

# Transformative Holistic Learning Experiences through Study Abroad: Place-Based Pedagogy with Pre-/In-Service Teachers

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## Abstract

*Teachers' first years are challenging for a variety of reasons, and can result in them leaving the profession (Veenman, 1984). Reasons for leaving are numerous but include: feeling unprepared to teach diverse student groups, lack of self-satisfaction, and feeling disconnected from students. International, place-based experiences provide opportunities to address interdisciplinary connections, which can provide rich experiences for teachers to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse educational landscape. In an effort to address these issues, the authors investigated the following research questions: Does a short-term international study abroad in Costa Rica for pre- and in-service teachers initiate holistic transformative experiences? And to what extent do short-term study abroad experiences transform pre- and in-service teachers' perspectives of their profession? Students' reflections were coded primarily using Singleton's Head, Heart and Hands Model for Transformational Learning. Much of the development in the cognitive (Head) domain involved students' experiences engaging with content-specific knowledge through interdisciplinary activities. The more physically active elements of the study abroad directly contributed to participants' psychomotor (Hands) development, and students reported feeling more confident and engaged, especially as they worked on overcoming fears and doing things they've never done before. Lastly, in the affective (Heart) domain, participants consistently reflected on a reinvigorated passion for teaching and learning, and the experiences contributed to deconstructing stereotypes they held about people different from themselves. The present study implicates: the need for continuing inclusion of challenging, international cultural experiences, the purposeful development of critical place-based pedagogical approaches, and the importance of place as an aesthetic context to frame and transform perspectives.*

*Keywords:* transformative learning, study abroad, pedagogy of place

## Introduction

Teachers' first three years, often referred to as their induction years, are challenging for a variety of reasons (Veenman, 1984). Many educators leave the profession during this period of time—nationally, approximately 17% of teachers leave by their fifth year (Gray and Taie, 2015). Reasons for leaving are numerous, but can include: feeling unprepared to teach diverse groups of students, lack of self-satisfaction and engagement, and feeling disconnected from students, the material, and the educational space (Stinebrickner, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Inman & Marlow, 2004). While teacher preparation programs continually strive to improve, meeting the needs of students in schools with increasingly

challenging contexts remains an uphill battle given the wide variation in teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2003). In light of trying to meet these needs, noted curriculum theorist, Patrick Slattery (2013), stresses that to do so, education must recognize that, “[t]his is a dramatic time to analyze the interdisciplinary connections among economics, ecology, social upheaval, accountability, and curriculum” (xiii).

International study abroad experiences, grounded in implementing a pedagogy of place approach to instruction, provide opportunities to address interdisciplinary connections through intersectional lenses. Research shows that international experiences, as well as pedagogical experiences grounded in “place” outside of traditional classroom contexts, can positively impact teachers holistically through the creation of transformational learning experiences (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2007; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009). In citing Pugh’s (2002) operational definition of transformative experiences, Singleton (2015) address the holistic nature of transformative experience which include an expansion of perception, experiential value or interest, and motivated use, which is an active use of concepts learned during school in students’ personal lives. Dewey (1934), in *Art as Experience*, discusses the benefits resulting from having aesthetic, transformative experiences as having the potential to change a person’s relationship with the world, causing the rise of new ways of seeing, perceiving, and existing. Oftentimes, and consistent with pedagogical ideas of “discomfort” as a curricular asset (Zembylas, 2015), these genuine and deep experiences can be uncomfortable for students. In spite of that discomfort, or rather, *because* of that discomfort, one which involves mind, body, and heart, transformational learning experiences can be positive for participating students (Singleton, 2015; Gardner, 1999). For teachers undergoing such experiences, impacts include teachers’ development of their own self-efficacy, improvement of classroom management skills, and refinement of pedagogical practices (Hoy & Spero, 2005). Despite a multitude of research studies, a gap in the literature exists in examining the holistic impact of international place-based experiences that directly incorporate service-learning with pre- and in-service teachers.

Participants in the present study included undergraduate and graduate pre and in-service teachers enrolled in a large southwestern U.S. research university. This study investigates participants’ takeaways, or learned insights, from attending a seven-day study abroad program in Costa Rica. Prospective and current K-12 teachers participated in a variety of structured learning activities intentionally designed to push students into zones of discomfort (Zembylas, 2015) with the intention of provoking deep and meaningful transformational learning experiences. Activities included nighttime rainforest hikes, service within a local elementary school and a combined middle and high school, forest zip-lining, and several others. Simultaneously, an equal and primary goal of this study abroad experience is in its modeling of the importance of pedagogical practices emphasizing “place.” In consideration of the intentions of the program presented in this study, we sought to address the following research questions:

1. Does a short-term international study abroad in Costa Rica for pre- and in-service teachers, grounded in pedagogy of place, initiate holistic transformative experiences?
2. To what extent do short-term study abroad experiences transform pre- and in-service teachers’ perspectives of their profession?

## Literature Review

### *Teacher Induction Years*

Over the last decade, researchers have found an increase in the attrition rate of novice teachers (Papay, 2017; Redding & Henry, 2018), with some leaving even before the end of their first school year. By the fifth year, some sources report that 40-50% of beginning teachers leave; in urban schools and rural schools with a high-percentage of minority students, that number increases to 75% (Ingersoll & Perda, 2012). High percentages of teacher turnover and attrition are costly, both in time and money. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, nearly \$8 billion per year is spent on recruitment and hiring, as well as professional development and training of replacement teachers (Carroll, 2007). These percentages reflect the combined number of teachers that transfer to a different

school/district, as well as those who leave the profession entirely; nonetheless, they paint a stark picture of teacher retention.

There are a number of reasons that teachers choose to leave the profession, but researchers have identified four major factors: compensation, preparation, mentoring and induction, and school conditions (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). While all of these factors are important to consider, we are particularly interested in how preparation and induction can be positively impacted by transformative learning experiences. Continuing research has shown that attrition is unusually high for those who are less prepared to enter the classroom (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014). There are also many workplace conditions that contribute to teachers' decisions, including: instructional leadership, school culture, collegial relationships, time for collaboration and planning, teachers' agency, effective professional development, school facilities, parental support, and resources (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). As described above, schools with high rates of minority students tend to have higher attrition rates. Teachers in Title I schools have 50% higher rates of attrition than those in non-Title I schools (Carver-Thomas, 2016).

As teacher preparation programs work to meet the challenges of preparing student teachers for increasingly diverse schools, study abroad programs provide interesting opportunities for growth. Myers (1997) states that the best way to achieve the highest level of cross-cultural awareness is to be completely immersed in a culture completely different than one's own. It is imperative that pre-service and induction-phase in-service teachers are provided with opportunities to work with diverse populations in various contexts, both to provide more preparation to work in high-minority schools as well as increase their cross-cultural awareness. Experiences such as study abroad can provide those opportunities.

### ***Pedagogy of Place***

Transformative learning theory presents a framework to view how place-based educational experiences can change a learner's mind-set to become more inclusive, open, reflective, and emotionally capable of change. Changing and expanding worldviews of learners is the goal of transformative learning from the perspective of Mezirow (1978), Taylor (2007), and O'Sullivan (2008). As Lange (2004) conveys, it is hoped that the "cultural scripts they held for success, security, status, importance of paid work, life purpose, and fulfillment were redefined" (p. 132). Foundational to this approach of transformative learning is the critical pedagogical perspective that knowledge is not value-free, and that learning needs to be personal and meaningful (Gruenewald, 2007; Orr, 1992; Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2008). Meaning-making which involves emotions, relevance, and context is central to the development of individuals and in creating optimal conditions for engagement to learn. Places are invested with meaning and shape our consciousness, social identities, attitudes and behavior (Hutchison, 2004). Place provides a context, an internal and external landscape, that frames, organizes, and anchors experience which is needed to extract meaning and construct knowledge. Place also provides an experiential background for shared experience and reflection.

*Pedagogy of place* is a combination of critical pedagogy and place-based education. Critical pedagogy situates learning spaces in a sociocultural and socioespacial perspective (Pipitone, 2018). Study abroad is an experiential learning journey in a place that is novel to the participants. Being immersed in another culture and ecosystem can be a catalyst for enhancing pre-service teachers' ecological knowledge, but also global competencies, social awareness, and cultural responsiveness. The study abroad program described here includes service and interaction with rural Costa Rican elementary, middle, and high school students. In these spaces, they are aware of cultural differences, yet also experience the commonalities of teaching and working with children. These interactions and experiences have the potential to enhance pre-service teachers' ability to work with diverse learners in their own practice at home.

Even a short-term study abroad (STSA) can increase intercultural awareness, emotional intelligence and increased self-awareness (Walters, Charles, & Bingham, 2017). While traditionally, study abroad has been between one semester and a full academic year, more recent trends illustrate a concerted shift in the nature of study abroad design and enrollment. The Institute of International Education (IIE), as

cited in Vanden Berg and Schwander (2015), report that “the majority of students (62%) who studied abroad did so in a short-term program,” indicating a shift from traditional study abroad program enrollment toward STSA programs. Vanden Berg and Schwander (2015), in citing Donnelly-Smith (2009), note that:

In addition to increased numbers of student participation, the nature and scope of study abroad programs have changed dramatically in recent decades. There has been a shift away from full academic calendar year programs toward short-term study abroad programs generally accepted to be from one to eight weeks long. (p. 18-19)

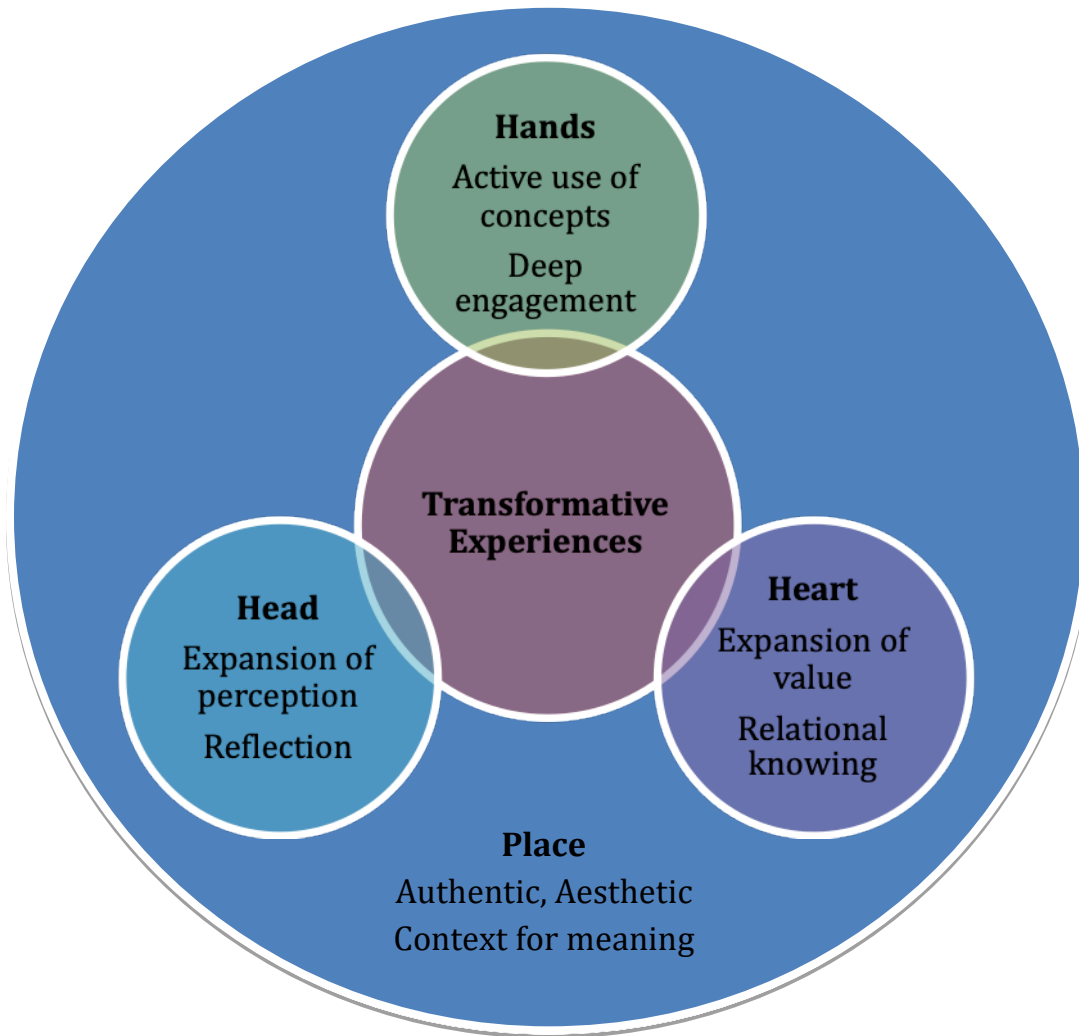
Although the program is very short in duration, it has been carefully designed to facilitate transformative learning experiences. This STSA has been facilitated by the same instructors for four years. Group leaders have established relationships with local people, local schools, and the staff at the university’s rainforest research center where participants reside and study during the trip. In addition, the instructors had taught the majority of participants and had already built relationships with students. A well-designed study abroad program that is purposed to initiate transformative experiences includes a disorienting environment, cognitively critical reflection, and emotionally charged relational interactions with a goal towards incorporating these experiences into personal practice. During nightly class meetings, we reflected on the day’s events and discussed the impact of place-based experiential learning from a theoretical and personal perspective. These experiences and reflections became catalysts for constructive discourse that allow cognitive, affective (social-emotional), and behavioral transformations (Ritz, 2011). This holistic approach is framed by the Head, Hand and Heart model for transformative learning in place.

### ***Head, Hands, and Heart***

Pugh’s (2002) transformative learning construct offers an analytic tool for measuring transformational experiences through expanded perception (head), expanded value (heart), and application of learning (hands). A holistic framework from the personal perspective of head, hands, and heart is a starting point to frame transformative experiences. Transformative learning involves a holistic approach that is inclusive of growth in all domains of development: cognitive, psycho-motor, and affective. Holistically addressing all learning domains relates to the organizing principle of transformative education through engagement of head, heart, and hands (Orr, 1992; Sipos, et al, 2008). There are also specific attributes that have been associated with transformative processes. These are reflection, active engagement, and relational interactions (Mezirow, 1978). The measurable components of change in perception, change in value, and active use of new awareness in one’s personal life are easily categorized within the domain areas (Pugh, 2002). Educators set the stage for transformative experiences through authentic community context that allows for deep engagement, building relationships, and experiences for reflection. It is the authentic context of place that offers students a context to create meaning from their learning experiences.

The Head, Hands and Heart model reflects that transformation is a multi-dimensional process and that change requires more than knowledge, logical argument, or an emotional appeal. Experience and reflection along with awareness and caring are needed to initiate a true transformational event. In the case of a study abroad experience, place offers a stimulating, authentic context for meaningful educational experiences that hold potential for personal growth for learners, going beyond academics. The essential elements of transformation—deep engagement, relational knowing, and reflection—can have a greater impact within an authentic context and place, for meaning-making. Relevant educational experiences are needed to reshape teaching and learning for more productive means (Sipos et al., 2008). The holistic pedagogy of engaging head, hands, and heart reclaims a personal perspective which brings community into the curriculum and the real world into our student’s lives. From this perspective, transformation goes beyond epistemological processes of a change of worldview to an ontological process of a change in being in the world (Lange, 2004).

For a visual representation of the Head, Hands and Heart Model, see Figure 1 below. In the figure, Head, Hands and Heart refers to the three learning domains—cognitive, psycho-motor, and affective—and reflect the holistic nature of transformative experience. Reflection, relational knowing, and deep engagement are essential aspects of transformative learning theory and can be examined qualitatively. Expansion of perception, expansion of value, and active use of concepts are quantitative aspects of transformative experiences. It is hypothesized that transformative learning experiences are more likely to occur in a place, such as a natural setting, that offers an authentic, aesthetic context for meaning.



*Figure 1.* Visual Representation of the Head, Hands and Heart Model.

### Methods

In this qualitative study, the researchers investigated the impact of a structured international STSA program grounded in a pedagogy of place. Participants provided written accounts of their experiences while attending a study abroad in Costa Rica. Selection of participants for the experience was separate from recruitment and selection for this study. All study abroad students were asked to participate in the study, with most electing to participate (n=12).

Data was derived solely from participants' summative reflection essays. Participants' essays were analyzed using *a priori* coding (Saldaña, 2013) according to Singleton's (2015) HHH model. Each domain of Singleton's (2015) HHH model was selected as a code for our data set. "Member checking" (Saldaña, 2013) was used subsequent to the initial coding and occurred over the course of several conversations among the three research team members. To systematize this, and given the narrative structure of participants' summative reflections, we used Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zimble's (1998) analytic approach to categorical content analysis, whereby "[c]ategories of the studied topic are defined, and separate utterances of the texts are extracted, classified, and gathered into these categories/groups" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 13). Table 1 delineates the overall breakdown of where participants' reflections fall within each domain. This coding process then served as the catalyst for several dynamic conversations among the research team members to finalize placement of the data into each category.

Table 1

*Breakdown of Head, Hands and Heart Entries*

Participant	Head entries*	Hand entries*	Heart entries*
1			
2	1	1	2
3	2	1	2
4	2		
5		1	2
6	2		
7	2	2	2
8			
9			2
10	2	1	1
11	1	2	1
12	4		
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>

\**Entries* defined coherent chunks of continuous information on a topic, where a given topic was determined by the cohesion of an experience/s through its/their effect/s as the linkage.

**Data Sources**

Data for the present investigation was collected during a STSA program at a large research-intensive university in the Southern U.S. Participants included both undergraduate (n=7) and graduate (n=5) students at different stages of their teaching careers: the undergraduate students were all pre-service teachers, and all but one of the graduate students were in-service K-12 teachers of varying years (the remaining graduate student is currently pursuing a doctorate and is teaching in a higher education context). As a required component of enrollment in the study abroad program, each student was required to write summative reflection paper recounting, exploring, and debriefing their experiences while attending the program. For students volunteering to participate in the present investigation, their final papers were utilized as the primary data set. Because students' final papers were used as data, no analysis was conducted until after the required course attached to the study abroad officially closed and grades were submitted. Additionally, any personally identifying information was anonymized prior to coding and analysis. More information on how data were gathered is provided in the results section.

**Results**

As an instructional component of the course attached to the study abroad tour in Costa Rica, attending students were required to write a final paper conveying overall impressions and take-aways of their time abroad, specific memories, moments, or accounts which resonated for them during their time in Costa Rica. This included any thoughts, shifts in thinking, or noticed changes in attitude attributed to their participation in programmed activities and events. Students were provided with several opportunities to recall and reflect upon experiences. These opportunities took the form of guided debriefs in group settings following a programmed activity. Guided debriefs were intended to surface ideas and encourage community building. Opportunities for individual, free explorations of both planned and unplanned activities were also provided. These were intended to provoke introspection and cultivate intrinsic connection to space, place, and self. Additional time was provided allowing students to write the final paper for the course.

Findings indicate that participants' experiences resonated in one or more ways. While participants varied in their thoughts on which experiences resonated enough to provoke explicit reflection in their final papers, each participant identified the study abroad as deeply moving and life-changing. In recording their take-aways, all participants indicated a sense of intrinsic transformation or growth. Many directly tied this growth to the program's fundamental premise as an *international* study abroad and as one directly grounded in a pedagogy of place. Crucially, related to their current roles as prospective or inservice educators, many also connected their take-aways toward bettering their own overall instructional efficacy and passion for teaching. Additionally, these experiences provoked the development of character traits and new ways of knowing necessary for the implementation of layered critical thinking processes in curricula. Many stated the experience as a whole was a reminder that learning is both a continuous process and life-long.

Using Singleton's HHH model, participants' written reflections of their experiences are categorized into three domains: head (cognitive), hands (psychomotor), and heart (affective). Of the 14 enrolled graduate and undergraduate students participating in the study abroad program, 12 chose to participate in the present study. In total, 14 entries were categorized in the "head" domain, 8 were categorized in the "hands" domain, and 13 were categorized in the "heart" domain (see Table 1).

## Head

Much of the development in the cognitive domain focused on participants' experiences with ecological experts who provided substantial information related to the program's context and history.

I find it hard to write a reflection on a trip that took my breath away. The week I have spent here [has] felt like a lifetime, and Costa Rica feels like home. I did not know what to expect at first. I was mostly very nervous, fearful of the unknown. I let the fear hold me back from applying for the trip until I decided that it was time for me to face those fears. It was the first time I left the country, and it was worth every minute. At first, I will admit, I carried my own stereotypes along with my luggage. These played a small role behind my fears of traveling to a new country, but a role nonetheless. With all the negative stigma surrounding foreign nations it was difficult to distinguish fact from fiction without seeing it firsthand. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 relays having had a sense of anxiety and fear tied to attending the program itself. Here, she connects this fear to the "stereotypes" she had about travelling in "new" countries. In identifying this fear as she does, participant 3 impugns the education she has had in her region of the United States, calling into question the ways in which fear of the "other" or the "unfamiliar" are instilled in students through formal and informal educational mechanisms. Further, in mentioning the "negative stigma" surrounding foreign nations, there remains an unambiguous sense of coded, racialized language euphemistically and covertly distinguishing between White, Western countries and other countries, such as those found in Latin America. While she may not then or yet be consciously aware that she employs this kind of coded language directly tied to "stereotypes," her recognition and acknowledgement of the ways in which these stereotypes have informed and shaped her approach to the world provides a necessary and vital cognitive

bridge toward undoing those stereotypes and opening up to new understandings of the world. Participant 3's reflections represent the power and necessity of extended, structured, international experiences in reshaping cultural attitudes and perceptions.

As a pre-service teacher, participant 3 goes on to signify a relationship for such cognitive shifts to their applications in her future pedagogical practice, stating, "Fears I faced: language barrier. Now I can relate to ESL students much easier having experienced what it is like to be in a country that speaks a different language" (Participant 3). Here, language is named as a specific, fundamental cause of fear. She bridges this situationally derived realization of this fear to its impact in crafting profound understandings that she explicitly conveys she wants to carry over to her classroom practices.

Participant 6 discusses the deconstruction of previous implicit culturally-derived biases through the knowledge acquired over the course of her time in an international context:

Just being around the culture for a week has allowed me to slowly pick up on different habits. Even my Spanish has improved. It also opened my eyes to countries the US tends to see as "less fortunate". What I picture when I hear that is people struggling to survive, living in run down homes, with very limited resources. However, in Costa Rica there were a multitude of buildings and resources, the people are happy and enjoy life, and most everyone has a job. What I find most amazing is that ecology is taught in schools, beginning in first grade. This has had an impact on the children's views of the world they live in and the impact they have on it. This is something I have always wanted to incorporate into my classroom, but seeing it first hand [*sic*] helped reignite that spark. I am so grateful for this experience. (Participant 6)

Through participation in an international study abroad program, insights were elicited directly tied to being out of a United States context. Participant 7 encapsulates the overall effect of knowledge acquired through their participation in this study abroad:

Coming on the trip to Costa Rica has been an experience of a lifetime. There was not a day that I did not learn something new. Being a teacher, I feel that I should also be learning on a daily basis to show my students and my own children that a person should never quit learning. As I participated in each event, I thought about how I could take my new information back to help expand others knowledge. I want to lead by example to show others that you can do what ever [*sic*] you put your mind to. (Participant 7)

This participant quite explicitly explains the cognitive gains made as a result of their attendance in the program.

### **Hands**

The more physically active elements of the study abroad directly contributed to participants' psychomotor development while raising new perceptions of self and the world:

*Pura Vida*. I think about the zip-line, and how much different it was from my experience in Wimberley, Texas. 650 feet looks a whole lot scarier when you are in the air being suspended by a cable and a harness going 50 miles per hour. As excited as I was, every time we got ready to go, I would feel my stomach get in knots and palms would start to sweat. I felt like I would come zooming in on the other side and break both of my legs trying to stop myself on that wall. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 recalls the feeling she had in participating in one of the challenge-by-choice activities. She begins with the phrase, *Pura Vida*, which is, for many in Costa Rica, a phrase indicative of an authentic philosophy promoting an embrace of life. Beginning with this phrase suggests that, despite the sense of adrenaline-inducing apprehension and exhilaration, she remained glad to participate in the zip-lining.



Participant 5 recounts the sensory experiences in attending the *Finca Don Juan* eco-farm and the subsequent zip-line activity:

On our third day of our trip we visited a farm called Finca Don Juan. Our guide was a man named Domingo. As he took us through the garden he had so much fun and was so passionate about everything he knew. Through his excitement we had so much fun as well. Throughout the tour, we were able to taste the fruits and vegetables that they grew. At the end of the tour we had a lunch that was made up of the food that we had seen through the tour. Thinking about it now I think this is a great example on how Costa Rica really does embrace the idea of Pura Vida. This farm is growing so many different things and they are able to make a meal right there for 14 or more people. The food was completely simple and pure. After a great lunch, we traveled to Sky Trek [sic], which is a zip line place in Costa Rica. As I literally flew through the rain forest, 600 feet in the air, I was amazed by the beauty around me. (Participant 5)

Although these are quotes from just two participants, many of the students similarly acknowledged the zip-line activity as pivotal in surfacing and shifting underlying fears. Other participants also mentioned a quiet trek through the rainforest to an isolated waterfall as an extremely physically demanding, yet deeply rewarding, experience. Participants' writing associated with the *Hands* domain reported feeling more confident and engaged directly because of these activities. The visceral impact of overcoming fears and doing things they had never done before provides a transformative sense of accomplishment. This sense of newfound confidence is important for pre- and in-service teachers as they approach their daily practice and professional responsibilities.

## Heart

In the affective domain, participants consistently relayed a reinvigorated passion for teaching and learning. In addition, participants wrote that, although they may have held pathologizing myths or stereotypes prior to the study abroad, those myths were deconstructed as a result of relational understandings derived from unplanned interactions with humans throughout their time in Costa Rica. Here, Participant 11 conveys feeling the underlying sense of community and connection by virtue of our shared humanity:

One of the little girls that I was working with pulled a book out from her sparse desk. I knew instantly from the cover illustration that it was an adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood. Picture books are one of my biggest passions and it warmed my heart to see the pride on her face as she shared her book with me. Even though we couldn't connect through language, we were able to share a common connection through literature! That moment for me was priceless! (Participant 11)

Participant 11's experience occurred during a time when the pre- and inservice teachers assisted at one of the local schools with which program coordinators have developed a relationship over several years. Clearly, Participant 11 was profoundly impacted by what she characterizes as a very heartfelt interaction.

While Participant 11 expresses the domain of "heart" through situationally-grounded relational knowing, Participant 10's account below describes "heart" by having the courage to believe in herself:

I signed up for the directed studies course with some hesitation. I am 43 years old and a mother of three. I knew that I didn't fit the mold of the typical student and worried that I would feel uncomfortable or out of place. However, the idea of visiting a school in Costa Rica and being immersed in the local culture was an opportunity that I just couldn't pass up. I submitted my application and was thrilled to learn that I had been accepted. (Participant 10)

Through an intangible openness fostered in various ways through the program, many participants developed relationships and life-long connections with their peers, with many of the people they interacted with, and, importantly, with themselves. Many of the interactions began as merely polite interactions, but evolved into deep and meaningful relationships. In particular, the visit to the local schools evoked feelings of protectiveness toward the children and gratitude toward the teachers. Many of the participants reported feeling very attached to the children, despite such a short time frame, and expressed a need to stay connected. This protectiveness extended to their surroundings and the environment, and participants felt that the rainforest and its inhabitants deserved protection.

### ***Mitigating Teacher Attrition, Turnover, and the Woes Afflicting Education***

Participants' reflections were coded according to Singleton's (2015) Head, Hands, and Heart model. At its core, this model integrates together an effective approach toward inducing transformative learning experiences for students as well as a lens to interpret the reflection essays. We contend that providing future and current educators with transformative learning experiences is made more effective through the provision of an international study abroad experience undergirded by a pedagogy of place approach to curriculum, teaching, and learning. As prefaced in our literature review, we are deeply concerned with the continued attrition and turnover trends in education. As such, we sought to examine how educators' experiences in Costa Rica might shape or reshape their views on the profession. The results indicated that participants' experiences enrolled in this study abroad did shift, reshape, or craft understandings that worked favorably for K-12 students in the long run. Participants reported feeling joy and passion for education or seeing new avenues of instruction that more actively and accurately grapple with the world's increasing ecological and sociopolitical complexities.

Participant 4's final synopsis of her experiences nicely encapsulates the authentic, multidimensional, and layered impact of Costa Rica in a way that speaks to its own very potential to improve education for our K-12 students by improving educational experiences for their teachers:

As I leave this beautiful country, I want to remember how each experience challenged me and transformed me because this trip was not only about ecological sustainability and education, but it also helped me grow as a person and as an educator. The activities we did helped me understand that although something may intimidate me at first if I just give it a try, I will accomplish something that I never thought I would be able to. I also want to bring back with me a new sense of appreciation for my family, friends, education, and life that I am so fortunate to live. I want to wake up every morning and remember "Pura Vida," and I want to live out that phrase whether it is through my teaching or my relationships that I will continue to build and maintain. Costa Rica is a special place, and it will leave an everlasting impact on my heart forever (Participant 4)

For Participant 4, the entire endeavor seems to have caused a fundamental shift, or a spark, one which expresses each domain of Singleton's (2015) HHH model. Though she verbalizes this beautifully and succinctly here, each participant—without exception—convey like takeaways, albeit in their own voices. Participant 4 also reminds us of that which Dewey continued to express throughout his lifetime, and something which many at all levels of our educational system seem to forget: Education *is* a *human* enterprise. The humanity of education seems often missed, not impressed in teacher preparation programs or in many school meetings and professional development. Yet, this investigation's cohort informs our understanding in a way that suggests that, teacher induction programs, and by extension, quite possibly, current teacher professional development programming, would benefit by creating learning-intensive experiences which marry the head, the hands, and the heart.

## **Discussion**

*Research Question 1: Does a short-term international learning experience in Costa Rica for pre- and in-service teachers, grounded in pedagogy of place, initiate holistic transformative experiences?*

Although the data set was limited for this study, the majority of students expressed a holistic transformative experience in their writing. Students' statements, placed into the categories of cognitive, emotional and practice implications, aligned with the head, heart, and hands respectively. The HHH model framed programmatic planning, classroom discussions, reflection papers, and the lens through which we evaluated their experiences. Many expressed deeply emotive and thoughtful reactions to the experience. And though this qualitative, subjective experience is difficult to capture, we found the majority of participants had an authentically immersive transformative experience during this STSA in Costa Rica.

*Research Question 2: To what extent do study abroad experiences transform pre- and in-service teachers' perspective of their profession?*

Regarding research question 2, the results indicate that the study abroad experience did affect participants' perspectives of their teaching. In the category of head, expansion of perception, students reflected on several aspects of their teaching practice in terms of breaking stereotypes, teaching ELL students, being a life-long learner or the impact of teaching local ecology. In both categories of hands and heart the idea of having the courage to believe in one's self, overcome fear, lean into risk and discomfort has the potential to increase young teachers' agency and self-efficacy in their teaching practice. The heartfelt interaction with the Costa Rican school children seemed to have a profound impact on participants' attitudes toward the importance of connecting and building relationships in educational settings. The impact of place, the beautiful and verdant rainforest, the genuine people and the rich culture did provide an aesthetic context for deep engagement, construction of new meanings, and relational knowing.

### **Limitations and Acknowledgements**

There were several limitations in this study that we want to make explicit for future research considerations. First, all data in this study is self-reported by participants and, as such, reflects participants' perceptions and not our observations. Second, while students' grades were submitted prior to reviewing students' final reflections for the purposes of this study, in an effort to remove potential bias, it is impossible to say whether students' written reflections were completely honest. And, of course, the reflection papers were written immediately while emotions were high. A longitudinal study would be needed to fully address whether transformative experiences from an STSA impacted pre- and in-services teachers' retention in the profession and whether they implement place-based or transformational experiences in their teaching practice.

Given that the majority of our participant pool are cisgender women, and from the same southern State, it seems sensible to both examine final responses for particular demographic markers (e.g. the impact of such a program on cisgender men, for instance), *and* how region of origin and domicile within the United States might shape a participants' response to such an experience. We believe it is appropriate to continue similar investigations and to expand the pool of data itself such that other analyses might be properly conducted.

In acknowledgement of the data described in this manuscript, many of our participants' excerpted reflections overlapped and fell into more than one domain of Singleton's HHH model. Although the research team conscientiously and systematically made decisions about which excerpts fell within which domain of Singleton's HHH model, we recognize that this process, being dynamic, is given to the justifications and rationale of the present research team. Other research teams, in using the same selection criteria, may make entirely different decisions related to the same data set.

### **Implications**

The present study implicates: the need for continuing inclusion of challenging, international cultural experiences; the purposeful development of critical place-based pedagogical approaches; and the

importance of place as an aesthetic context to frame and transform perspectives. This study has broad and profound implications for the improvement of pre-service teacher preparation programs, as well as for currently practicing teachers through the meaningful inclusion of international study abroad experiences made possible through a critical pedagogy of place. In addition, this study highlights the importance of cultivating place-based transformational learning experiences in order to engage students in rich and meaningful ways beyond learning content or earning a grade. Too often, schooling for teachers focuses on cognition, methodology, curriculum and assessment rather than development of human potential and relational networks. As trip leaders role-model critical place-based pedagogy and facilitate transformative experiences, pre- and in-service teachers are opened to new possibilities and depth in their own teaching practice. Participants experience holistic educational practices and learn to go beyond intellectual cultivation to include the development of relational and cultural learning. This meaningful, purposeful learning may encourage teachers to stay and grow in their profession. This movement toward lifelong transformational learning can keep teachers engaged in the profession.

In an increasingly global and interconnected society, it is crucially important for students to have broader understandings of the world. Students reported learning a wide variety of content, including aspects of: sustainability, agriculture, ecology, geology, animal behavior, political and educational structures, Costa Rican culture, U.S.-Costa Rican relations, colonization, and the impact of climate change. Situating this knowledge within the context in which they briefly occupied amplified and broadened the learning experience beyond the typical vacation trip and supported notions of pedagogical implementation within their own classrooms. Certainly, investigations of STSA programs in additional contexts are necessary to think further about those curricular and pedagogical choices which seem to consistently produce similar transformative results. Indeed, this study leaves us with more unanswered questions than not and proves to be a nascent and rich area of scholarship ready for pursuit. The researchers have intention of continuing this research and applying the HHH model in future study abroad programs in this impactful environment.

### **Conclusion**

With rapidly changing demographics in our country, teacher preparation programs need to address cultural responsiveness and social awareness. Being unprepared for the reality of today's classrooms is one of the reasons for teacher attrition. Pre-service teachers can have many preconceived beliefs about teaching, learning, and learners that should be challenged and critically examined. Properly facilitated, learning experiences in unfamiliar and "uncomfortable" places can enable personal growth among participants and greater flexibility in social awareness. The participants' guided reflections showed their experiences impacted their identity as educators, learners, and global citizens. Students wrote in their reflections that the study abroad experience made them feel more selfless and committed to ecological sustainability. The reflection essays showed participants have a renewed passion for teaching and a willingness to engage in risk-taking and challenge-by-choice.

Transformational learning theory presents an epistemological and ontological framework to view how intense place-based educational experiences can change a learner's mind-set to become more inclusive, open, reflective, and emotionally capable of change. In our dynamic society, educators require transformational skills to grow and adapt to changing needs of the next generation of learners. Because transformation is a very personal, identity changing, and holistic experience, capturing this experience from a research perspective can be daunting. The framing that the HHH model provides addresses changes in cognitive perspectives, expansion of relational knowing, deep engagement, and application. Developing self-awareness by reflecting on personal assumptions, norms, and personal meaning is a critical transformational process. The HHH model meets the essential aspects of transformational learning—critical reflection, active purposeful learning experiences, and reconstructing personal meanings for future actions. In addition, because the HHH model is situated in place as an aesthetic context to construct meaning, it is a good match for examining the transformational impact of a study abroad.

Travel to another country can push an individual out of their comfort zone by entering an intellectually, emotionally, linguistically, and culturally difficult territory. Humidity, heat, elevation,

insects, snakes, and other common causes of discomfort literally surround participants. For some, even the steady beat of rain every evening, or the silence itself during the day, serve as discomforts. Many of our activities, too, are physically demanding, such as the rainforest hike, or emotionally and mentally challenging, such as the zip line high above the rainforest canopy. Participants must push themselves to meet the challenges. We must also accommodate cultural challenges, such as language barriers, especially when we are working with local school students. But discomfort pushes participants towards personal growth as they choose to meet challenges, which increases their flexibility, resilience, and agency in all life endeavors, including their teaching practice. When one grows personally, one grows professionally.

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