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## Partnering With International Peers to Promote Young Children's Social and Emotional Learning: Students' Experiences During an International Service Learning Program

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PARTNERING WITH INTERNATIONAL PEERS TO PROMOTE YOUNG CHILDREN'S  
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES DURING AN  
INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Psychology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Danica D. Mavroudis

August 2023

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## ABSTRACT

### PARTNERING WITH INTERNATIONAL PEERS TO PROMOTE YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES DURING AN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM

by Danica D. Mavroudis

International Service Learning (ISL) has been used increasingly across fields of study in higher education to enhance student's learning outside the classroom. ISL programs often encourage students to reflect on their experience to promote experiential and transformative learning. Previous research on ISL has found benefits to students' professional and personal development. While the process may be helpful to participating students, there may be a lack of lasting benefit to the host community. There also is a gap in the literature of how mental wellness services could be delivered using ISL. In hopes to extend program benefits and provide mental wellness services to the host community, a unique ISL program was designed to partner ISL undergraduate students with local undergraduates in delivering socioemotional lessons to local preschoolers. This study used thematic analysis to investigate students' experiences with an ISL program that utilizes international peer partnership to deliver social and emotional services to young children in China. Written reflections from two cohorts were analyzed, and three themes were identified, highlighting the role of self-perception in adaptation, the process of meaning-making in noting cultural differences, and the social context of growth in multiple areas. These themes corroborated and extended existing ISL literature to show how participants of this peer-partnered mental wellness ISL program experienced growth in similar but also unique ways and what aspects of the program facilitated their growth.

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## **Partnering With International Peers to Promote Young Children's Social and Emotional Learning: Students' Experiences During an International Service Learning Program**

In an increasingly globalized world, it has become important for students, faculty, and administration in higher education to participate in programs that promote diversity, cultural awareness, and cultural exchanges. One such program is International Service Learning (ISL). ISL combines a popular experience of studying abroad with supporting local communities through structured volunteer programs (Crabtree, 2008). The prominence of ISL has increased steadily and has been utilized in a number of different fields of study. Students across a wide range of disciplines have traveled with ISL programs to a variety of different countries to deliver services, teach, and work with others in their field. There are now numerous ISL programs at universities around the world that have built effective partnerships with international communities (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008).

ISL goes beyond just studying in a different country or volunteering to serve communities in need. Quality ISL programs combine what is learned in the classroom and challenge students to apply it to real-life situations while working with communities in a culture different from their own (Amerson, 2014). ISL programs may also include a reflective process where students are encouraged to talk or write about their experience before, during, and after their trip abroad. Analysis of these reflections can reveal the thoughts, feelings, and growth of students as they travel and engage with another culture. ISL has shown to be successful in promoting diversity, cultural competence, and cross-cultural collaboration (de Diego-Lázaro et al., 2020; Grenier et al., 2020; Holden et al., 2019). Participants are introduced to people from different backgrounds and can gain confidence in

effectively communicating with and working within a new culture. For example, participants of a physical therapy focused ISL program reflected on their newfound understanding and compassion for patients through the experience of interacting with an international community (Reynolds, 2005). However, because ISL programs tend to vary across universities and communities to serve specific program-community goals, further research is needed to understand whether and how different ISL programs provide opportunities for participant's personal growth and development in professional competencies. Insight into the strengths and constraints of ISL can help inform better designs of ISL programs that can balance between the needs of the sponsoring and the hosting partners of ISL.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for ISL**

As most undergraduate students fall into the age range of 18-25, it is relevant to relate their experience to that of emerging adulthood. This stage of life is associated with exploration of one's identity through trying out different experiences (Arnett, 2000). As most undergraduate students are in a period of transition, challenging and fulfilling experiences such as ISL can present significant and unique opportunities for developing a stronger sense of identity, building confidence, and establishing goals. Undergraduate students may be especially suited to partake in opportunities like ISL to learn more about themselves and push themselves to grow.

The model of ISL follows established learning theories in adult education. For example, ISL fits well into Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, in which by reflecting on experiences, learners gain knowledge and skills that they can then apply to their world moving forward. Faculty leaders have utilized the experiential learning framework when

designing ISL programs to promote positive outcomes for participating students (A. M. Johnson & Howell, 2017; Salam et al., 2019). Kolb suggests that learning is a process of first immersing oneself open-mindedly in a new experience. For many students, ISL may present the novel experience of being in a new country or culture. The practice of reflection gives learners a chance to look at their experience from different perspectives. Many ISL programs implement reflection, such as through journal writing before, during, and after the program, to facilitate this process of experiential learning (Akhurst, 2016; Hayward et al., 2015; Nickols et al., 2013; Reynolds, 2005; Zafran, 2009). The learner then takes what was experienced and applies it to their future. Upon returning home, participants have reflected on actions they plan to take related to what they learned about themselves, their career, or the world during their experience (Borstad et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2022; Kollar & Ailinger, 2002).

ISL also aligns well with the theories of transformative learning and cosmopolitan learning. *Transformative learning* highlights the importance of perspective taking, emotional intelligence, and reflecting critically on one's own previously held beliefs or assumptions (Mezirow, 2003). It has been suggested that ISL programs could be aimed to produce lasting change from the transformative experiences of participants (Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Mckee, 2016). At the same time, ISL can foster global partnerships and intercultural connections, which have been emphasized in the field of contemporary education. Specifically, *cosmopolitan learning* practices place students in environments where they can interact with others from different backgrounds and tackle international problems (Rizvi, 2009). Rizvi posits that involving students in cosmopolitan learning could contribute to the

ideals of an interconnected world. Building global citizenship, intercultural competence, and cross-cultural partnership are common goals for ISL programs across the globe (Chan et al., 2022; de Diego-Lázaro et al. 2020; Holden et al., 2019; Pless et al., 2011). Review of participants in a variety of ISL programs have identified cosmopolitan thinking as a prominent outcome (Pless et al., 2011).

### **Strengths and Constraints of Existing ISL Programs**

ISL has its pedagogical roots in service learning, which allows students to put into practice what has been learned in the classroom, strengthening their mastery of the academic disciplines. Rather than learning solely through readings, lectures, and exams, direct work with communities requires students to apply lessons to current issues and facilitate a more transformative experience for the student (Crabtree, 2008). For example, an ISL program involving engineering students challenged participants to develop a wind turbine for a community in Nicaragua, allowing students to apply what they had learned to a real-world scenario while navigating challenges associated with a different language and culture (Johnson, P. E., 2009). In healthcare, ISL participants work directly with patients to fill service gaps in their host community (Amerson, 2014; A. M. Johnson & Howell, 2017). A review of ISL programs in business education has found that it contributes to students' understanding of ethics and an increased sense of responsibility for serving the community through their work (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008). Across disciplines, students work on community problems and develop skills relevant to their field of study, such as effective communication, leadership, and organizational skills (Salam et al., 2019). Combined with

critical reflection that is guided by faculty leaders, ISL can become a transformative learning experience for students (Bamber & Hankin, 2011).

Even when ISL programs do not target the knowledge and skills gained in the students' academic disciplines, they can engender significant development. One prominent change students see in themselves is an increase in their confidence and self-efficacy (de Diego-Lázaro et al. 2020; Hamby & Brinberg 2016; Zafran, 2009). ISL places students in a new environment they must learn to navigate while focusing on the service they are providing, such as delivering supplies (Akhurst, 2016; Nickols et al., 2013), language teaching (Akhurst, 2016; Yang et al., 2016), environment cleanup and/or building (Baugher et al., 2019; Johnson, P.E., 2009). Thus, participating in ISL might involve learning new skills or attempting tasks that the student has never tried before, and students reported leaving ISL programs with a sense of accomplishment and a more positive outlook on what they can do in the future (Couillard, 2022). The experience has also been related to development of leadership skills as students take upon responsibilities within their group and when working with the local community (Nickols et al., 2013). These gains in general professional skills can serve students in the professional settings they will enter after graduation (Borstad et al., 2018).

The cornerstone of ISL is its immersion of students in the context of a global community. The cultural exchange aspect of ISL gives students a unique perspective on other cultures and their role as a global citizen. During ISL, students are not just traveling to a different country but directly engaging with the culture and its people. This can lead to an increase in participants' intercultural competence (Amerson, 2014; de Diego-Lázaro et al., 2020;

Nickols et al., 2013; Tang & Schwantes, 2021; Yang et al., 2016). Beyond cultural awareness, which is the acknowledgement of other cultures, intercultural competence involves the knowledge of cultural differences, critical understanding of one's own culture, and the ability to understand the perspective of other cultures (Deardorff, 2006). This skill can be essential to professions where working with, and most importantly understanding, people of different cultural backgrounds is an everyday task. Compared to those who had not participated, ISL participants showed higher levels of intercultural competence (Tang & Schwantes, 2021). When compared with students who only attended a study abroad program without a service component, ISL students reflected more on lessons learned of civic action and responsibility as well as an increased understanding of social justice issues (Hamby & Brinberg, 2016). Follow-up reflections collected by Hamby and Brinberg nine months after the program revealed that participants continued to adapt and change their values, as well as show a commitment to serving in their career and personal lives.

The process of introduction, understanding, and acceptance of new cultures has been detailed through student reflections of ISL. Students reported instances of culture shock as they first encountered different living conditions or styles of communication (Mather et al., 2012; Nickols et al., 2013). During the trip, students begin to adapt and express enjoyment of learning about a new culture, such as one student on an ISL trip to Tanzania expressing appreciation for the sense of community and partnership they observed (Couillard, 2022). As the trip comes to an end and students reflect on their experience once coming back home, applying their experience and cultural knowledge to what they will work on in the future (Hamby & Brinberg, 2016). ISL programs often involve students working together in small

groups, providing opportunities for relationship building and interpersonal skills. These relationships are essential and have been cited as the true heart of ISL programs (Crabtree, 2008). Student reflections often include details of group dynamics as students work with each other, expressing frustration when others might not approach a problem the same way they do, or appreciation for the support they receive from peers (Akhurst, 2016), as well as empathy and respect for others (Couillard, 2022; Hamby & Brinberg, 2016; Yang et al., 2016). As found in the Ulysses project, a leadership development ISL program, reflections showed participants developing the ability to effectively think before acting to avoid prejudice, and the ability to listen consciously to people from different backgrounds (Pless et al., 2011).

In summary, participating in ISL can result in the development of skills in professional fields, a range of personal and psychological benefits, and an increase in overall cultural awareness and competence for college students. Previous research has shown growth in students through reviews of quantitative and qualitative data. Students become aware of needs in communities across the world, undergo challenges that allow them to grow, and show development in their ability to problem solve.

Although research to date has unveiled various benefits of ISL, researchers and educators have advocated for further program revision and evaluation (e.g., Crabtree, 2008). A common criticism of ISL programs is that they do not result in lasting benefits for the host community (McKee, 2016), who may not receive support that is sustainable after the ISL students leave. Another often cited issue is the uneven power between the ISL students and the host community that receives the service. When ISL students are not deeply engaged with

the host community, they may have a “tourist-gaze” that does not facilitate critical reflection and perspective as a global citizen (McKee, 2016). One possible program modification to address these issues could be working closely with local peers, such as partnering ISL students with the college students in the host community to complete the service assignment. Delivering services alongside local peers may bridge the gap between what ISL students bring and what the host community is left with after the program ends. Furthermore, working with international peers can further student engagement, allowing students to look at problems from different perspectives by reflecting on how their peers approach a common issue (Holden et al., 2019). Related research has shown benefits for both domestic and international students when they are partnered together in learning environments (Yan et al., 2014). It has been recommended that future programs implement opportunities for participants to work directly with local organizations to allow the community to play a prominent role in the distribution of services, and have unstructured time with community members (e.g., sharing a meal together, playing games with children) to promote cross-cultural learning (Amerson, 2014). To create a truly ethical and successful collaboration, it has been suggested that ISL programs should focus on reciprocity and mutually positive outcomes for participants and host communities (Crabtree, 2008). A handful of research has also suggested that participants' racial and ethnic identity may be a factor in how they experience ISL. For students of color, ISL experiences have allowed them to consider their experience in connection to their own culture (Mather et al., 2012). Further research may be needed with racial and ethnic minority participants, particularly those who may have not been provided with opportunities to travel and learn in another country.



There is also limited research on how ISL programs can be used with mental health services. The United Nations has identified mental health as a global issue that continues to be neglected and includes mental wellbeing as one of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (United Nations, 2018). Stigma plays a large role in the perception of mental health issues and is a strong barrier to seeking treatment, particularly in Asian countries (Zhang et al., 2019). Though ISL should not be used to impose values or cultural biases on the host country, a program involving the promotion of mental wellbeing may be appealing to both domestic and international communities. Very few ISL programs actually provide mental health services, which may be due to language and cultural barriers. Involving students in psychology and related fields, ISL could give students the opportunity to extend academic training through international community service while providing important mental wellness services for the host community.

### **Current Study**

The current study investigated how U.S. undergraduate students experience a unique ISL program that involved international peer partnership to deliver mental wellness services and how it impacted their personal and professional development. To answer the question, I analyzed archival data from two cohorts of ISL students who traveled to China in 2018 and 2019, respectively. This dataset was chosen as it included rich and detailed reflections from participating psychology students as they traveled and interacted with international peers. This dataset also included a diverse sample of mostly non-White participants. Additionally, this dataset was available to the primary researcher as a result of personal involvement in the current ISL program (years 2022 and 2023) as a graduate student assistant. The archival data

consisted of the students' written reflections completed as course assignments before, during, and after their ISL trips, and I obtained permission to use such data and received the unidentified data from the program's faculty leaders.

The ISL program is part of the Global Classroom at San Francisco State University, which focuses on promoting children's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in local and international communities. The ISL program involved teaching SEL lessons to young children in the host community, and evaluation of this program may give insight into how ISL may be utilized to serve the long-term goal of promoting mental wellness globally. Moreover, because the ISL students in this program were partnered with local university students, the current study may offer insight into how peer partnerships as a program component impacts ISL program outcomes.

The aim of this current study was to understand the personal experiences of ISL participants as they engaged in delivering SEL lessons to children in China. The current study also focused on the evaluation of this novel ISL program that focuses on mental wellness services alongside international peers. By understanding the participants personal experiences, the current study may give insight into their perception of the program and what they found most valuable. The thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data collected from ISL participants. Braun and Clarke argued that thematic analysis is not bound by theoretical frameworks and is designed to report experiences and meanings from the respondents' perspective. As such, thematic analysis is a helpful tool for organizing qualitative data across different fields, because it may allow for an unrestricted view of respondents' voices. However, it is important to note that

the process of thematic analysis is not atheoretical, and previous research on the subject matter inevitably informs the analytic process by virtue of the researcher's subject expertise (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In other words, the researcher's knowledge of ISL and its impact on undergraduate participants will play a role in the analysis of the student reflections, and it is expected that the analysis will likely show themes common in existing literature, such as an increased self-efficacy, confidence, professional competency, and intercultural appreciation and acceptance.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 25 undergraduate students in Psychology and related studies (e.g., Child and Adolescent Development) participated in an ISL program in China in 2018 and in 2019 (Cohort 1: 12 students, mean age = 22.75, 11 female; Cohort 2: 13 students, mean age = 22.67, 10 female). The participants reported their ethnicity as 48% Hispanic/Latin@, 12% Filipino/Filipina, 12% Asian, 2% White, and 20% one or more ethnicities/other. The majority of participants had limited travel experience based on their responses to application prompts. The students were selected based on their experience and interest in working with children and on their demonstrated ability to problem-solve in groups during an interview for admission into the ISL program.

The primary researcher was a cisgender woman graduate student studying in psychology who had extensive international travel experience and had reviewed relevant literature on ISL. It was noted that her education and lived experiences may shape the perception of reflections and thematic analysis. The primary researcher did not personally know the ISL participants and was not involved in the facilitation or collection of the reflections.

### **Materials and Procedure**

#### ***Description of the ISL Program***

Three faculty leaders of the Global Classroom have been organizing the summer ISL program in China since 2017, although written reflections were not implemented until 2018. Prior to departure, the ISL students enrolled in a semester-long course to prepare students for the work they would be doing internationally. The course focused on theories and research of

child development and how to effectively implement SEL in the classroom, as well as building students' skills in working in educational settings and in different cultures. During the preparatory semester, students practiced delivering Global Classroom SEL lessons in class with each other. The SEL lessons were developed after discussion and feedback with Chinese collaborators (including interactions with scholars, parents, and educators), and they focused on promoting emotion knowledge and social awareness for children ages 3 to 5 years. ISL participants delivered a total of 14 hour-long lessons during the program. Each lesson included direct instruction (book reading) and practice activities (e.g., expressing emotions through an art project, exercising mindfulness through yoga poses and breathing techniques). More information about the SEL curriculum and an example of the lessons can be found in Paik et al. (2022).

Once arriving in China, the ISL students were partnered with local college students to provide SEL lessons to preschoolers and engage in various cultural exchange events (e.g., demonstration of traditional music instruments, calligraphy workshop, visits to local schools). Both cohorts were hosted by the Southwest University of Science and Technology (SWUST) in Mianyang City, China. As described by Paik and colleagues (2022), Mianyang City was the second largest city in the Sichuan province (Southwestern region of China) with a population over five million, and all lessons took place in children's regular classrooms at the SWUST Preschool, which served predominantly middle- to upper-middle class families. The 2018 cohort initially stayed in the International Students Dormitory, but because the dormitory was not within walking distance from the faculty leaders (a risk management concern), the students were relocated after one night upon faculty leaders' negotiation with

the university. The students were relocated to be within the same building as the faculty leaders, a SWUST faculty dormitory. In 2019, students and faculty leaders stayed in a hotel near the SWUST campus due to political tension between the U.S. and China.

### ***Student Written Reflections***

The ISL program required students to complete reflections both pre- and post-departure (see Table 1 for numbers of reflections by timepoints). These reflections were designed by the faculty leaders with respect to the content students had read in preparation for the ISL trip, about their experiences during the trip, and how they felt as the trip came to an end (see Table 2). ISL students submitted their reflections in class or electronically through the university's learning management system (i.e., iLearn).

**Table 1**

*Number of Reflections and Word Count Pre- and Post-Departure*

	<b>Cohort 1</b>		<b>Cohort 2</b>	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	Departure	Departure	Departure	Departure
Number of prompts	3	4	4	6
Number of reflections	38	39	51	76
Mean Word Count	81	541	230	253

*Note.* To keep workload manageable during the ISL trip, each participant was required to complete between 2 and 4 reflection prompts. However, during the semester before the ISL trip, all participants were assigned all reflections prompts.

**Table 2**

*Reflection Prompts*

	<b>Cohort 1</b>
Prompt 1	Culture Shock Experience in the Past
Prompt 2	Cultural Experience Concerns (related to the China trip)
Prompt 3	How do you think this experience will enhance you and enrich your life?

- Prompt 4 Describe some of cultural differences and/or culture shocks you have noticed thus far. (This was given right after they experienced SWUST)
- Prompt 5 Describe your experiences visiting 3 different schools in Mianyang City and the students you have interacted with. Compare and contrast how the U.S. and Chinese school system as you have observed.
- Prompt 6 How have your views of the Chinese culture changed over the month that you have been here? How have you changed from this experience? Note: this was given at the very end of the trip
- Prompt 7 How do you think this experience will enhance you and enrich your life?

---

**Cohort 2**

- Prompt 1 How do you think this experience will enhance you and enrich your life?
- Prompt 2 Share your assumptions and expectations of this program (e.g., how are you envisioning this experience would be like?)
- Prompt 3 Based on the article for this week, what does cultural competency and cultural humility mean to you? What are the cultural concepts most important to you as you prepare to travel and why? Are there any aspects of cultural competency or humility that you would like to work on developing more yourself?
- Prompt 4 Please read the article posted for this week. We have been learning a lot about China this semester. Provide and explain top five differences that you are recognizing between the U.S. and China. Be sure to choose the topics that mean a lot to you (e.g., food, climate, people, education system, language, customs, social issues, economic, political, fashion, art, music, religion, etc.). How do you think these differences will affect your adjustment during the Study Abroad? Explain your answer thoroughly.



- Prompt 5 You have been in China for a couple of days so far. Reflecting on your experience thus far, what did you find to be especially (1) surprising, (2) challenging and (3) enjoyable. Be specific and provide concrete example(s) for each category.
- Prompt 6 You have been living in China for a week now. You have already encountered numerous interactions with the children, other college students, teaching partners, the temperature, curriculum, and so much more. Reflecting back on these interactions, describe something you have learned about yourself that surprised you. Be specific (e.g., provide an example of the event). How would you incorporate this new finding about yourself in the future?
- Prompt 7 In the past two weeks, you have been exposed to many different cultural experiences through planned excursions and living and working in China (e.g. music, people, food, arts, history, customs, etc.). How have these cultural experiences shaped your view of yourself within this global world? AND/OR How has your understanding of larger global issues changed as a result of this study abroad experience?
- Prompt 8 [Same prompt as Prompt 1 (before trip)] How do you think this experience will enhance you and enrich your life?
- Prompt 9 [Same prompt as Prompt 2 (before trip)] Share your assumptions and expectations of this program (e.g., how are you envisioning this experience would be like?)
- Prompt 10 After having gone through the program, what does this study abroad experience mean to you? What does this program mean for the Chinese community that we are working with? Explain your answer thoroughly and give examples as needed.

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*Note:* For Cohort 1, Prompts 1 and 2 were given as in-class reflection writing assignments, and the faculty leaders had lost access to the exact wording of the prompts.

## **Results and Discussion**

The procedure of thematic analysis as described in Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze participant reflections. To perform thematic analysis, reflections were first read in their entirety to note the broad, initial ideas. Each idea was designated as a code (e.g., “scared,” “frustrated,” “sad”), and an initial list of codes was created from this first read-through. The codes were then applied across all reflections, and the codes were revised and refined (e.g., breaking “worry” into separate codes of “worry for self” and “concern for others”, redefining the “personality” code as “self-perception”). Once the codes were finalized, a thematic map (see Figure 1) was used to visually organize the codes into possible themes by how frequently the codes appear together. The possible themes were then reviewed and edited for clarity and for how they work together (e.g., relatedness and distinctiveness among themes). The coding file was visually examined for abnormalities, and there were no notable differences between the cohorts in terms of codes or themes. Themes were then finalized, and findings here reported with example quotes from the reflections.

The current analysis led to the initial identification of 14 codes, which were then revised to 16 codes (see Table 3). Of the 16 codes, 12 were organized into three themes: adjusting to new environments and experiences, attributing meaning to cross-cultural differences, and appreciating areas of growth (refer back to Figure 1).

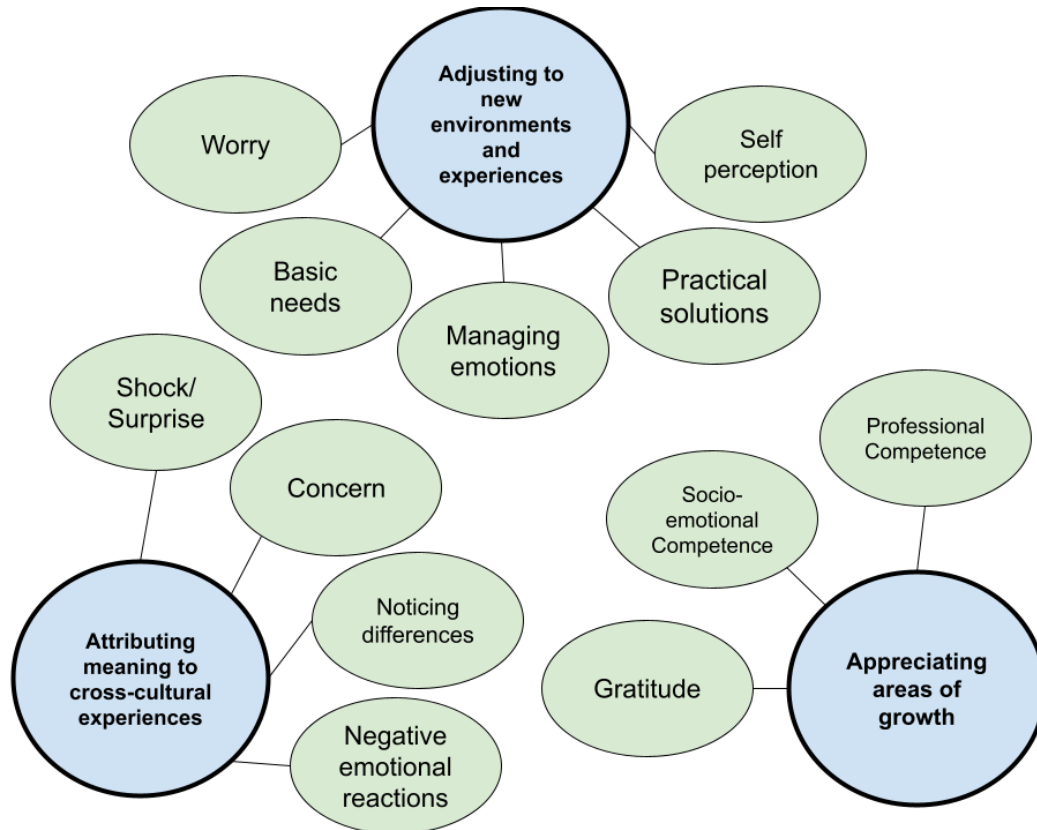
**Table 3***Initial and Revised Final Codes during the Process of Thematic Analysis*

Initial codes	Final codes	Notes
Negative emotions	<b>Negative emotional reaction</b>	Specified as negative emotional reactions
Positive emotions	(retained)	
Worry/concern	<b>Worry (self), Concern (others)</b>	Specified as concerns towards the self and towards others
Solutions/Coping	<b>Managing Emotions, Practical Solutions</b>	Specified as management of emotions and solutions that were implemented
<b>Basic Needs</b>	(retained)	
Personality	<b>Self-Perception</b>	Redefined as perception of oneself
Noticing Differences	(retained)	
Cultural Frustration	(retained)	
Shock/surprise/discomfort	<b>Shock/surprise</b>	Specified as shock/surprise

		as most reactions were initial rather than longer lasting discomfort
<b>Gratitude</b>	(retained)	
Interpersonal Experience	<b>Positive Social Interactions</b>	The experience mentioned was almost all positive interactions
Educational/professional experiences	<b>Socioemotional Competence, Professional Competence</b>	Specified as specific social-emotional competencies, and professional competencies
Previous Experiences	(retained)	
Similarities	(retained)	

**Figure 1**

*Final Thematic Map*



**Theme 1: Adjusting to New Environments and Experiences**

The codes worry, basic needs, managing emotions, practical solutions, and self-perception. frequently co-occurred within student reflections, which were combined as the theme of *adjusting to new environments and experiences*. This theme captured student’s concerns and the role of self-perception in the process of adjustment. Before the trip began, students reflected on what they were learning about their host community and how they anticipated they might react. A main concern expressed was for their everyday needs, such as food and sleep, and how this may be different in their new environment. For example, one

student noted: “I’m really nervous the food will be too spicy. I’m concerned about jet lag and getting enough sleep.” Similarly, another student noted that “I am worried about . . . the weather. I know that it will be hot and humid, which is the complete opposite of what I am used to.” Cognizant of their concerns, students showed critical reflection of their self-perception and how it might affect their experience. They highlighted certain aspects of their personality, such as being an introvert, to explain their perceptions and reactions. The following example from a student illustrates how the way they viewed themselves impacted their experience in the classroom:

I was nervous about how effective of a teacher I would be . . . I find comfort in not being the center of attention . . . I was really nervous about dancing, singing, and just carelessly having fun in front of people I did not know.

Despite worries, students offered solutions for navigating unfamiliar circumstances or managing difficult emotions. Expressions of worry and how their self-perception might impact their experience negatively were often accompanied with effective ways students solved the problem. For example, a student expressed worry about the language barrier but found that nonverbal communication worked as a helpful solution:

Something that I found challenging was communicating to the locals. Defiantly [*sic*] was something that had to resort to [some] of my more basic instincts like pointing and taking pictures of the items and showing those. . . I feel that we/I have been able to find ways of nonverbal communication to get what I want across and communicate with the locals.

In addition to solving practical challenges, an essential part of adjustment for ISL participants was effectively managing their emotions. In a new and often overwhelming environment, the students implemented coping skills that fit the situation. As one student reflected: “Just the

other day I felt too overwhelmed and almost broke down. But I invited a few of my peers over to my room and had some much needed laughs and that helped me a lot.”

The theme of adjusting to new environments and experiences is consistent with past research that found increases of self-efficacy among ISL participants (e.g., Couillard, 2022; de Diego-Lázaro, 2020). As student participants overcame hardships in their new environment and tackled their own internal challenges, they may have gains in their problem-solving skills and self-efficacy. The reflections in the current study suggested that the ISL program increased participant's self-awareness as they anticipated and solved practical and emotional challenges. Such awareness can play an important role for individuals to recognize changes in self-efficacy. Participants showed a base level of this awareness as they anticipated how their personality and sense of self may interact with what they will encounter. The unfamiliar situations of ISL, which may be physical, social, and/or cultural in nature, can make students feel more self-aware. Although being overly self-conscious can often be crippling, a moderate level of heightened self-awareness may be a key feature of ISL that brings about growth. Specifically, the experience of solving various challenges amidst heightened self-awareness can prepare students for gaining practical skills and for gaining confidence and self-efficacy. The opportunity to explore and grow one's self-awareness and confidence is a key aspect of the emerging adulthood period (Arnett, 2000). This ISL experience allowed participants to investigate their values and learn new things about themselves, which can contribute to successful resolution of the development task of this period.

## **Theme 2: Attributing Meaning to Cross-Cultural Differences**

The second theme consisted of the codes shock/surprise, concern, noticing differences, and negative emotional reactions, which captured participant's experience navigating and interpreting cross-cultural differences between U.S. and Chinese cultures. Some showed initial feelings of shock, discomfort, and concern when interpreting the differences in practices and values. For example, a student reflected on their experience while in the local community:

[A] very challenging aspect has been getting used to the amount of cigarette smoke . . . Often times, we see people smoking around their young children and it is extremely shocking. When we were in the Tea house today, there were a group of men and a child at the end of the table and they were blowing smoke around with the doors closed which was very shocking and challenging to see. I could not help but feel bad for the child.

Social differences, such as expectations for children's education, were compared as students prepared to enter the classroom and provide lessons. They anticipated that these differences may be hard to overcome:

I feel Chinese students are worked a lot harder than American students and their schooling often struggles [to] take their mental well-being into account. Seeing this will definitely be hard for me as I have known many American students who have endured depression and anxiety because they feel overworked from school; I cannot imagine how Chinese students must be feeling considering their school system is much more demanding.

Though some situations brought stress or sadness, others allowed students to evaluate U.S. and Chinese values. Many expressed concern for Chinese children in educational settings that were unfamiliar to them as Americans. However, they also related their initial emotional response as resulting from their own world view and values. After visits to boarding schools in the host community, a student processed how the differences impacted them emotionally:



What really shocked me was learning that this school begins boarding at 7-8 years old. These children live in the dormitories and are taken care of by dorm teachers. It was hard to hide how sad and shocked I felt that parents would allow a school to raise their own children rather than themselves, yet like I mentioned before I realize that the culture is so much different here and that there is a strong family value to take care of the children as they grow to give them the best future possible.

The reflection of students' perception of the Chinese versus the American school system shows the unique perspective they were able to gain by being directly involved with the community. While students had their initial judgments about the positives and negatives of a different school system and values, conversations and direct interactions with the Chinese peers and children living within the culture allowed for more nuanced understanding. The perspective as psychology students promoting mental wellness also may have influenced participant's values and interpretation of education. They were keenly aware of how the current school system could impact children's mental wellbeing, and how they saw their work benefiting students. A particularly conflicted student reflected on the dynamics of implementing socioemotional learning curriculum:

I admit I felt uneasy about the school. I thought about how I'd never want to work there of [*sic*] how we should not even try to implement social emotional curriculum there. Then with more thought I realized that this is a school [who] would need it the most. It would be a challenge however this is a school who's [*sic*] students show a lack of self advocacy, expression, and self care. These schools push their kids extremely hard and are intense. . . [If] we plant the seeds with them and expose them to social emotional curriculum I feel like they will be happier sooner. I want them to be successful and spread their knowledge especially because [*sic*] they are international learners it's important to be self aware.

These instances of confronting cultural values that are different from their own show experiential learning present in this ISL program (Kolb, 1984). Participants were introduced to different perspectives on education and children's development through their direct involvement in Chinese schools. They showed an ability to use these different perspectives to

interpret how social and emotional learning may impact the children they worked with in the long term. Similar to findings in Holden et al. (2019), ISL participants identified how the host culture's way of thinking held value and meaning. Their connections with international peers may have also assisted in this perspective-taking as they related their own college experience to others. The ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences is key to cultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). The initial shock, period of reflection, and eventual acceptance of differences follows the experiences of students in other ISL programs (Nickols et al., 2013).

### **Theme 3: Appreciating Areas of Growth**

The final theme collected the remaining codes of professional competence, socioemotional competence, and growth, focusing on students' reflection of the changes they experienced as a result of their ISL journey. Students reported feeling an increased sense of empathy and understanding for all kinds of people. They cited the ISL program as a unique experience that allowed them to connect with different communities. A student reflected on how their experience could extend beyond the connections they made during the program:

I see this experience as an opportunity to get to know other different places, people, and cultures throughout the world. Humans have a basic understanding of one another, which I believe is the link to anyone across the globe. I believe that I can experience any part of the world because with the right mindset, you can make any place in the world feel like you are a part of their community. Just as long as we are respectful and considerate, I am able to connect with everyone whether it be from a global or even local standpoint.

The students felt they had grown professionally by becoming better teachers and learners. Reflections included concrete skills participants had gained from their experiences in the classroom:

I have changed by being able to adapt to different situations and coming up with multiple plans in case my initial plan does not work out. I feel like now I am able to manage a classroom and teach a lesson plan with much less of a struggle than [*sic*] a couple of weeks ago.

In addition, ISL participants reflected on other skills that could serve them both personally and in their future career. Participants took what they were teaching in the classroom and applied it to their own needs. Many reflections captured the socioemotional skills that the participants themselves felt they had gained:

I feel as though anything is possible now. My comfort zone has only expanded and I am no longer afraid to conquer what I might of [*sic*] once thought was impossible. I am able to make personal connections with professors, classmates, and locals.

The connections ISL participants made during the program was another highlight of their experience. They expressed gratitude for the experience and for their international peers. For example, one student noted that “Everyone has been so friendly and helpful on this trip. . . There's a part of me that feels we don't deserve the whole red carpet treatment. They have been so kind and hospitable and I feel very grateful and appreciative for all that they've done for us. I wish there was a way to repay them for all their kidness [*sic*].” As another example: “I have found the camaraderie between everyone most enjoyable. I have really enjoyed every second I have spent with everyone here so far. I feel we are all building close relationships fast, and I really appreciate how close we have become.” Students created meaningful connections that crossed barriers. There was an increased understanding of not only cultural differences but similarities. As one student put:

While having deeper conversations . . . Often people talked about their dreams . . . and the struggle of making decisions for themselves that do not coincide with their parents aspirations for them. People talked about the fear of failing, or not being enough, and the fear that they wont [*sic*] find a partner to share their lives with . . . But most of all people shared the hopes that if they worked hard enough their dreams

would one day come to fruition. When fully invested in these intimate conversations, the fact that I am in a different country seemed to fade away.

A dominant finding across ISL research is the similar gains in personal and professional growth for participants upon completing the program (see e.g., Akhurst, 2016; A. M. Johnson & Howell, 2017; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Though not all participants expressed a desire to continue teaching preschool-aged children, their experiences inside and outside the classrooms in China allowed them to identify clear aspects of themselves that had changed and grown. As expressed by Crabtree (2008), the meaningful relationships ISL participants build are a keystone to effective international experiences. The gratitude participants showed for the experience, their peers within the program, and their international peers was notable in this theme. Much like the findings from reflections in Akhurst (2016), these relationships helped participants adjust, relieve stress, and step outside of their comfort zone in order to grow. Gains in self-efficacy and professional competence are common outcomes of ISL experiences (Borstad et al., 2018; de Diego-Lázaro et al. 2020; Hamby & Brinberg 2016; Zafran, 2009). However, the emerging theme in the current study also highlighted a unique nature of this program: The U.S. students had the opportunity to work directly with Chinese peers, which facilitated growth in a new way not underscored in prior research. ISL participants in the current program felt that their ability to succeed in the program and find growth in themselves was indebted to the relationships they fostered with their international peers. The Chinese university students served as cultural brokers between their home community and the ISL participants. Participants likely used the knowledge given by Chinese peers to help adapt and develop competencies in working in international settings. ISL participants were able to connect their individual life experiences to their international

peers and find valuable human connections that could stay with them as they continue on into professional careers.

## Conclusions

This thematic analysis explored the emotions, reactions, and critical thoughts of ISL participants as they traveled to and worked with each other in preschool classrooms in China. More specifically, the analysis underscored how participants perceived their experience to begin the evaluation of a new approach to ISL that focuses on mental wellness service-delivery while working closely with international peers. The benefit of international travel during service-learning was clear as in prior research but adding to the literature the current analysis showed ISL participants' growth also facilitated through learning and delivering mental wellness services to the community and through international peer partnership.

In line with previous research, the reflections show that students likely had a transformative experience (Amerson, 2014; de Diego-Lázaro et al., 2020). Reflections followed the arc of transformative learning as described by Mezirow (2003). The ISL participants showed an open-minded approach to the program and the culture within which they were immersed. Reflection from before departure, during the trip, and at the end of the trip gave participants the space to think about the challenges they faced and the changes that resulted. Students may have entered the program with preconceived notions about China, its people, and the global community, and reflections showed that these ideas were challenged. Students typically experienced initial culture shock and worry but were able to manage these difficult emotions and find appreciation and growth from the experience. The comparison of U.S. and Chinese cultures, and the understanding that both have value, show an important increase in participants' cultural awareness. The ability to take on the perspective of Chinese students and families during the ISL program may show that this awareness was elevated to

cultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Themes of adjustment, finding meaning in differences, and appreciating resulting growth suggest that this ISL program gave its participants the opportunity to think critically and find personal relevance in their experience.

Findings from this analysis showed that the participants underwent learning that is experiential (Kolb, 1984). Deeper learning of their field of studies through experience was linked to the program's unique focus on SEL and mental wellness. The participants compared cultural values and put critical thought into how social and emotional learning could fit into an educational environment very different from the United States. The current analysis suggests that, from a student perspective, ISL focused on mental wellness is relevant and meaningful. As psychology students, participants gained experience that may be important for their future careers, such as working with people from diverse backgrounds, communication and problem-solving skills, and confidence as a leader.

Compared to other programs, cosmopolitan learning (Rizvi, 2009) outcomes in the current program was likely enhanced through the partnership with local university students. Reflections detailed international peers as essential helpers in navigating the language and culture, and as friends that could give ISL participants a view into what everyday life was like for someone their own age in China. ISL participants treasured these connections and expressed gratitude for the new friendships they had forged. Such connections have the potential to challenge the power imbalance often seen in ISL programs, where participants only interact with the local community at a shallow level and leave without a lasting impact on the population they served (McKee, 2016). The current ISL participants had the chance to connect more closely with the host culture, as seen in participants' reflections detailing the

similarities they observed between themselves and their international partners. In teaching, the partnership mitigated the language and culture barriers that may have made it difficult for ISL participants to successfully deliver SEL lessons. Thus, in more than one way, the meaningful peer connections made through the program can help foster the values and ideals of cosmopolitan learning, where international collaboration is key to solving global problems (Rizvi, 2009). Meanwhile, it is reasonable to suggest that the benefits of international connection and collaboration might be similar or reciprocal for the local university students, and perhaps also the children served in this ISL program who were exposed to this important collaboration wherein people from different cultures could effectively work together and promote cosmopolitan values. It is worth noting that the current sample of participants was very diverse, and their experiences as undergraduate students in a West Coast University may have led to a baseline level of cultural understanding and multicultural skills through which learning was leveraged. These participants may have prior experience working alongside individuals from different cultures, and a multicultural environment is part of their everyday life. However, this experience may have specifically led to the development of *intercultural* skills through the navigation in Chinese society and classrooms and connection with Chinese peers. Participants likely learned skills that could allow them to effectively collaborate across cultures with the ability to engage in culturally appropriate behavior, and the ability to see the world from a Chinese perspective. Multicultural and intercultural skills are important to cultural competence, but the acquisition of intercultural skills may be more difficult to gain without the opportunity to be immersed in another culture.



The distinct focus of this ISL program provides possible future directions for program development and research. The findings of this analysis could be applied to the organization of later ISL programs. The unique SEL lessons delivered were evaluated positively by ISL participants who found success in their classroom experience. Themes from the reflections also show important development in intercultural skills, particularly through the connections with Chinese peers. Future programs may want to explore the possibility of implementing the delivery of services relevant to psychology students such as teaching mental wellness skills. As this is a delicate topic, partnering with peers in the host community should be implemented to help bridge cultural gaps and lead to increased benefits for both participants and the host community.

The main limitations of this study are due to the subjective nature and narrow scope of reflection. Though student reflections contained rich detail of each individual's experience, quantitative data may be needed to measure the magnitude of student gains from the program. For example, though students discussed their perceptions of cultural differences and similarities, an established measure of cultural competence may more accurately capture the changes pre-and-post ISL trip. The prompts for reflection allowed for highly individualized responses, so the themes from this collection may not be applicable to other ISL participants.

The background of participants in this analysis is another limitation that may cause results to be less generalizable to a wider population. As this analysis focused mostly on students in the emerging adulthood stage of development, the findings of personal and professional growth may not be as applicable to other age groups. Emerging adulthood is a

prime time for ISL experiences where young adult students can explore and form their identity (Arnett, 2000). Older students may have more concrete identities that are not as easily changed by the experience of ISL. This participant sample also was unique in their overall limited travel experience, so the novelty of traveling to another country for the first time may have amplified their learning. The unique background and experience of these cohorts, however, differentiate this analysis from prior research and offer suggestions for future directions.

Analysis of ISL participants' experience is just one part of evaluation of this program, and further research is needed to understand the experience of Chinese collaborators, the children served, and the long-lasting effects of the program. Future research could explore more specifically what aspects of ISL aid which aspect of student growth. A combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses could allow for a more detailed picture of the very personal journey that students experience. For example, validated measures of confidence, self-efficacy, and intercultural competence could be administered to participants, and scores could be compared to support findings from written reflections. Continued research in how psychology students experience ISL programs could reveal how it could be used more widely within the field. Future studies may also include perspectives from the international collaborators and how they experienced the partnership with U.S. students in delivering SEL lessons. There are clear benefits for the participants, such as having a peer who is knowledgeable of the culture and can serve as a guide, the impact on these international peers is yet unknown. A study design focused on the relationship between ISL participants and local peers could reveal what specific cultural lessons were learned and how each side

applied this knowledge. Finally, evaluation of how the children in this program were impacted by SEL lessons (see e.g., Paik et al., 2022) may also provide insight into how successful the ISL participants were in their work.

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