

THE SLOW BURN:

Young Alumni on the Impact of Global Education Programs Over Time

**Executive Summary of the Research Study
for Educators**

Dr. Clare Sisisky



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Overview of Research Study

Context and Rationale for the Study

Many independent schools in North America have been designing and implementing immersive intercultural learning experiences over the last ten years, yet most of these schools have not assessed or even explored any long-term impact of these programs on their students. As we consider ways to assess the impact of global education programs, alumni are one group of stakeholders that is often overlooked—yet they perhaps can offer the most substantial insight into understanding any impact that these programs might have. This report provides a summary of a three-year research study conducted by the Global Education Benchmark Group’s (GEBG) Executive Director, Dr. Clare Sisisky, for her dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania in partnership with 6 GEBG member schools and 191 of their young alumni who participated in global education programs.

One intention of global education programs at most GEBG member schools is to develop in students the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be engaged global citizens and thrive in their futures. The term **global competence** is often used to define this body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions - “the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development” (OECD, 2018; Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). The October 2020 release of results and analysis from OECD’s first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of global competence in 15-year-olds identified some key areas that can lead to stronger student outcomes (Schleicher, 2020). Providing students with “opportunities to relate to people from other cultures, including through international exchanges

and virtual programmes” (Schleicher, 2020) was specifically outlined as one of 5 key ways that schools can successfully prepare young people to thrive as a result of global competence development.

As many educators are considering ways to increase student development of global competence through various learning experiences and initiatives and many GEBG schools are looking to assess the impact of their global programs, this study aimed to better understand the impact over time of school-organized programs that immerse students in international contexts and relationships outside of their own self-identified culture. This study **asked young alumni that engaged in these experiences during high school to report if and how the experience has lived with them since that time** using the research question: How, if at all, do recent alumni feel that an immersive short-term international high school learning experience influenced them over time, including any development of the global competencies of intercultural communication skills, perspective taking, and adaptability?

Summary of Research Methods

This was a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study with an emphasis on qualitative methods (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), meaning that the study used both a survey and interviews to collect reflections from young alumni on any self-reported impacts of their high school global learning experience. The research design began with a quantitative survey that included an option for participants to volunteer to participate in a qualitative interview. 191 participants from 6 different independent schools in North America provided responses to the quantitative survey, and twenty of these participants participated in additional qualitative interviews. All participants were part of a short-term global learning program abroad that was organized by their high school, and all shared their reflections on their learning experience confidentially.

The quantitative data was analyzed to create composite scores for a participant's current frequency of behaviors related to intercultural communication, perspective taking, and behavioral adaptability. Scores were also created for how participants see any influence of their high school global learning experience on their current frequencies of these global competence behaviors. While these scores helped to identify the extent to which students developed lasting global competencies during their travel experiences, the study emphasized qualitative data analysis (the twenty interviews) to more deeply understand how their global learning experience in high school has lived with them over time, including in the areas that emerged from the quantitative data such as identity development and a disposition for continued intercultural engagement.

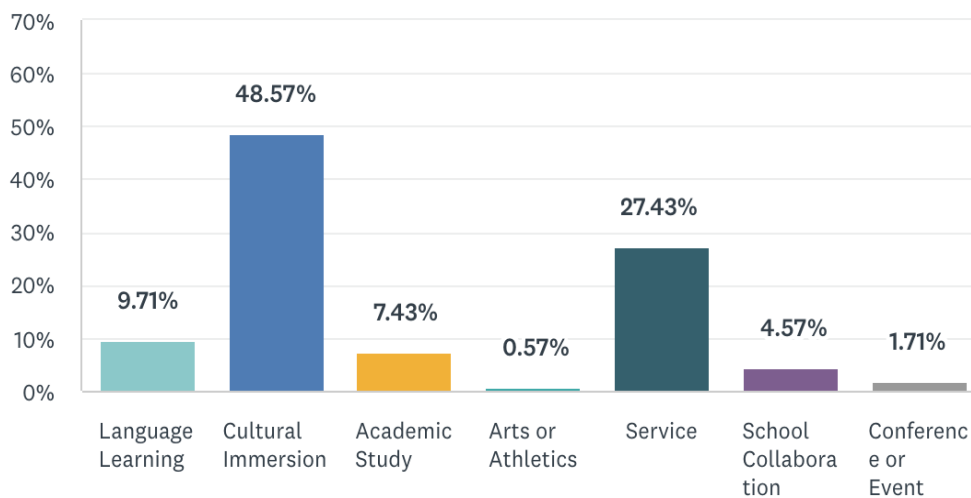
Participant and Program Demographics

The research study was conducted in partnership with 6 GEBG schools located in North America, all with long standing global education programs that have provided global learning opportunities for students for at least 6 years. All alumni who were between 5 and 8 years since their participation in a program that was short-term (2-4 weeks long) and provided an opportunity for intercultural relationship building were invited to participate in the study.

Participant Demographics

Participant Demographic (self-reported)	Quantitative Survey (n=191)	Qualitative Interview (n=20)
Gender Identity	79% Female*; 19% Male; 2% Non-binary	75% Female*; 25% Male
Racial/Ethnic Identity	35% Participants of Color	35% Participants of Color
Transnational and/or Immigrant Identity	27% Transnational and/or Immigrant Identity	25% Transnational and/or Immigrant Identity
Age	Average Age 24 (mean)	Average Age 25 (mean)

Program Type by Primary Learning Focus (n=175)

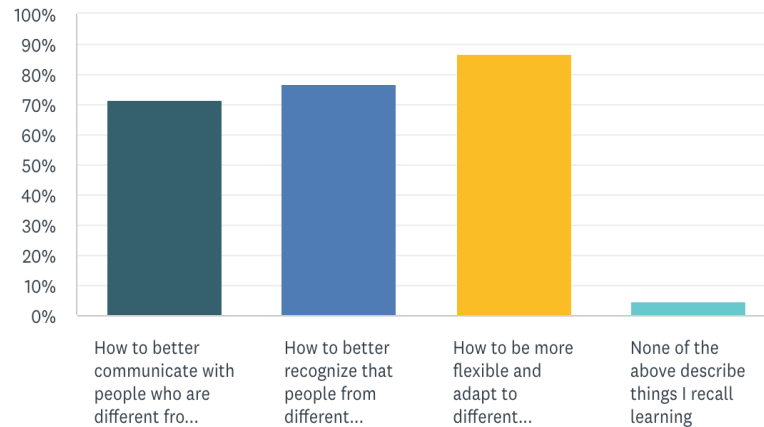


Research Findings

Findings Related to Global Competence Development

This study found that immersive, international, short-term programs designed by schools can help students significantly develop skills and dispositional aspects of global competence, especially when the program prioritizes relational learning, learning facilitated by the opportunity to connect and communicate with community members from the host community/culture. The findings of this study show that short-term immersive learning experiences that provide students an opportunity for intercultural relational learning with partners whom the students perceive as peers (regardless of factors such as age, education level, family income, etc) can support students in developing the essential skills of intercultural communication, perspective taking, and behavioral adaptability.

Participant Self-Reported Skill Development Through Global Learning Experience



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ How to better communicate with people who are different from me	71.59% 126
▼ How to better recognize that people from different cultural backgrounds/identities see things differently	76.70% 135
▼ How to be more flexible and adapt to different situations	86.93% 153
▼ None of the above describe things I recall learning	4.55% 8
Total Respondents: 176	

Intercultural Communication

For this study, intercultural communication was defined as the ability to communicate with people who have a different cultural background than you (OECD, 2019), and **71.59% of participants (n=176) reported that their global learning experience in high school helped them to better communicate with people who are different from them.**

Drawn from composite scores created from quantitative data around current behavior frequency related to intercultural communication and any self-reported influence of their high school global learning program on that behavior frequency, we see even stronger continued influence of the global learning experience. 88.5% of participants (n=156) report currently engaging in the intercultural communications behaviors often or very often and a significant majority of all participants (75.5%) attribute their high school global learning experience with having some or more impact on their intercultural communication behavior frequency. The scores are even stronger for behaviors that directly mention an intercultural dimension, specifically that 88.4% of responding participants attribute their high school global learning experience with having some or significant impact on their behavior of modifying the way they communicate with people from different cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds from their own.

The qualitative data analysis showed that one of the key areas of intercultural communication developed by participants through their high school experience was both the **skill and the disposition for empathic listening**. The prioritization of listening, especially significant for adolescents, also continued to impact participants beyond high school. Participant 32 shared how she continues to see the influence of her high school global learning experience in the way she prioritizes listening: **“Even though there may be some communication barriers, such as language, I will go out of my way to really listen to try to understand the person.”**

Behavioral Adaptability

Of the 176 participants reporting, 87% reported that their global learning experience in high school taught them how to be more flexible and adapt to different situations. Many of the participants described

the significance of being a guest or developing an understanding of the cultural importance of hospitality in the host community, a concept outlined by UNESCO as central to understandings of global citizenship in the Global South (UNESCO, 2018). Participant 18 describes how she learned how “to defer and follow others’ lead... by respecting the culture... by being a guest in other people's spaces,” demonstrating how embracing being a guest and wanting to be respectful in a new cultural setting contributed to practicing behavioral adaptability.

Perspective Taking and Perspective Seeking

A major finding of the study was that participants who practiced global competencies during high school possessed the disposition to **put these skills into use in new and varied contexts well beyond high school**. Participant 38 describes how listening to stories from community members during his global learning experience made him realize:

“My life is so different from what other people have experienced. My privileged life is such a blip on the radar compared to what's happening in the world. And that sets you up going forward to listen... Before you tell a story or engage in a conversation where you're the focal point, just maybe consider where other people are coming from... the understanding that what you say has an impact, and your experience is different from other people's experiences is really valuable. And what that does is it flips the switch in your brain.”

This quotation exemplifies the response of **77% of participants (n=176) who reported that their high school global learning experience helped them to better recognize that people from different cultural backgrounds/identities may see things differently from them.**

An **ongoing desire to seek out perspectives from various and multiple perspectives** is one of the lasting impacts self-reported by many participants. Participant 19 shared:

“I want to learn more about other people, learn more about history and just trying to challenge myself to see from every worldview, even if it's a view that I don't align with, I still want to know your view, I want to understand it, I want to know why you think that way, and I want to be uncomfortable, I want to be comfortable with my uncomfortableness.”

These findings reflect how educators understand global competence as well as how they might consequently design programs or curriculum to support intercultural communication and perspective taking development in high school students.

Findings on Lasting Impact and Shifts in Perspective

This study consistently found that participants shared **the importance of this experience having taken place during their adolescence.**

Participant 41 explained that “time of my life that it happened... shift[ed] my perspective, not only on the world but also on myself... It was the literal genesis to start building my identity, in my mind... So it's shaped literally everything.” For many participants the fact that the learning experience took place during adolescence was a key factor because they described their self-concept and identity as still in formation during that time in their lives, an idea supported by the literature related to adolescent neuroplasticity (Fuhrmann et al., 2015) which emphasizes that adolescence is a time of peak influences of outside experiences on brain development.

Disposition for Continued Intercultural Engagement

One of the most significant findings of this study, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, is that a structured and supported global learning experience during adolescence that is organized by the participant’s high school leads to a **strong disposition for continued intercultural learning.** This was **especially true for participants of color.** While students of color continue to be under-represented in higher education study abroad, the quantitative data indicates that participants of color in this study participated in higher education study abroad at higher rates than White participants and report a stronger influence of their high school global learning experience on that decision than White participants. This study found that participants described their learning experiences as a first step in a chain of decisions or thinking that led them to intentionally engage more across differences and feel more prepared to be successful in doing so.

Limitations of the Experience in Service Programs

Two important findings relate directly to the limitations of the experiences for some students or certain types of programs. Participants in service-based programs described a significant shift over time in their understanding of the value of these programs. The intensity of many interview participants' feelings about the service aspects of their programs, for those that participated in programs with this focus, was surprising given the years that have passed between their participation and the interviews. Many expressed emotions of guilt and confusion, often instigated by new courses, readings, relationships, or intercultural engagement. As they described, this guilt and confusion resulted from what they described as realizations that these programs may have unintentionally perpetuated neo-colonial mindsets and problematic power structures (Gandhi, 2018).

Participant 12 shared that her current work for an international NGO shifted her perspective on her high school program:

“Now looking back after... having more experience..., they marketed it as a volunteer trip... but it wasn't very meaningful for the people living there...[W]e didn't have any impact on them... so I feel kind of icky about that, looking back on it, but it's hard to reconcile it because it did have a big impact on my life and what I want to do, but for the people there,... it's really just like they're kind of tourist sites.”

She described her ability now, after working, to look at service-focused programs from the perspective of the community visited, rather than just viewing it through her own lens, a direct result of also experiencing meaningful learning and growth through the relational learning aspects of these programs.

Other participants, however, were much more directly critical of their service-focused programs: some had, over time, come to see them as problematic or as perpetuating what Participant 38 described as a “White Savior Complex.” Participant 17 describes how she came to this view during university:

“I learned about these trips and how they’re pretty terrible for the community. Like me, these privileged White Westerners go into their communities, take away their construction work, expect everyone to be nice to us, and smile and go home feeling like we're heroes and that we're better people. It's a really, really messed up type of trip in my opinion... In high school I wasn't aware, I didn't have this education, I didn't know... but now... it's so blatant and wrong to me that... I view that trip as a mistake.”

This reflection captures very directly what several other participants described through their questioning of the service aspects of their experiences, sharing how they have shifted over time to now see the service as reinforcing problematic power dynamics, involving misguided explanations of who is helping whom, and perpetuating neo-colonial mindsets. Ironically, this critical thinking reflects the student’s development of global competencies, explaining why students with this perspective might continue to feel gratitude for the experiences, despite their problematic nature in hindsight. One implication of this finding is that service programs and/or the service aspects of these programs are neither an effective way to develop relational global competence over time (perhaps as a result of the inherent perceived inequity of the student-community relationship) nor to combat global systems of injustice, as much as that might be the intent.

The possibility of thoughtful and sustained community learning partnerships that are co-created and mutually-beneficial does exist. This type of partnership centers local agency and informal educating,

positioning the student as a learner, and compensating the community partner as educators. However, in order to shift existing service relationships toward this other type of partnership requires significant critical self-reflection amongst stakeholders and difficult conversations between partners, particularly given the challenge that the perspectives of students/families/educators are deeply ingrained and influenced by the societies in which they live. Authentic community learning partnerships are also difficult to execute at the high school level given limited resources (including time) available to build and sustain partnerships as well as the challenge to provide ample time for student critical self-reflection prior, during, and after travel. Schools and educators could benefit from a reflective review of Fair Trade Learning principles and how they might guide any continued or reimagined endeavors into community-based learning partnerships abroad (Hartman, 2015).

Limitations of Learning for Transnational Students

The final finding emerging from participants' narratives is that most participants with transnational and/or immigrant identities reported limited global competence development from their high school global learning experience. Participants shared how their transnational or immigrant identity provided them with previous opportunity to engage in intercultural contexts and to develop global competencies, leading the short-term programs in their high school to have limited impact on them. Participant 13 reflected that she had already developed some of the skills addressed in the interview prior to her global learning experience. When asked about where she believes she developed some of these skills, she shared "I think it probably came from when I was younger, when I moved from Hong Kong to the US for high school - that was a very big change for me". Similarly, when asked about adaptability, Participant 14 shared that "when I'm at home I only

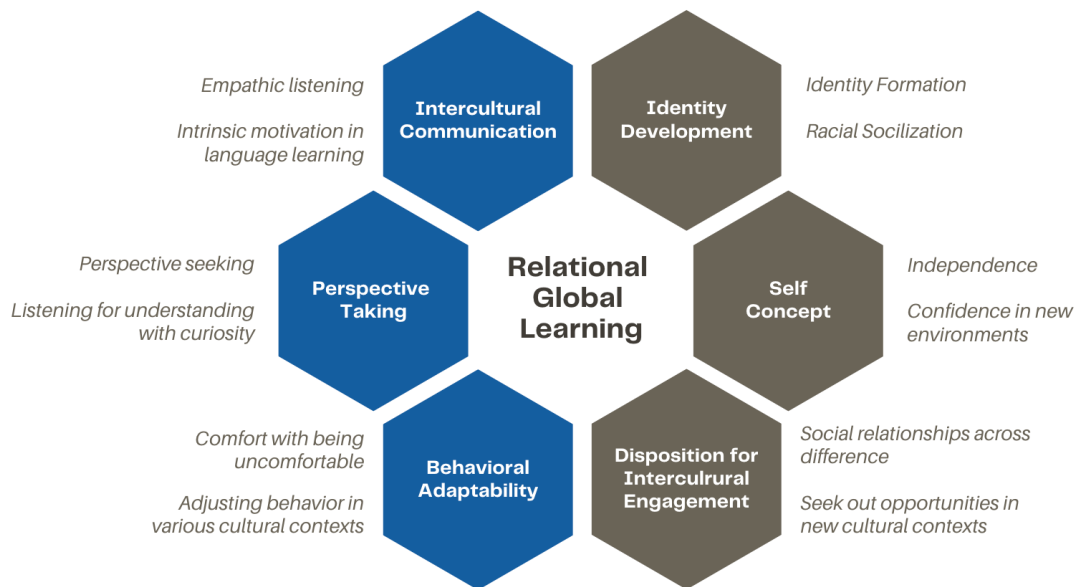
speak Spanish and I very much have a Mexican personality side of me that I can only be when I'm home, [when I'm at school] I have to adapt to be the American side of me," demonstrating how attending a predominantly White school which greatly differed from her Mexican-American home culture provided her with ample opportunity to practice advanced levels of adaptability both culturally and linguistically. These participants demonstrate how they had already developed significant global competence prior to their global learning experience, even if it was unrecognized by their school and not accounted for in the design of the program.

While assessing and differentiating for student prior knowledge and skill development may be common model practice in core academic classroom instruction, this study found that it is not a common model practice for school designed global learning programs. Many programs are implicitly or explicitly designed with an assumed student profile in mind, and that profile does not include a student whose transnational or immigrant identity has led them to prior global competence or linguistic skill development. PISA global competence assessment results indicate that in some countries immigrant students reported higher levels of certain global competencies, even with other educational disadvantages or inequities in place within that country (Schliecher, 2020). When secondary schools discuss ways to make global education and global learning experiences more inclusive, they often neglect to include the need to differentiate for prior skill development in students with transnational identities. Global educators can build on the developing frameworks to make global learning opportunities more inclusive and more equitable, a clear implication of the qualitative research findings of this study.

Conclusions

A Deeper Understanding of Potential Impact

Diagram of Student Learning Outcomes for Relational Global Learning



Relational Global Learning

Relational global learning is a learning opportunity that immerses students in a cultural context outside of their self-identified home and school culture(s) and provides them opportunity to connect with and build relationship with members of the host or partner community for the purposes of learning.

Summaries of Research Findings and Implications

Summary of Recommendations related to Global Competence

General Finding	Sub-Finding(s)	Recommendations for Program Design
<p>Participants report that relational learning was key factor in their experience</p>	<p>Intrinsic motivator for learning both during and since high school experience</p> <p>Provided meaningful context for critical self reflection</p>	<p>Educators should prioritize relational learning as an intentional driver of program design, if the goal is global competence development</p>
<p>Participants report development of the intercultural communication and continued influence of their high school experience</p>	<p>Empathic listening as key aspect</p> <p>Language learning as contributing to development</p>	<p>Educators that seek to develop intercultural communication skills in students should consider ways to emphasize listening with empathy as part of communication</p>
<p>Participants report development of perspective taking and some continued influence of their high school experience</p>	<p>Instigator for continued curiosity and open-mindedness, including perspective seeking and listening</p> <p>Some report a shift from an exclusively North American-centric worldview</p>	<p>Educators that seek to develop perspective taking skills in students should consider ways to foster curiosity through first-person perspective sharing, including with peers, both prior to as well as during learning experience</p>
<p>Participants report development of behavioral adaptability and continued influence of their high school experience, especially in new or intercultural contexts</p>	<p>Learning how to be comfortable being uncomfortable</p> <p>Significance of learning how to be a guest in cultures that prioritize hospitality</p>	<p>Educators that seek to develop behavioral adaptability skills should consider ways to include in the curriculum both the benefits of being uncomfortable and the complex concept of being a guest in cultures that prioritize hospitality</p>

Summary of Implications and Recommendations for Improvements in the Field related to Limitations of Impact

General Finding	Sub-Finding(s)	Recommendations for Improvements in the Field
<p>Participants with a transnational and/or immigrant identity report limited impact and competence development due to prior intercultural experience and skills</p>	<p>Programs do not meet the learning needs of transnational/immigrant students with high existing skill levels</p>	<p>Educators should work to know their students' prior knowledge, skills, and dispositions and differentiate learning experience to provide growth opportunity for all students</p>
<p>Participants report that their views have shifted over time in regards to the service aspects of their high school programs and that they now see these aspects as problematic</p>	<p>Participants who have engaged in critical self-reflection report feeling that these programs perpetuate neo-colonial mindsets and systems</p>	<p>Educators should critically evaluate or even reconsider programs with a service focus and look to prioritize relational learning with community partners</p>

A New Approach to Program Design: Embracing Contradictions and Connections

One way for educators to make improvements to program design is to embrace a dialectic approach to global learning pedagogy and program design. A dialectic approach is one that **embraces the contradictory nature (rather than trying to minimize it) of wanting our students to engage with the world while being very aware of the multiple intersecting identities and global systems at play** in this engagement. Educators can use a dialectic approach to create a more culturally responsive learning experience for transnational students, in which educators differentiate to provide growth and development for all students just as they would in an academic classroom setting. This differentiation would allow for the complex and fluid interplay of cultures and identities to engage both within and between participants in intercultural encounters (Martin and Nakayama, 2015).

A dialectic approach to intercultural learning prioritizes intercultural connections and relationship building but also “foregrounds the inevitable inequities in power relations that are characteristic of intercultural interactions,” meaning that these inequities are identified, discussed, and examined in context with students (p.22, Martin & Nakayama, 2015).

To engage with this approach, educators can intentionally help students to recognize and unpack what is implicit and at work as part of their intercultural interaction—in terms of histories and power-dynamics related to the geo-political context of the learning and students entering into that space. Educators can make visible the often ‘invisible’ or normative home/school nation/culture in the intercultural relationship, bringing into students’ understanding the history and implications of this geo-political legacy rather than only focusing on learning about the history, language, and culture of the community

students are visiting (Mignolo, 2020). Building this approach into the curriculum and pedagogy of a program will lead to more supportive identity formation for all participants as well as critical and contextualized global competence development. The dialectic approach to intercultural learning "emphasizes its ongoing and processual nature," while embracing "the relational and contradictory nature of intercultural interactions" (p.18, Martin and Nakayama, 2015).

This study strongly supports **the incredible, unique, and lasting value for students of this kind of learning experience.** This study and its focus on how these learning experiences live with participants over time highlights the value for educators of remaining in conversation with their alumni to better understand the evolving impact of their high school learning experience. Perhaps it can also support educators in creating more thoughtful opportunities designed with a dialectic approach and focus on relational learning. Centering the complexity and the specifics of both the learning context and the learners themselves will allow educators to design learning experiences for students that are competency-based and provide equitable opportunity for growth and development across diverse student identities.

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