



# STUDY ABROAD AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' GLOBAL COMPETENCE

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Globalization has made the world a more interdependent and multicultural society. Global issues, including regional conflicts, pandemics, and climate change, affect human life across boundaries and cultures and require people to collaborate in solving problems. Under this context, teachers with a global perspective and diverse values can enhance students' world views, foster respect for difference, and develop responsibility for a more sustainable and inclusive world. Thus, the need for professional development to prepare teachers to be globally competent has been extensively recognized. Recently, the study abroad program as an effective means of developing global competence has been increasingly researched and implemented in teacher education program (Huang et al., 2023; Okken et al., 2019). Unlike stand-alone training courses, studying abroad provides immersive opportunities for participants to expose themselves to different educational systems and cultures. Such intercultural encounter experiences can broaden teachers' pedagogical repositories and skills to teach diverse students, enhance understanding of global issues, and facilitate reflection on personal and professional identities.

## *Theoretical Framework*

What is global competence? Global competence combines knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values successfully applied to global issues or intercultural situations (OECD, 2019). Globally competent individuals can respect different perspectives and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being. Numerous research focuses on how the study abroad experience impacts preservice teachers' global competence, prevalently adopting situated learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning theory as the theoretical framework.

Situated learning believes that learning occurs within situational contexts. Students acquire knowledge from observing others and practicing themselves, becoming "cognitive apprentices" within the community (Collins et al., 1989). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a learning process is a form of societal participation. People in the real world continuously acquire knowledge and learn as long as they continue to engage with others. Other theorists, such as Brown and Duguid (1996) claimed that understandings are constructed amid activity and without prior specification of expected learning. In other words, learning within designed instructional and cultural activities does not always happen as initially planned. Therefore, the effects of studying abroad will not be constrained if the participants are not limited to specific contexts. As such, a study abroad program should encourage learners to make sense of what they explore and interact with in a resource-abundant learning environment.

Experiential learning theory considers learning the process whereby knowledge is created through experience transformation. The experiential learning cycle by Kolb (1984) highlights how learners change due to experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Learning occurs when an individual comes across a subjective experience and reflects on the analysis and formulation of abstract concepts. The difference, conflicts and disagreement

people encounter abroad could be assimilated into existing concepts. Reflective activities of the study abroad experience, an essential component of experiential learning, could enhance active thinking, change attitudes, and develop multicultural awareness (Huang et al., 2023).

Transformational learning involves a fundamental questioning of how one thinks or acts, leading to a fundamental change in our worldview beyond simple knowledge acquisition (Mezirow, 2000). The experience of disorienting dilemmas, accompanied by guided reflection, is eye-opening and life-changing to preservice teachers. As the definition implies, reflection alone does not result in transformative learning unless the process involves a critical reflection on long-held beliefs and values. Study abroad experiences challenge participants' tacit assumptions and supports critical reflection in which they consciously make meaning of their lives.

### *Study Abroad Program Reviews*

According to a meta-analysis by Huang, Cheung, and Xuan (2023), prior studies on studying abroad mostly show different but positive influences on preservice teachers' learning, attitudes, and identities. Different goals and implementations cause inconsistent findings on the program's effectiveness.

A short-term program is cost-effective. With compact activities schedule, participants can achieve their learning goals. Thus, it is suitable for a program with specific learning objectives. On a deliberately-design program within a short time, students can participate in actual teaching activities and the school environment of another country. For example, Sanders-Smith and Cordoba (2022) reported a study abroad program explicitly aiming to learn the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy. Preservice teachers wanted to implement what they learned in Reggio Emilia's classrooms and lectures into their future classrooms. Also, students showed an analytic ability to ponder philosophical and cultural values regarding the curricular and pedagogical application. However, other studies revealed that it might be an overreach to expect participants to develop a deep understanding of educational knowledge with a critical awareness of larger social, political, and historical contexts in a short time (Frieson et al., 2022). Such an approach is insufficient to fulfill the goal of fostering education for cultural diversity and international understanding.

Cultural distance, defined by Hofstede (2011) as the degree to which shared norms and values differ from one country to another, is also an influential consideration. Research has shown international contact reduces prejudices more than within-national, cross-cultural contexts (Frieson et al., 2022). Despite avoiding culture shock, studying abroad in a country of similar culture could limit exposure to an unfamiliar culture and keep student-teachers within their comfort zones as happy learners and tourists abroad. Preservice teachers experience the difference as cultural outsiders have transformative potential. These experiences can trigger strong emotions such as surprise, anxiety, fear, and frustration are important for setting the stage for preservice teachers' reflection and self-transformation (Li & Costa, 2022). An unintentional-design long-term program promoting local cultural contact will facilitate transformative learning, which first relies on the experience of disorienting dilemmas that challenge their taken-for-granted views.

### *Implementation Suggestions*

A criticism of study abroad programs in the literature is that they are often considered tourist opportunities instead of educational experiences (Frieson et al., 2022; Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016). Tourism can provide positive experiences but is often associated with superficial knowledge. Accumulated research findings highlight that if preservice teachers

are not supported in critically appraising the differences they encounter, such encounters can inadvertently reinforce ethnocentric or inappropriate views. Guided reflection after dissonance-inducing experiences is vital to assist participants in understanding the personal impacts and cultural understanding of study abroad experiences (Frieson et al., 2022; Li & Costa, 2022).

A short-term study abroad program in a low-cultural-distance country will increase the success chance for promoting global learning. Tourism feature bringing pleasant feedback is an inevitable part of the program. But guided reflection leading students to engage in meaningful learning can maximize the benefits. As indicated by Sanders-Smith, these cultural immersion experiences in the form of short-term faculty-led study abroad programs had a lasting impact on developing culturally relevant later. Cultural awareness occurs slowly. Long-term study abroad experience in a high-cultural-distance country is ideal for cultivating participants' global competence. Nevertheless, a short-term study abroad experience can inspire participants' interest in attending a future long-term program or continuing to study or work overseas afterward. To promote study abroad successfully, launching the short-term program first to trigger positive emotions and then following up with a long-term program will further strengthen students' global competence.

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