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Cultural Immersion: A Trigger for Transformative Learning

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Abstract: This study examines the cultural immersion experience of 26 students who participated in either a study abroad program (SAP) or global service learning program (GSL). Specifically, the study investigates the transformative learning before, during, and after cultural immersion and the impact it had on participants' attitudes toward diverse others. The findings indicate that attitude change during and after the cultural immersion experience is a multi-dimensional and unique process that differs for individuals. Additionally, the results suggest that during cultural immersion, certain program factors and personal factors are essential for transformative learning to occur. These factors include intentionality in pre-immersion preparation, the intensity of cultural immersion, and willingness to engage in reflection during post-immersion.

Keywords: cultural immersion 1; global service learning 2; study abroad; transformative learning 3; attitude change 4

1. Introduction

As society becomes increasingly interconnected, many educators are incorporating cultural immersion programs into the curriculum to equip students with the skills they require to succeed in a global environment ([Addleman et al. 2014](#)). Cultural immersion programs that have been shown to support global outcomes include service learning (SL), global service-learning (GSL), study abroad programs (SAP), and international internship ([CIEE 2018](#)). Studies show that participation in these programs increases outcomes such as cultural tolerance, global awareness, self-development, listening, intercultural communication, and critical thinking ([Bringle and Hatcher 2011](#); [Hartman et al. 2015](#)).

The majority of the studies on cultural immersion have focused attention on the assessment of program outcomes ([Blake-Campbell 2014](#); [Graham and Crawford 2012](#); [Terzuolo 2018](#); [Yan Lo-Philip et al. 2015](#)). For instance, [Yan Lo-Philip et al. \(2015\)](#) found that during short-term study abroad, students became culturally sensitive and aware of their own biases. Similarly, [Salisbury et al. \(2013\)](#) reported that a group of American undergraduate students who participated in a long-term study abroad program in Europe experienced an increase in intercultural competence. [Tarrant et al. \(2014\)](#) measured the difference in students' global citizenship after short-term SAP. After controlling for age, gender, prior international travel experience, socioeconomic status, and race, the results of this study showed that students who participated in the SAP had a higher score on global citizenship than those who took part in the traditional class-based course. While there are plenty of studies that have looked at program benefits, there has been a dearth of studies on the impact of process factors on cultural immersion experience ([Crabtree 2008](#); [Engberg et al. 2016](#); [Hartman and Kiely 2014](#)). Hence, this study uses the theoretical concept of transformative learning to understand how the learning before, during, and after cultural immersion impacts participants' attitudes. Particularly, this study examines the unique impact of transformative learning before, during, and after study abroad

programs (SAP)/global service learning (GSL) and the effect it has on participants' attitudes toward diverse others in the community.

1.1. Transformative Learning

Transformative learning provides a framework that explains how students, through their learning, can experience a change in perspective. Mezirow introduced the concept of perspective transformation in his study, which looked at the experiences of adult learners who were re-entering college. He defined perspective transformation as the process of developing a new interpretation and meaning of experience due to a shift in perspective (Mezirow and Taylor 2009; Mezirow 2000). Since the introduction of the Mezirow perspective transformation theory, the concept has evolved, and many disciplinary perspectives of transformative learning have emerged (Hoggan 2016a). Some scholars also believe that transformative learning involves a process that leads to a change in ways of thinking and acting (Clark and Wilson 1991; Cunningham 1993; Damianakis et al. 2019; Newman 2010; Shor et al. 2017).

Most recently, Hoggan (2016b) defined transformative learning as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (p. 71). Based on an extensive literature review of several transformative learning perspectives, Hoggan identified six categories of transformative outcomes that are byproducts of transformative learning. These six categories of transformative learning outcomes include changes in worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, behavior, and capacity (Hoggan 2016b). According to Hoggan (2016a), a change in a person's worldview represents a significant shift in how they understand the world and its workings. These include changes in a person's assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. The category “self” represents how one can experience a shift in their sense of self. These changes include self-relation, empowerment, identity, self-knowledge, and personal narrative (Hoggan 2016a). Epistemology refers to a change in how people construct and evaluate knowledge. These changes include critical assessment, utilizing extra rational ways of knowing, and openness. Ontology deals with a person's mental, emotional, and physical existence in the world. Evidence of change in ontology includes affective experience of life, ways of being, and changes in habitual tendencies, increase, and development of particular attributes. Behavior refers to change in cause of action. These changes include social actions, actions that are consistent with new perspectives, professional practices, and skills. Finally, capacity represents a developmental process that indicates qualitative changes in a person's abilities that affect the way they see, interpret, and function in the world. Changes in capacity include cognitive development, consciousness, and spirituality (Hoggan 2016a). In this study, Hoggan's typology of transformative learning outcomes is used to analyze the impact of cultural immersion on participants' attitudes toward diverse others in the community.

1.2. Study Abroad Programs (SAP)

Study abroad programs (SAP) are a form of cultural immersion experience that purposely exposes students to a cultural environment that is different from their local society (Grusky 2000). SAP can either be credit-based or noncredit-based educational and cultural activities that require students to live and study in a foreign country for a specific period (Goode 2007). There are three types of SAP programs commonly referred to in the literature; these include the topic focus instructor-led short-term study abroad, community engagement study abroad, and immersion semester enrolment study abroad (Graham and Crawford 2012; Hanouille and Leuner 2001). Each of these SAP programs uses both formal academic activities and cultural experience to foster transformative learning. Overall, the findings from various studies indicate that people who participate in the different types of SAP programs gain global outcomes, such as cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, self-development, and global competency (Blake-Campbell 2014; Engberg et al. 2016; Graham and Crawford 2012; Rubin and Matthews 2013).

1.3. Global Service Learning (GSL)

Global service learning (GSL) is a growing model in the cultural immersion field. The GSL model provides students with opportunities to live and interact with, and learn about a host community. GSL involves participation in a local or international experiential learning activity that combines community service with educational reflections (Hartman and Kiely 2014). GSL programs are reciprocal, in that they connect education and community service in a way that benefits both program participants and the host communities (Bringle and Hatcher 2011; Hartman and Kiely 2014; Kiely 2005). There are four basic types of GSL programs; these include the co-curricular global service learning, short-term global service learning, course-embedded spring break global service learning, and the curricular-embedded global service learning (Alonso Garcia and Longo 2017).

Depending on the program type, participants either stay with host families in a homestay or other forms of housing within the community (Niehaus and Crain 2013). A significant aspect of the GSL program is that the participants, while living among the host community, engage in service projects within the community (Hartman and Kiely 2014). Studies show that GSL engagement promotes transformative learning and supports the development of global competence (Hartman and Kiely 2014; Hartman 2008; Jones et al. 2016).

1.4. SAP/GSL as a Trigger for Perspective Transformative Learning

SAP and GSL share similarities in that both programs use cultural immersion engagement to facilitate transformative learning (Parker and Dautoff 2007). A major distinction between SAP and GSL programs is that the GSL program emphasizes reciprocity in all phases of the cultural immersion experience, pre-immersion preparation, cultural immersion, and post-immersion (Hartman and Kiely 2014). Studies show that often when students participate in study abroad and global service learning trips, the cultural experience triggers a new consciousness that enables them to reevaluate their view of self and others (Crowder 2014; Slimbach 2017; Trilokekar and Kukar 2011). For instance, Crowder (2014) found that a group of Canadian students who participated in a GSL program in Kenya witnessed various events that caused a change in their worldview on poverty in African nations. The GSL experience provided the students with a broader lens to understand the impact of global policies and the effect it has on smaller economies around the world. Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) reported that pre-service teacher candidates from York University who participated in a four-week SAP program experienced unfamiliar situations that forced them to realize the connection that exists between power and privilege. Evidence from this study showed that SAP exposure allowed the students to engage in daily reflective practices that enabled them to recognize the layers of privilege and power between the program participants and their host community.

Similarly, Lumkes et al. (2012) investigated the impact that a two-week-plus faculty-led study abroad program in China had on the development of cultural awareness and sensitivity among participants. They found that students developed deeper appreciation and respect for other cultures because of their cultural experience. Other studies show that during SAP, cultural awareness develops in stages (Anderson et al. 2006; Pedersen 2010). For example, Pedersen (2010) found that cultural awareness begins with the reversal stage, where it is “us versus them”. At this stage, the students feel that their culture is better than that of the host. Next comes the minimization stage, where students begin to sense the similarities between cultures. Finally, there is the acceptance and adaptation stage, where students begin to accept and respect cultural differences. However, these studies only focused on understanding the program outcomes. Thus, the current research focuses on understanding the impact of transformative learning based on Hoggan’s model (Hoggan 2016b) across the pre-immersion, immersion, and post-immersion phases of the cultural immersion experience. This research also examines perspective transformative learning differences between global service learning programs versus study abroad programs.

2. Materials and Methods

Since the aim of this research was exploratory, the study employed a qualitative method to collect and analyze the data examined. [Marshall and Rossman \(1999\)](#) believe that qualitative inquiry provides the most appropriate tools for exploratory study. They argued that the use of qualitative research methods allows the researcher to gain in-depth insight into the concept examined. Additionally, the researcher used a qualitative design because the study explored a socially constructed concept that happened in a natural setting (cultural immersion, before, during, and after SAP/GSL participation). [Patton \(2002\)](#) claims that the qualitative research method lends itself naturally as the most appropriate tool to answer questions about social and personal experiences.

2.1. Study Participants

This study used a snowball sampling method to recruit participants. [Noy \(2008\)](#) suggests that for social research, snowball sampling produces a distinct category of participants that provides rich knowledge of the subject of interest. The sampling technique offered direct access to students and faculty members who had participated in a credit-based curriculum SAP/GSL program. The selected participants were from public and private universities in the northeastern, western, and southern regions of the United States. The researcher informed the participants about the nature of the research and ensured that each person gave their consent before they participated in the interview.

A total of $n = 26$ past and current students from various academic majors (international business, management, pre-engineering, Spanish, nursing, sociology, education, and global studies) participated in the study. The participants' gender, social class, race, age, and programs they attended varied. The participants interviewed included two SAP faculty members ($n = 2$), one from a private university, and the other a public university. GSL faculty members ($n = 4$) included two from private universities and two from public universities. Student participants included SAP undergraduate students ($n = 10$), four from private universities, and six from public universities. GSL graduate students ($n = 5$) were all from public universities. GSL undergraduate students ($n = 5$) included four from private universities and one from a public university. The gender of the participants included male ($n = 10$), female ($n = 16$). Participants' race included White ($n = 16$), Latino ($n = 1$), Hispanic ($n = 1$), Asian ($n = 4$), Biracial ($n = 2$), and African American ($n = 2$). Family socioeconomic status included working class ($n = 2$), and middle class ($n = 22$). The ages of students interviewed ranged from 18 to 30, and the ages of faculty members interviewed ranged from 35 to 65.

2.2. Data Collection

The data collection process happened over nine months after we obtained the Institute Review Board approval for Log number (16-300). The primary data collection involved conducting in-depth individual interviews with participants. For participants that resided within the study location, the interviews took place at a private and convenient site, while for participants who lived out of the study region, the interviews happened online via Zoom. Each of the interview sessions lasted between 45 and 60 min. At the start of each interview, we used a question guide to initiate the conversation before probing further. [Patton \(2002\)](#) sees the use of a question guide as a good practice and a way to start the information flow. The secondary data process involved reviewing the program information from the brochures, program proposals, and program curriculum obtained from faculty members. [Patton \(2002\)](#) and [Grbich \(2013\)](#) believe that the review of program documents provides researchers with information that may not ordinarily be observable.

2.3. Data Analysis

I recorded all the interviews digitally and then transcribed them verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. To ensure consistency in the findings, I only analyzed data from participants who participated in a short-term credit-based curriculum program within the last one to seven years. I then

used NVivo 11 (Pro), a qualitative research software tool created by QSR International, to organize and code the data. Next, I used an analytical approach that entailed a three-cycle process to analyze the data. The process involved a preliminary data analysis, structural coding, and thematic data analysis (Gibbs 2007; Patton 2002; Saldana 2013).

The preliminary analysis involved reading and rereading the interview transcript to search for similarities in words that participants used to describe their cultural experiences (Grbich 2013; Patton 2002). The process generated several initial themes from the data, which we shared with some of the faculty members that we interviewed. According to Patton (2002), sharing emerging themes with experts enhances the data analytical process. Based on their feedback, I re-coded the themes using the structural coding technique. The structural coding method entailed applying a phrase that described the participants' experience to a segment of the data that related to the research question (Saldana 2013). I then grouped these segments of the data into categories. Finally, through the process of thematic analysis, the themes and categories that represented the experiences shared by the study participants developed.

3. Results

The data analysis process generated several categories and subcategories consistent with categories outlined by the typology of the transformative learning model (Hoggan 2016b). The data indicated that program structure was essential in promoting transformative learning, while personal reflection, motivation, and openness were necessary for transforming participants' perspectives and attitudes. Additionally, the findings suggested that transformative learning happened before (pre-immersion), during (immersion), and after (post-immersion). These findings are summarized in Table 1, shown below.

Table 1. Summary of transformative learning outcomes themes.

Cultural Immersion Experience	Themes	Transformative Learning Outcomes Associated with Themes
Pre-Immersion Phase	Seek knowledge about the host community, mental anxiety, motivation.	Self: self-knowledge. Ontology: affective experience of life.
Immersion Phase	Openness, readiness to learn from experience, willingness to engage with the host community, and rethink ways of knowing (education).	Epistemology: openness, utilizing extra rational way of knowing, critical assessment Worldview: assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, new awareness, and understanding Capacity: consciousness
Post-Immersion Phase	Career choices expand understanding, and change in perceptions of self and others impacts decision-making skills	Behavior: action consistent with the new perspective, social actions, professional practices, skills Capacity: cognitive development,Ontology: ways of being Self: view of self and others, and responsibility

3.1. Pre-Cultural Immersion Period

Most of the participants stated that outside of the program preparations, they took personal initiative to research the social and political history of the host community. The data suggested that for most of the global service learning participants, this was important because of concerns about going into a developing country. For instance, one participant explained that for her to get the most out of her cultural experience, it was vital to know about the host community. She said, "I was going to a former colony and a place where my skin color would be the minority, and I wanted to understand how the Jamaicans may view us." For most of the study abroad participants, the reason for wanting

to know about the host culture was because they wanted to be able to manage the language and cultural differences.

Participants talked about dealing with mental anxiety before and during the cultural immersion. Many participants shared that besides the academic preparations, they had to prepare mentally for the trip. For example, participants who were from minority backgrounds noted that they had to deal with both family anxieties as well as personal worries about the trip. A participant said that she had to go on the journey with her best friend to ease her parent's fears as well as to provide social and mental support during the program. She explained, saying, "I applied to the program with my best friend; I wanted to make sure that my mom was happy, and also that I wasn't alone." Another participant, an African American male, said that he had to spend some time "talking to his family members and getting their mind ready before the trip." Overall, participants acknowledged that having a support system was essential, but nothing prepares you for the shock of going away from family and friends. The participants indicated that the support received from family, friends, program facilitators, and mentors helped them manage the anxieties associated with the cultural immersion experience. During the pre-immersion phase, the participants showed a desire to learn more about their host community and figured ways to manage the pre-immersion mental and physical anxieties. The characteristics displayed by these participants were consistent with aspects of self and ontology, two vital elements of Hoggan's typology of transformative learning. The decision to participate in the cultural immersion experience challenged most of the participants in ways that pushed them out of their comfort zone (family, friends, and teachers). The cultural immersion experience then forced them to engage in transformative learning that led to changes in self-knowledge, effective experience, strength, motivation, and self-development (Hoggan 2016b).

3.2. Cultural Immersion

During the cultural immersion, participants quickly recognized that one could never be fully prepared to experience a new culture. The participants observed that physically being in a location is much different from reading about it in a book. A reoccurring theme from the interviews alluded to the need for students to go into the cultural experience with openness and a readiness to learn from all situations. A participant reiterated the importance of this concept, saying, "honestly, I believe that if you are willing to put yourself out there and not be holding on stubbornly to your [own] view of things, you will experience and learn something new." Other participants mentioned that pre-immersion preparation was an important component that set in motion transformative learning. They also indicated that a flexible mindset was essential to be able to adapt when the unexpected occurs during the immersion. Participants shared that open-mindedness was necessary to experience transformative learning that allowed for a change in their way of thinking and understanding. One participant explained this concept, saying, "If you want to know about a culture, you can learn about it, but to understand the culture, you have to immerse yourself in the experience." During the cultural immersion phase, participants exhibited elements that related to epistemology, as categorized in Hoggan's transformative learning. Participants recognized the need to be open to construct and evaluate new ways of knowing and viewing the world (Hoggan 2016a).

Findings also suggested that transformative learning during cultural immersion does not depend on the length of the stay but on the willingness and extent to which the participants engage with the host community. One of the participants explained this notion, saying that: "you could go to Jamaica, and you spend your entire trip surrounded by other European or Americans, never really experiencing Jamaica." Participants also described the impact of living with a host family and the effect it had on transformative learning. For example, a participant said that the host family is huge, and it is one of the best things about the program for students. She said, "It gives you a way in, and once your family accepts you, the community accepts you." Another participant noted that the host family was the key to transformative learning because it provides situations that force people to step out of their comfort zones and venture into the unfamiliar. She explained:

If we had gone back to dorms, hotel rooms, or any other kind of stuff, the experience would not have affected us as deeply as it did. At least for me, it definitely wouldn't have, because you can shut it out, you can compartmentalize it, you can shut yourself off from it, but here, there was no getting away from it (Participant's interview 2017).

Interestingly, the findings also showed that the cultural immersion experience allowed participants to begin to think of their education differently. Participants recalled that before engaging in the cultural immersion experience, they had limited knowledge about other countries. For example, a participant shared that before studying abroad, she thought there was only one way of doing things. She explained, "We were very much taught that the American way is the way, I went to the Netherlands, and I saw a completely different way of life, a completely different way of social policies, and government interaction with its people." For others, the experience made them question the conventional education system and the limitation it places on the ability to reflect critically on personal perspectives. For instance, one participant said, "You can now look at things from an outsider's perspective, and you see yourself and the bubble you grew up in from a different lens." Other participants also acknowledged that the cultural immersion experience made them aware of the benefit of engaging in reflective learning and the critical knowledge that develops from this process. Participants explained that during the cultural immersion phase, they developed more holistic and reflective ways of understanding people and viewing things.

Interestingly, findings showed that based on race and age, there were unique differences in the challenges that participants had to overcome during the cultural immersion phase to achieve transformative learning outcomes. Most of the participants who lived in small rural communities had to step out of their comfort zone to interact in their host community. One of the participants shared that:

I was raised in Mississippi in the South, I was raised in Mississippi, and so, I was raised very much in a bubble, the Southern bubble, then I went on this trip, and I saw how backward a lot of the things we do could be. You know that is what travel and going out of your comfort zone does. You can look at things from an outsider's perspective and you kind of see yourself and the bubble you grew up in from a different lens (Participant's Interview 2017).

Findings also suggested that for most of the individuals from minority backgrounds integrating into the cultural immersion experience was much easier. For example, one participant said, "Let us just put it like this, I'm a first-generation Taiwanese American, so growing up, I had an extremely diverse experience, so it was easy for me to relate."

The findings also indicated that older participants faced unique challenges during the cultural immersion phase. Several of the older participants talked about the struggles they had to overcome during the cultural immersion phase because they were unprepared for the transition of living close to other participants who were younger than they were. One of the older participants shared, "To be honest, I didn't experience much culture shock. It was more of discomfort, which I think was a product of my age and staying with five students." Another older participant expressed similar feelings. He said, "We were together all the time, and there were times where I just need five minutes to listen to music and be by myself (laughing)."

One of the older participants summarized her experience, saying:

I don't know that I necessarily prepared myself emotionally because being an older person uh, and having lived on my own for a very long time, it was difficult for me to be kind of thrown into this like, here is an 8 × 8 room and you shared it with other people. (Participant's interview 2017)

Many of the older participants attributed the discomfort experienced during the cultural immersion phase to their age and to the fact that they were accustomed to living by themselves and having control over their time and daily schedule. Overall, the findings in the cultural immersion phase are

consistent with key elements reflected in Hoggan's typology of transformative learning outcomes, such as epistemology, worldview, and capacity.

3.3. *Post-Cultural Immersion*

The findings showed that throughout the different cultural immersion phases, many of these participants began to realize that, despite the difference in geographical location and culture, humans share many characteristics. One of the participants noted that the cultural immersion experience changed her perceptions about people. She explained:

The experience opened me up to be able to see beyond stereotypes and lump sum generalizations. I realized that in the ways that truly, truly matter, humans are far more alike than they are different, we all want love, we all want peace, and we all are just trying to make a living for ourselves, the way people go about doing that, changes with different cultures (Participant's interview 2017).

Other participants shared that the cultural experience expanded their understanding of people, and now they know that the differences between humans come from variation in peoples' cultures. Illustrating this idea, one participant said, "No matter what culture you are from, no matter what religion or the color of your skin, people are people. I met good people in China." She further elaborated, saying, "We did not speak the same language, but we still got along; It made me appreciate people more." Other participants shared that they had to make an effort to step out of their comfort zone and be willing to interact. For instance, a participant talked about how the cultural experience helped in overcoming her introverted personality. She explained that it is "really hard to reach out [to others], but once you do it, you get more comfortable doing it, and then you get comfortable with yourself."

Many of the participants also came to understand that people interpret situations differently based on their cultural experience. One participant said, "It's not about right or wrong; nothing is black or white; everything is pretty relative." Most of the participants indicated that the cultural immersion experience helped them to become more appreciative of people's culture and identity. This finding is consistent with Hoggan's assumption that transformative learning increases one's capacity to see and interpret things differently.

Additional findings showed that the pre-immersion, immersion, and post-cultural immersion experiences helped participants to become conscious of how the decision-making process impacts others. For instance, one of the participants described how the trip changed her process of decision-making, saying, "I'm more conscious of my actions, I'm more conscious about the decisions I make and the outcome it has on me and others." Other participants explained that while working on the project at the host community, they witnessed firsthand the effect decision-making has on society. Most of the participants also acknowledged that the transformative learning process that happened during the pre-cultural immersion, cultural immersion, and post-cultural immersion increased their understanding of self and others in many aspects. One of the participants summarized the impact of the transformative learning in this quotation

the world is so much bigger than just where we are, not just this space, this experience opened my eyes to how much is out there and how much we [participants] can see and experience and learn from other people, and their culture (Participant's Interview 2017).

Another participant explained that, "I came back understanding stupid questions, curiosity, and the biggest thing is that I now have empathy when I see people going through the same thing." A participant said that she feels that her respect for others increased on her return from the cultural immersion experience. In her words, "I treat people with a little bit more respect now." One other participant explained, "I came back a little bit more patient and a little bit more understanding of people's reality."

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, the findings allude to the importance of immersion, reflection, and openness in achieving transformative learning during and after cultural immersion. Importantly, participants noted that the pre-immersion preparation (assigned readings, reflection activities, and the community project at the host location) collectively enhanced transformative learning. The evidence from this study shows that the pre-immersion preparation helped participants transform difficult situations during the immersion experience to transformative outcomes. These findings support [Slimbach's \(2017\)](#) argument that adequate preparation before cultural engagement facilitates the development of intercultural skills during the immersion experience. These findings also are consistent with elements of Hoggan's typology of transformative learning outcome, such as worldview, self, and epistemology that signifies a change in a person's perspective.

The findings also suggest that a combination of factors, such as the intensity of participant engagement in the local environment, housing, and reflective practice, cumulatively contribute to the transformative learning (change in worldview, epistemology, self, behavior, capacity, and ontology) that occurs during cultural immersion experience. This finding is also consistent with [Kang et al. \(2019\)](#) study, which found that 12 schoolteachers who engaged with their host community experienced a change in their epistemology and worldview after a study abroad engagement in China. Some participants indicated that transformative learning would not have happened without the lived experience and the opportunity it provides to interact with the host community. Participants stated that the service component gave them the means to connect directly with their host community. Again, this finding supports [Slimbach's \(2017\)](#) claims that learning during cultural immersion does not happen in a vacuum. He argues that the participant's character will interact with external factors, such as the environment, to either restrict or enhance transformative learning outcomes.

The findings suggest that on re-entry, most participants noticed a transformation in how they think and act towards others in their community. However, some of the participants said that because of societal influence, they struggle to keep up with this new attitude. Some participants acknowledged that on return to their community, over time, it becomes challenging to keep up with the attitude change achieved during the cultural immersion experience. One participant explained that it was hard to keep up because the culture is ingrained and a massive part of one's environment and personality. For some, this cultural immersion experience signaled the start of a transformative change that they continue to navigate on re-entry to their society, through platforms such as career, community activism, and civic engagement. Others struggle to sustain the transformation because of social pressures. Explaining this observation, [Illeris \(2014\)](#) argues that "sometimes progressive transformation can be too demanding and challenging for learners so that the outcome instead becomes withdrawal or regression, which also can be a kind of transformation" (p.160). The participants all agreed that for transformative learning and attitude change to continue during the post-immersion phase, it requires a process of reflective thinking and conscious actions. Overall, the findings show that for a cultural immersion program to foster transformative learning there must be adequate pre-immersion preparations, cultural immersion engagement, and post-immersion reflections.

Study Limitations

Since the snowball sampling approach involves using individuals to identify participants, the risk of systematic bias and the likelihood of interviewing a homogenous sample that might not reflect an accurate representation of the larger population exists. To limit this effect, I triangulated the data collection and analysis process by using multiple sources to gather and interpret the data. Another source of limitation in this study was the use of a single data collection instrument. Although qualitative research allows the researcher to serve as the data collection instrument, the researcher needs to take steps to reduce the effect of personal bias. To minimize the impact of personal preference, I created analytical memos and used member checks to verify all transcribed information. This process

ensured that the data analysis procedure was reflective and that the themes that emerged reflected the participants' perspectives of their experience (Saldana 2013).

Finally, the variations in the structure and design in the different types of GSL/SAP programs that the participants in this study attended created another source of limitation. Only data from students who participated in short-term credit-based curriculum GSL and SAP programs were included in this study to reduce this effect. However, no long-term data were available, so these results provide a limited time frame to examine the impact of these transformative experiences, which is an additional limitation of the current research.

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