

## Short Report

### East African Transnational Adolescents and Cross-Border Education: An Argument for Local International Learning

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#### ABSTRACT

This contribution outlines the current research on many of the positive benefits of cross-border education as well as some of what we know about student experiences. The authors also highlight some of the limitations of the study-abroad research to date (too White, too American, too European), and suggest that it is time to consider different sorts of “international” experiences; these potentially include crossing into local multilingual and multicultural communities as well as examining a fuller range of experiences for members of diaspora communities. By challenging common ideologies about international education, they suggest that it might be pedagogically better, more practical, and more ethical to find local international sites for all, and for future educators in particular.

As well documented in the present volume (see Kinginger & Wu; Du, both in this issue), cross-border education has grown dramatically in recent years. This trend holds for the numbers of students engaging annually in cross-border education and the range of possible student experiences. Cross-border study, that is, educational programming in which students reside outside of their national border, is widely claimed (with varied empirical support) to provide students with life-changing challenges and opportunities for intercultural and interpersonal development, for language learning, and for the acquisition of global skills and perspectives (Jackson, 2008, 2015; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). However, although research on this topic is vibrant, it is far from conclusive. Furthermore, while data suggest that students from an increasingly wide range of backgrounds are now opting to study abroad, substantial ethnic and racial inequities remain, including disproportionately low numbers of African American, Latino, and American Indian participants (*Open Doors*, 2017), with only an emerging body of research on how these students experience study abroad (e.g., Goldoni, 2017; Kinginger, 2004). We likewise know little about diaspora or immigrant students’ experiences of “going home,” “giving back,” or just exploring family migration paths through cross-border education.

To date, central lines of investigation include the role of study abroad on language learning and on intercultural sensitivity (see Pinar, 2016) and the impact and interaction of programming features (e.g., length of stay, languages of host country) on student outcomes (Mapp, 2012). While there is growing support in some areas of work (e.g., positive impact of study abroad on oral fluency and pronunciation accuracy), outcomes are inconclusive in areas such as cultural sensitivity (Strange & Gibson, 2017), with the experiences of students from the United States (and to some extent Europe and Japan) being overrepresented in the literature.

Although some of these demographic, programmatic, and research trends are steps forward, in the current short piece we wish to draw the attention of the *ARAL* readership to some of the tensions within this work and to problematize the places that are often claimed to be “international.” We do this by reflecting on some of the assumptions of international and cross-border education in light of current research in the field. Our work with multilingual East African transnational adolescents, which we briefly overview here, has shown us that there is much to learn from *local, international* work. We argue that international learning can be most productive if it takes place locally. In other words, we challenge the way universities engage in (and frequently celebrate and fund) cross-border international education while simultaneously overlooking international communities adjacent to our campuses. We consider the implications and challenges for prospective teacher educators in particular and point to the myriad benefits of working with transnationals (people with cross-border histories, experiences, and relationships) in local international sites for both language learners and future language teachers.

#### COMPLICATING CROSS-BORDER STUDY

Study abroad is often framed as an essential tool to develop students’ cross-cultural communication skills (Yang, 2016). This laudable outcome, however, is far from guaranteed. For example, while language learning is often a prime motivator for international study abroad, the findings are mixed. While some research suggests that students can make gains in oral fluency and accuracy even with short-term study (3–4 weeks; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), others find that students who stay at home but participate in intensive language classes make equal or greater gains (Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011). See Yang (2016) for meta-analyses comparing “study abroad” and study “at home” students, as well as short-term and long-term “study abroad.”

Research that has attempted to quantify gains in intercultural sensitivity is also less than clear-cut; for instance, studies have found that short-term study abroad participants from the United States tend to have inflated perceptions of their intercultural sensitivity relative to actual skills and gains (e.g., Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). Jackson (2008) likewise reported that her participants from Hong Kong, who studied in the United States, Australia, or England, had inflated perceptions of their skills before going abroad and that language proficiency did not necessarily predict intercultural skills. Length of experience seems to matter

here: Engle and Engle (2004), examining different study-abroad models, found that U.S. students made greater gains in the areas of cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication during full-year programs. However, only 2.4% of the 325,000 U.S. students who studied abroad in 2015–2016 participated in yearlong or two-semester programs, with most going over the summer (38%) or for one semester (32%) (*Open Doors*, 2017). On the other hand, Martinsen (2011) found that more interaction with locals increased a student's intercultural competence, but only up to a certain point, after which more contact resulted in diminishing returns. In short, the assumed outcomes of study abroad (by university administrators and commercial programs in particular) are often outsized relative to empirical support for those claims. And any empirical claims concerning impact need to be evaluated carefully given the increasing diversity of program types (e.g., 2-week to full-year), educational offerings, and living conditions (e.g., home-stay, international dorm).

In some institutions, student teaching abroad is touted as a means to develop culturally responsive teachers (Marx & Moss, 2011; Nero, this issue). In many such programs, the goal is to provide future teachers with international experiences that will help them better serve their future immigrant-background students. We offer several cautions here. First, we worry that cross-border teacher preparation programs might not have the capacity to offer high-quality student-teaching experiences that can support this preservice learning. Second, while teaching abroad potentially offers learning opportunities, the receiving countries are rarely those from which U.S. immigrant students originate and rarely represent similar linguistic and cultural mixes as those in our local school districts. In 2015–2016, the top host destinations for U.S. students studying abroad were the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, with Europe as the top host region, attracting more than 50% of Americans who studied abroad (*Open Doors*, 2017). Most immigrant-background K–12 students in the United States have ties to Latin America, Africa, or Asia, not Europe. As detailed below, this mismatch is even sharper in our context of work, Minneapolis-St. Paul, home to the largest number of Somali speakers in the United States and the second largest number of Hmong speakers in the United States. Even if preservice teachers were teaching English to East African youth in London, albeit valuable in many ways, they would still not become familiar with critical K–12 national (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA), state (e.g., World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, or WIDA), or school (e.g., coteaching) policies that determine immigrant education practices. We argue that for future teachers, meaningful, sustained local experiences with East African students will provide international experiences that are more likely to be transformative, authentic, and even, by many definitions, more “international.”

To be optimally meaningful, preservice learning experiences must be closely aligned with the contexts of teachers' future work. In an effort to envision a cross-border study example that would be closely tied to local issues, we point to the return migration back to Latin America due to current U.S. immigration policies. This phenomenon has meant that many bilingual children (often stronger in English) are facing enormous linguistic and cultural adjustments to their “home” countries. Preservice teachers learning (perhaps not teaching) in such contexts could offer

relevant experience closer to the needs of transnational Latinx communities in the United States. (Note: Latinx is the gender-neutral term for Latino or Latina, now widely used in the United States.) Of course, this type of experience requires significant predeparture learning, support while there and ongoing guidance with transferring learning to U.S. contexts, not to mention different sorts of support for preservice teachers with ties to these communities.

The need for careful planning and thought here is reminiscent of Ivan Illich's (1968) now classic text, *To Hell With Good Intentions*, delivered to U.S. students embarking on a trip to Mexico:

It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don't even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourselves when you define something that you want to do as "good," a "sacrifice" and "help."... I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the "good" which you intended to do. I am here to entreat you to use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.

One of the most pernicious unintended consequences for study abroad students, in particular those engaged with service learning, and perhaps for future educators in particular, is the ways in which sentimentalism, that is, "emotion-based claims to moral superiority and as justification for one's actions," are invoked through cross-border study abroad (Krabill, 2012, p. 53). These experiences, rather than breaking down stereotypes, have the potential to encourage sentimental, one-dimensional, "White Savior" perspectives. In this vein, service learning has rightly been critiqued for offering students from economically wealthy countries and families the option to "become global citizens, while residents of the Global South become subjects of a global world order" (Krabill, 2012, p. 53). The critique and concern here is that these service learning experiences encourage students to take on particular types of identities and provide distinct and varied advantages for those "helping" and those "being helped."

Of course, this doesn't mean there is no potential value in cross-border education. However, these interactions also have the real potential (increasingly amplified through social media) of positioning individuals' flatly as savior, victim, donor, or recipient, rather than complicating and personalizing intercultural communication and understanding. We also point to the absurdities of significant investments of capital for relatively wealthy students to experience poverty internationally while simultaneously ignoring the international poverty quite literally next door. To quote a tweet from author Teju Cole's response to *KONY 2012* (a controversial film and media campaign against Joseph Kony, a brutal Ugandan militia leader, widely critiqued as an oversimplified, misleading example of "slacktivism"), "the White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege" (Krabill, 2012, p. 53).

## LOCAL INTERNATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

We argue that our ongoing collaborative work in two high schools, less than 3 miles from the largest university in the state of Minnesota, provides a valuable and critical perspective on international education. These high schools serve adolescents and young adults, all of whom have immigrant or refugee backgrounds, and most of whom have interrupted or limited formal schooling. Widely spoken student languages include Amharic, Lao, Oromo, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, and Vietnamese. Many teachers are multilingual and bilingual associate educators speak many of the students' languages.

Our research with these speakers, and with East African youth in particular, has sought better understanding of how transnational, refugee-background students with limited or interrupted formal schooling and emergent literacy skills learn "to do" school and experience U.S. formal education. This work has contributed to knowledge of, for instance, the international, social (media) networks maintained by many East African youth (Vanek, King, & Bigelow, 2018); the ways in which standard assessments fail to measure literacy skills acquired in languages other than English (King & Bigelow, 2016); the symbolic power and social capital of print literacy for youth with limited access to schooling (Bigelow & King, 2016); how native language literacy can be encouraged through social media platforms (Bigelow, Vanek, King & Abdi, 2017); and the ways in which students reconfigure, undermine, and repurpose classroom discourse routines to suit their personal needs (King, Bigelow, & Hirsi, 2017). Even more relevant for the present discussion, our work with East African youth has considered the complicated international life histories of these youth prior to arrival to the United States, their myriad transnational experiences both en route to the United States and while here, and their sophisticated sensitivity to communicative norms. Our work repeatedly underscores the value of instruction that is multilingual, but solidly grounded in the local, international context.

## TOWARD A CRITICAL REFRAMING OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

In questioning some of the assumptions of study abroad, we have challenged ideologies concerning what constitutes an international education. Although working with transnational learners in local international sites holds myriad benefits for language learners and future language teachers, deep engagement, and exchange with learners at home has greater potential to be reciprocal in nature, but also is in step with current work suggesting that language learners develop a "convivial disposition" (e.g., Crowther & De Costa, 2017). *Conviviality* means that linguistic and cultural distinctions are not evaluated based simply on degrees of difference but are "viewed as being elements in an infinite number of resources speakers can use to express their thoughts by mobilizing the range of semiotic resources (not just language) and intercultural knowledge available to them" (Crowther & De

Costa, 2017, p. 451). As Leung (2005) has argued, to promote deeper intercultural understanding requires an approach that de-reifies “culture-, context-, and time-bound notions of linguistic correctness, social and cultural appropriateness, real life feasibility and possibility” (p. 139). This approach includes responsibilities in our work with international students on our home campuses. We also hope that local *international* service learning can be mobilized as a form of radical reciprocity. This would entail substantial shifts; most notably, higher education would need to relinquish its infatuation with exotic or far-away destinations in favor of engaged work in local places where cultural sensitivity, language learning, and long-term relationships can thrive.

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