variables such as gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity, should be studied,

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to determine the impact these factors have in students' decisions whether to study abroad, as well as the influence those dynamics have on experiences abroad for those who do, as each variable can potentially impact the levels of IC in individuals and their intent to pursue further international opportunities at university and beyond.

Implications for Practice

It was the hope of the researcher that this study adds to the body of knowledge in the field of global education. Moreover, it was the hope that this study will serve as evidence that STSA at the high school level is a powerful tool that can be used as a pathway to increase the IC of students before they embark on international experiences in higher education and in the workforce. No longer is SA reserved for university students. Increasingly, high schools and even schools that serve students in the elementary and middle school grades are implementing STSA as an optional part of their global competency initiatives. As school leaders contemplate what their portrait of a graduate looks like, this study may serve as an example of the deep influence STSA has on the trajectory of the lives of students. Schools may begin to implement or enhance components of their global education program to meet the growing demands of employers who are seeking interculturally competent workers.

STSA is a major component of global education programs and can take on a variety of formats. Whether schools consider study tour programs with hotel stays that focus on the culture, history, and language of a region abroad, or whether they delve into programs that involve classroom time and home stays, or whether they use a hybrid model, offering opportunities for high school students to study abroad often impacts future decisions on colleges, careers, and relationships. As well, it impacts the way students perceive and interact with others from different cultures.

Many of America's public schools are dealing with limited resources and many schools serve economically challenged students. These factors can be major obstacles in implementing a global education curriculum in educational arenas that already have myriad programs, curricula, and initiatives competing for time and dollars. Thus, the evidence found in this study may serve as a justification for the allocation of resources to build or enhance global education programs in schools, offering students a competitive advantage in the college and career application process, and allowing them an opportunity to change and grow their global skillsets, potentially creating a deeper understanding of differing perspectives.

Conclusion

In this study, seven participants shared stories about their travels across many countries. They offered examples of cultural mishaps leading to lasting friendships. With each encounter, they blossomed as individuals, their confidence grew, their sense of independence strengthened, and their understanding of others heightened. Study abroad offers these types of unique experiential learning opportunities for students that classroom studies alone simply cannot. Through STSA programs, participants were able to access components of a global curriculum in a novel and distinctive way. Through STSA programs, students attended school with international peers and met with international educational leaders to study the similarities and differences in educational systems. Interacting with international peers offered students a better understanding of cultural norms and life in the

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host country. These experiences led to a deeper respect for others, the life they live, the struggles they face, and the joys they experience (IC).

As a result of their international experiences, all participants explained their lives had been profoundly impacted. For some, their intended career choice was influenced. Two students indicated their experiences with photography and videography in China propelled them to pursue careers in the Arts. Another student who long had planned to practice medicine stated she intended to focus on international health disparities due to her exposure to many countries through STSA. Other students spoke of their desire to participate in SA programs in higher education, with one student having already participated in two such programs in her first two years at university. One student took a summer job as an au pair and others enjoyed traveling abroad over the holidays to visit friends they had made from past international adventures. And one student, upon arriving back from her STSA, asked her parents if they could become a host family for international students and hosted over a dozen students in her home since that request.

All participants offered enthusiastic stories about how STSA had transformed their young lives. They spoke of changing perceptions and expanding mindsets. They affirmed their view of the world had widened and their understanding and respect for others had deepened. All participants spoke of working through uncomfortable situations abroad, and how that led to an increased sense of confidence and independence that had remained with them. They proffered they now observe the world through a new lens, having traveled abroad and interacted with international peers. Finally, they made the connection that it is within the understanding of others, that one, indeed, better understands oneself.

I hope the results of this study may serve as further justification that resources allocated toward global education programming in high schools are well spent, and, in fact, should be increased so more students will have the opportunity to study abroad. It is my hope that the tales shared by these brave students, whose curiosity drove them to board an airplane at 16 years old, without their parents, to participate in an educational adventure in a foreign land, inspires countless other high school students to do precisely the same; fostering future generations of world explorers and citizens of humanity.

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.1.7]

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