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Transformative Experiences During Short-Term Immersion Trips Abroad: An Examination of MSW Students in Panama and Italy

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ABSTRACT

Although several studies highlight the benefit of short-term immersion programs abroad among social work students, few studies have examined their transformative nature. In response, this study aimed to describe the transformative change experienced by MSW students from the Southwest USA who participated in a short-term, immersion program in either Panama or Italy. The structure of the program consisted of two components: a 10-week hybrid classroom during the semester and a -12–13 day, short-term immersion program during the summer. Content analysis was utilized to examine student reflections on the impact of the short-term study abroad experience in areas such as cultural awareness and humility, professional and personal growth, and the most impactful and transformative experiences. The results included the following themes: (1) Community, (2) Adaptation, (3) Empowerment/Inspiration/Transformation, &; (4) Culture. Implications for future research in this area are identified along with considerations for educators regarding planning, teaching, and/or leading the in-country experience to best support student transformation in short-term immersion programs abroad.

KEYWORDS

Short-term immersion programs; international social work; short-term study abroad; service learning; transformative learning

Introduction

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has identified the importance of a global perspective to guide social workers in their mission to promote human and community well-being (Council on Social Work Education, 2022, p. 14). Gaining a global perspective requires, at a minimum, information about the world and, ideally, experiences beyond one's home country. Gearing et al. (2020) note both an increase in study abroad programs and gaps in social work research on the impact of such programs in the literature they reviewed for their study on learning abroad and CSWE competencies, which found

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improvements in several competencies particularly for students with no prior experience abroad. Likewise, a scoping review by Moorhead et al. (2022) concludes that additional research on the outcomes of short-term, social work study abroad programs is needed. Despite gaps in the literature, there is a general agreement that study abroad has both high costs and significant positive outcomes. Past research indicates that social work students gain more from study abroad compared to travel abroad (Kim, 2015), and a common thread in both social work experiences abroad through international field placements and study abroad is that that they bring about student transformation, which represents a life-changing, personal, and professional experience (Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Lough, 2009; Voss et al., 2017; Willis et al., 2019).

Given the possibility of student transformation through study abroad, social work educators need to know more about the types of transformation that students experience and the factors linked to such transformation (Strange & Gibson, 2017). Furthermore, while the topic of diversity among students who participate in study abroad and differences in their experiences has been explored by Chang (2017) and Salisbury et al. (2011), there is limited research exploring the transformative nature of study abroad trips among diverse students in social work programs, especially from a qualitative perspective. As such, the overarching aim of this study was to identify major themes that led to transformative experiences among diverse social work students participating in a short-term, study abroad program.

Global perspectives and study abroad in social work

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) have highlighted social work's global perspective in some iteration since at least 2001 (2008, 2015, 2022; Council on Social Work Education, 2001). Pre-dating CSWE, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) was formed in the 1920s, and remains active, co-sponsoring the International Journal of Social Work, which has continuously published since 1959.The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is another prominent organization with a long history of promoting a global perspective in social work (Healy, n.d.; IFSW, n.d..).

The focus of this paper is short-term study abroad as a method to incorporate global perspectives in social work curricula. Study abroad is considered a high impact social work education practice (Cotten & Thompson, 2017). Short-term study abroad, AKA short-term immersion programs abroad, encompasses a student experience in a nation other than their own which can range from a single visit to several weeks or months in duration (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Engle & Engle, 2003; S. C. Mapp, 2012).

Destinations also vary; however, Moorhead et al. (2022) note that in the majority of programs global north students go to global south destinations. With the increased numbers of such programs there are more studies on student outcomes (Moorhead et al., 2022) including studies which find positive student outcomes related to specific CSWE EPAS competencies (Gearing et al., 2020; Voss et al., 2017; Willis et al., 2019) though it should be noted that short-term immersions should ensure equal partnership to avoid voluntourism – a type of volunteer work that prioritizes the needs and knowledge of volunteers over others (S. Mapp & Rice, 2019; Villarreal Sosa & Lesniewski, 2021). Furthermore, the development and execution of these trips should ensure that students are developing their experiences in a human rights-based fashion that centers the needs of the community to avoid cultural tourism and foster decolonization (S. Mapp & Rice, 2019; Villarreal Sosa & Lesniewski, 2021).

Theoretical perspectives on transformative learning and study abroad

Mezirow's learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2008) has been the most well-known reference point of transformative learning. It posits that adults view life and give meaning and significance to new experiences using their frames or reference, which consist of accumulated ideas, concepts, values, emotions, and conditioned responses that guide people's behavior. People tend to reject ideas that do not align with their frames of reference as they may be viewed as strange, unrelated, or misinformed. However, some circumstances can alter people's frames of references by targeting their habits and points of view leading to transformation. Hence, transformative learning (i.e., transformation in this study) is the process by which an adult changes their frames of reference making them more inclusive, self-reflective, and by integrating them with their experiences (Mezirow, 1997).

Even though transformative learning can take place anywhere, study abroad can promote transformative learning through discovering new perspectives and ways of life or by helping students become aware of their own biases and assumptions. In the context of study abroad, Taylor (1998) suggests that transformative learning can be achieved through a perspective transformation. This can take place even in short study abroad programs. Strange and Gibson (2017) suggest that there appears to be little difference in the transformative educational ability of study abroad programs based on program types (e.g., those offering traditional classes, field/practical, combination, or other) and program length (e.g., short, medium, long, and extra-long) though they found larger effects for programs lasting more than 18 days. However, program structure is important and should be activity based, as activities serve as important tools leading to transformative learning (Mezirow, 2008). Tarrant (2010) states

that where study abroad programs, even short-term ones, are experientially structured, there is a high propensity that students will achieve a new worldview. Transformation in this sense is changing not only a habit of mind, but an entire frame of reference, or the relationships between points of view and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2008).

Despite the recognition by prior studies of the transformation potential of study abroad (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Lough, 2009; Moorhead et al., 2022; Voss et al., 2017), prior studies have not explored this concept in depth from a qualitative lens among MSW students. In addition, much of the existing research is limited to one study abroad site and often only one trip. This study adds to the existing literature with a content analysis of over 40 MSW student reflections from a large, diverse student population from a southwestern state in the US with a high percentage of first-generation students. Furthermore, the sample included the reflections of students participating in three different years and from two study abroad sites-one was in a developing/middle-income country (Panama) while the other was in a high-income country (Italy). To better understand the transformative nature of short-term immersion programs, social work educators should know more about the types of transformation that students experience and the factors linked to these transformative experiences abroad. Thus, the goal of this study was to understand the various transformative experiences among social work students participating in a short-term, study abroad program.

Materials and methods

Program overview

The short-term immersion program in the social work program at our university (CSUSB, n.d.) began in 2016–2017 academic year with a focus on improving students' practice skills by examining social work issues, policy, and practice in other nations. The faculty members/coauthors all participated in planning, teaching and/or leading the in-country experience for one or both sites. The primary program staff during the trips included a field director, multi-national/multilingual faculty members, and an international partner (Italy). The country selection was based on two criteria: faculty experience and background in these countries. One faculty member was born and raised in Panama, and she regularly visited her family in Panama and often brought goods to help her community. Initially, this member took MSW students to volunteer to serve oppressed communities for three years. This experience eventually led to the beginning of the short-term immersion program in Panama during the 2016–2017 academic year. For Italy, another faculty member regularly visited Italy, and he began the program in Italy during the 2018–2019 academic year after having made Italian social work connections at

a social work conference, which developed into collaboration with social work faculty at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano.

Research shows that having faculty familiar with a country and its culture would improve the sustainability and success of the program (Reichert, 1998). In order to establish relationships and gain commitments with local universities, social work agencies, and cultural excursions, the aforementioned faculty members visited each country the summer prior to establishing the global immersion course. Once a program was established, the pre-trip preparation consisted of e-mails and telephone calls with university and community partners in the respective countries. Drawing from the experiences of the academic staff with connections to those regions, both countries have strong traditions in social work though they differ than social work in the U.S. as Panama and Italy tend to be more grassroots oriented. Although there is no literature offering a comparison between social work in the USA, Panama, and Italy, there is literature the development of social work in both Italy and Panama (Benassi et al., 2021; Bertotti, 2021; Lyons et al., 2012).

Student recruitment and preparation

The curriculum was structured with two informational sessions in the fall semester targeting students in the MSW program, a 10-week course in the spring semester, and the international experience in the summer for ten days in the host country. The informational sessions created interest and provided an overview of the program to potential students. The targeted student population was students ready to embark on an experience where they would embrace experiential learning opportunities, be culturally inquisitive with humility, and be prepared to be outside of their daily comfort as part of the learning and growth. Significant time was spent informing students of the educational and experiential component of the trip including course content, trip expectations and logistics, and financial obligations. To ensure safety for all participants, students and faculty were instructed to always travel in pairs.

Interested full-time and/or part-time MSW students from the in-person or online program were required to complete an application to determine student readiness to engage in an international immersive program, and it covered three areas including international travel experience and/or interest in international experience, openness to cultural differences between one's culture and the country of interest, and strengths and limitations that can assist or pose a challenge during the short-term immersion. Additionally, students submitted a letter of reference that rated students on professional behavior, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and ability to maintain effective relationships. While reviewing applications, the faculty attempted to identify students who understood that they were participating to learn from

the culture and not "save" the culture. Knowledge of the local language was not a requirement.

Course structure and content

The 10-week hybrid course was offered as an elective to expose students to cultures outside of the United States to improve a student's understanding of self, cultural diversity, and the inter-connectedness of social problems on a global level (Engstrom & Jones, 2007). The 10-week course incorporated international social work topics such as Social Work and Human Rights, Women's Status and Issues Globally, Human Trafficking and Slavery at home and abroad, Social Indicators and Social Policies in Other Nations, and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In addition to asynchronous online assignments, students attended three in-person sessions covering practical and logistical issues (i.e., forms, passports, money, phones, safety) and professional issues emphasizing professional and behavioral expectations as detailed in their student handbook. The international experience was 12 to 13 days long conducted in the summer shortly after completing their course during the spring semester.

Although the course itinerary varied depending on the country, similarities included students living within a local community, visits to the partnering university with a social work program, visiting multiple social work agency sites including hospitals, orphanages, group homes, and domestic violence shelters, and it included various cultural excursions involving museums, typical restaurants, and guided tours of ecological sites. Each day was carefully structured to immerse the students in areas of social work practice and cultural experiences. Students were challenged to step outside of their level of comfort and try new skills, experiences, and meet new people. At the end of each day, students were asked to reflect on their experiences through journaling. They were also given a copy of the final assignment instructions so that they could reflect on them during the trip.

Course assignments

The course included ten weekly discussion board posts related to global social work topics including social work and human rights, international social work, and international social welfare policy. The final assignment was submitted after the completion of the summer immersion and consisted of a PowerPoint photo-essay of their experiences and learning that included personal and professional reflections. The assignment included numerous questions covering specific areas including (1) the types of transformative experiences that had the largest impact on social work student professional and personal growth, (2) the study abroad experience's effect on students' cultural humility and sensitivity, (3) comparing study abroad in relatively better or worse resourced countries and (4) unexpected experiences from the trip that

significantly affected students. The photo essay was guided by the following questions that were supposed to be answered using text and pictures in a PowerPoint presentation:

- What is happening to me as I experience this part of the world?
- What are some of the sounds, sights and smells I hope to remember?
- What are some of the hopes I have for the people I meet here?
- What are some of the visions I have for using the knowledge I gained from this experience back home?
- What are some commitments I am making to myself as a result of this experience?
- What has affected me most deeply?
- Am I hearing what I expected to hear?
- What new questions is this experience raising for me?
- What ideas are most challenging for me?
- What am I learning about myself?
- Is the group as I imagined it to be?
- How do I feel about being in this part of the world?
- Were my original assumptions about the region affirmed? Challenged? Changed?
- What have I learned that affects the way I now view the U.S., and, in particular, social work practice in my own community?

Participants

Our sample consisted of 41 MSW students from either year of the full-time, part-time, or part-time online program all of whom were eligible to apply regardless of their year in the program. Although individual student demographics were not collected, the School of Social Work at the study university is quite diverse. During the 2020/2021 academic year, 86% of MSW students consisted of women, and 56% of students identified as Hispanic/Latino followed by White (15%), Black (14%), and Other (15%). In addition, more than three quarters of the student body were first-generation students and slightly more than half received Pell grants indicating that they came from lower economic backgrounds (College Factual, n.d.).

Analysis

An application to the CSUSB Institutional Review Board, IRB-FY2022-1, describing the planned research was reviewed and determined exempt. In order to understand the students' experience in the short-term, immersion program that led to transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (1997), the text and images used as a response to the aforementioned final assignment questions were anonymized and analyzed using conventional content analysis to describe the

phenomenon of transformation by identifying relevant themes and subthemes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All student names were removed, and photos were either removed or blurred by one researcher so that student identities were concealed during analysis. The analysis consisted of reviewing the text from 41 final PowerPoint presentations from students over four years at two study abroad sites (Panama $n = 28$; Italy $n = 13$), and presentations ranged from 10 to 22 slides that combined photos with text. The resulting data were analyzed in several phases of analysis: First, the data were divided between the authors evenly. Next, each author was instructed to review the projects multiple times to identify instances of transformative learning. These were defined as text that indicated a deep, impactful change that changed their worldview or frames of reference as defined by Mezirow (1997). An initial group meeting was then held between all of the authors to discuss the initial identification of 33 initial concepts related to transformative learning, which were shared in a Google spreadsheet. After more discussion, these concepts were subsequently combined into six themes and 20 subthemes.

For the next step, the authors were instructed to review their assigned projects using the initial themes and subthemes and to suggest edits for a subsequent meeting to generate consensus upon their meaning. During this meeting, these themes and subthemes were subsequently defined and refined several times to capture the reported experiences leading to transformation. If there was a disagreement, the authors continued discussing the concept until a consensus was reached. A final meeting was held to finalize the themes and subthemes and to discuss any differences on how certain concepts were coded, which resulted in four themes and 13 subthemes highlighting various aspects of transformative learning as listed in Table 1. By following this procedure, a form of data-triangulation took place while discussing the identification of homogeneous groups for each categorization (Bengtsson, 2016), which strengthens the analysis due to the researchers' diverse scientific and cultural backgrounds by adding an intersubjective reliability and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 1. Themes and subthemes related to transformative learning.

Themes	Subthemes
Empowerment/Inspiration	1. Increased self-awareness/insight
	2. Systems contrasts (e.g., resources, practice, focus, collaboration)
	3. Eye-opening experiences
	4. Gratitude
	5. Future action
Culture	1. Cultural humility
	2. Cultural appreciation
	3. Cultural connection
Community	1. Professional unity of social work
	2. Personal relationships
Adaptation	1. Overcoming challenges posed by a new environment
	2. Role change
	3. Fun

Results

Data analysis revealed four main thematic areas in which students identified a transformative learning experience: Empowerment/Inspiration, Culture, Community, and Adaptation. Each of the four themes and corresponding subthemes are defined and illustrated with student comments, and they are listed below in order of the theme most frequently referenced by students.

Empowerment/Inspiration

The first most common theme described transformative experiences or moments that were empowering and inspirational characterized by subthemes such as heightened self-awareness/insight, contrasting social welfare systems, eye-opening experiences, expressions of gratitude, and future-oriented actions. Every student contributed to this them by discussing how their experiences jointly influenced their transformation, sometimes reflecting general transformations and, at other times, rooted in specific encounters. Reflecting on the Panama program in 2019, an MSW student described it as a "place of growth," feeling "stronger, open, and mindful" upon returning home. Another emphasized the trip's life-changing nature, pledging to "live and work with passion and heart" after being inspired by the vibrant culture. Similarly, an Italy program participant found the experience empowering, reigniting their commitment to social work and community service. A 2017 Panama student illustrates the impact of contrasting systems by comparing how social welfare issues were addressed in the host country.

> As an American we grow up with the concept that we as a nation are the best. We grow up believing that our way is the best way . . . however . . . Panama has changed that by seeing the different agencies and how they run their successful program [it] was really eye opening. Maybe the American way is not always the best way.

A Panama 2019 student stated a transformational systems contrast experience in this way:

> This was my first of many big "wow" moments in Panama. This experience allowed for me to see how a pretty confident superpower like the United States, can learn so much from a country that is smaller and would be considered having less than us but are doing work that we have not yet figured out.

This type of transformation occurred in both host countries as illustrated by an MSW student that participated in Italy in 2019.

> In South Tyrol social and health care are always together. This is also where we learned the difference between a social worker and an educator (i.e., a social worker working in an educational setting). . .In the United States we do not separate the roles and social workers do both roles.

We categorized other transformative moments as eye-opening experiences as they crossed into many types of transformative change. This is captured by an MSW student who went to Panama in 2018 who stated:

> Little did I know that it would shift my perspective both on a personal and professional level . . . I learned a new way of life. . .I had once-in-a-lifetime experiences lie right outside my comfort zone, met new people who became good friends and fellow colleagues, and now view everything through a different lens . . . .To me, this trip taught me more about myself in 10 days than the last 25 years of my life.

Other students expressed transformative moments that centered around a profound experience of gratitude as expressed by an MSW student that went to Panama in 2017:

> This trip has heightened my level of awareness for things to be thankful for and not take for granted. It really put things like work, education, healthcare, food, and money into a new perspective for me which served as a reminder to not complain about some of the more mundane things in life.

Lastly, many students also mentioned how this trip led them to create future plans to continue their growth as indicated by a 2017 MSW student in Panama who stated:

> When I returned home, I felt compelled to really slow down and refocus on the things in my life which truly matter. . .I also feel it's important for me to not only stay aware of what's happening outside of my own little world, but to become more active in it.

Culture

The second most common theme with nearly every student contributing to this theme was culture, which captured transformative moments that were brought about by cultural experiences characterized by subthemes such as cultural humility, cultural appreciation, and cultural connection. Students described feeling humbled by language barriers, which reminded them not to lose sight of their roots, reinforced their values, and deepened their cultural sensitivity. Students emphasized that exposure to different cultures gave them new perspectives, especially in their interactions with diverse populations. Students expressed appreciation for the beauty in different cultures, the friendly people, their compassion and empathy, the beautiful country, and history.

In describing other transformative experiences related to culture, some students related it to cultural connection they made. For example, students reflected on the religion in Italy and shared that they felt like a home away from home because the country is so Catholic as captured by an MSW student participating in Italy in 2019:

> I was expecting to feel a bit foreign, strange, and out of my element but I surprisingly felt very at home. I think it felt like home away from home because it is so Catholic . . . The mass was celebrated in German and Italian and I could not understand anything, yet I was not lost at all because the ritual of the mass was exactly the same.

Other students also expressed being impacted by a strong cultural connection during the trip. For example, a quote from a 2017 Panama participant demonstrates how a shift in self-consciousness helped her become aware of her own culture in a new context as she experienced what it was like to be "othered" Specifically, this student described experiencing a downplaying of her own diversity and national identity and how it led her to become aware that she was engaging in similar oversimplifications of diversity.

> One thing I found interesting is the impressions people made about me when I shared that I was American. Most were in disbelief, especially because I spoke Spanish. Then, when I shared that I was also Mexican and that's why I spoke Spanish, the perspective changed and it seemed as if I was no longer American and instead was perceived as Mexican. This was something I noticed and even caught myself doing, assuming that people were Panamanian because they lived in Panama. When in fact upon asking, I met people from Venezuela, Brazil, Kuna (an Indigenous group in Panama), and Chile.

Community

The third most common theme involved students' reported connection to a community with roughly 65% of students contributing to this theme, and it included the subthemes of professional unity of social work and personal relationships. For example, an MSW student that went to Panama in 2017 identified with the community of social work's shared values of honesty, passion, and altruistic action; she stated the following after a site visit to the Panamanian Association for Social Workers,

> In our visit to La Asociación de Trabajadores Sociales de Panama, we got to listen to a beautiful speech given by the president of the association. She gave a strong and honest speech that highlighted her passion for social work and the importance of serving others. Her speech was the one thing that had the biggest impact on me as a social worker.

> A 2017 student in Panama commented on the personal relationships and how they affected her by stating:

I value quality time and getting to know others much more. Everyone has a story and EVERYONE wanted to share that story. Many people had been to 3+ countries and spoke multiple languages and it was so interesting to hear their stories . . . The quality of relationships that the Panamanian people try to have and the emphasis on love, especially at the orphanage, touched me and showed me an example of what to strive for in my own relationships.

Adaptation

The final theme involved student adaptation with half of students contributing to this theme. Collectively, the related subthemes illustrated the transformative journey undergone by the students including how they overcame challenges posed by their new environment, role change, and embracing fun moments. For example, a 2019 student described several obstacles during her trip to Italy and how she finally accepted and overcame these barriers:

> At times I would become frustrated, especially when I encountered locals that did not speak English. I would try my best to explain what I needed, but I was not always successful . . . but I just thought about how they would feel if they went to America and did not speak English.

In another example, an MSW student that went to Panama in 2019 described the role change that took place because she spoke less than usual:

> The largest limitation for me during the trip was the language barrier. It took a while to change my thought process from feeling like my voice wasn't valued at the table to one of a learner and observer. Since leaving Panama, I have practiced my Spanish EVERYDAY.

Last, one student described how the fun experiences complemented the educational and cultural experiences with the following quote:

> The biggest surprise for me on this trip was how much our fun excursions really shaped my educational experience and cultural awareness of this trip. Everything from our city tour, the Bio Museum, the ruins, and even the monkey jumping on me at our visit to monkey island (which was also a big surprise) added a lot to this experience and added a lot of things for me to think about which redefined my perspective of global humanity.

Discussion

This study makes significant contributions to the existing literature by illuminating the transformative nature of study abroad among diverse students that participated in a short-term immersion programs abroad. The findings from this study illustrate how deeply impactful and transformative short-term, immersion programs can be for students as noted by their comments indicating personal change and validation of personal and professional values (Moorhead et al., 2022). The experience expanded students' global perspectives, vastly strengthened their cultural sensitivity and appreciation, and broadened their knowledge of different approaches to social work. Furthermore, this growth is in alignment with the aim of social work education that focuses on social workers gaining knowledge "about the global intersecting and ongoing injustices throughout history that results in oppression and racism, including social work roles and responsibilities" (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). The experience

abroad, which included a better understanding of systems, power, and privilege was described as life-changing and unforgettable suggesting a change in their frames of reference as posited by Mezirow (1997). Very few on-campus educational experiences can claim this, and our findings in addition to prior studies highlight the importance of this high-impact practice (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Gearing et al., 2020; Voss et al., 2017; Willis et al., 2019).

Considering the range of study abroad programs available, we need to clearly define the different types of programs because long-term and short-term study abroad programs still lack a clear definition (Engle & Engle, 2003). Similarly, the important components need to be specified as well. Reichert (1998) describes six developmental phases for short term social work study abroad courses that remain relevant consisting of connecting with a host country, planning in the home country, developing course content, planning with the host country, carrying out the course, and evaluating the course. Reichert also describes course components including pre-trip study of the host nation's history, values and social welfare policies, pre-preparation of students for cultural differences, interaction with a host university faculty and students, various social service agency visits to illustrate the policy and program reflections of national views of social welfare, and frequent processing and reflection time for students. Having a clearer typology with well-defined components would be an important step to help future researchers use common terms to evaluate common core components of study abroad programs to incorporate more robust measures to capture the effect of short-term immersion programs as well as other study abroad programs on student transformation.

One important contribution involves our finding that students appeared to have transformed significantly despite only participating in a short-term immersion program abroad consisting of less than two weeks. Although prior studies have found smaller effects for programs that last fewer than 18 days (Strange & Gibson, 2017), our study highlights that transformation may be possible during shorter, well-organized trips that include several opportunities to immerse students in their host country's culture. This is in alignment with Cotten and Thompson (2017) who took 12 students on a similar trip to Guatemala in a similar fashion (i.e., students took a six-week course followed by a 10-day immersion), and they found that every student reported it as transformational and improving their cultural competence – the latter was supported with quantitative data measuring Guatemalan service learning competencies. We did not conduct quantitative analyses to isolate components that led to the reported student transformation, so it is possible that it could have been attributed to the opportunities to meet other social workers and social work students in the host country of interest, the numerous site visits where students interacted with clients from different backgrounds, the intensity of the daily

itinerary, the numerous check-ins throughout the day to process their interactions, and/or the final assignment that made students reflect upon all of the aforementioned activities at the conclusion of the trip as has been found in prior studies (Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Glassburn & Reza, 2021; Lough, 2009; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Future studies should continue to examine variations in what is proposed to be the necessary components that facilitate student transformation using quantitative and qualitative measures.

Notably, the impact on students was similar between the years and different locations although one location is characterized as "global south" and the other as "global north," which is in alignment with Gearing et al. (2020) who found that destination did not significantly affect competency development further supporting the notion that the transformational impact may not depend on a particular geographic location. The immersive experience in either location challenged students' cultural humility and broadened their perspectives by observing differences in access to services, the distribution of resources, and social policies to address common social problems. Themes and comments varied somewhat in response to specific agencies and social work organizations visited, but the impact on students was similar, nonetheless. These findings align with Kim (2015) who emphasized the importance of studying abroad over traveling abroad to develop multicultural competencies. Although we did not test whether there were changes in specific CSWE competencies, prior studies indicate that this is possible (Gearing et al., 2020; Voss et al., 2017) and something that should continue to be researched in future studies of short-term study abroad programs.

Although we did not capture demographic variables to examine whether differences emerged for different students, prior studies that short-term study abroad programs have a stronger effect. For example, Gearing et al. (2020) found that students with less international travel experience and students born within the U.S. had higher competency rating though there was no difference between bilingual and monolingual speakers. Of note, one of our Spanish-speaking students had a transformational experience related to being "othered," which has been found in prior studies. Willis et al. (2019) found that their Latinx students were surprised to be considered "others" in Costa Rica but not necessarily affected whereas Chang (2017) found that their students of Latinx heritage were significantly affected by seeing how native Guatemalans othered indigenous Guatemalans, which reminded them of their experience being othered in the U.S. Future studies should include various demographic characteristics to identify how experiences of student transformation differ among diverse groups of students.

Our findings also bring up important considerations from an equity standpoint. Traditionally, study abroad programs have been seen as opportunities that were only available to students of higher incomes traditionally of

European ancestry. By shortening the length of the program and subsequently the cost, this provided students of lower incomes of diverse backgrounds the opportunity to participate in an immersion program that may not have affordable otherwise. In addition, the program was offered as part of a spring semester course, which allowed students to use some of their financial aid from their spring semester disbursement to partially fund their trip. This coupling of the short-term immersion program into a spring semester course also allowed students to avoid paying additional fees that are part of programs that require students to enroll in summer semester courses to participate in short-term immersion programs. There is some support for this as noted by Salisbury et al. (2011) who found that the availability of federal grants (not study abroad scholarships) increased study abroad intent among Latino and Asian students. Future studies should evaluate the impact of the type of structure in addition to other types of faculty-led, short-term immersion programs to evaluate their impact on increasing participation among students who may not have otherwise participated in such types of programs.

Although this study did not specifically test Mezirow's learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2008) of transformative learning, which proposes the need for students to experience guilt and shame to have a transformational perspective, we presume that participants' transformative learning did not occur due to guilt and shame. Instead, we posit that being placed outside their cultural frame of reference is key and that the resulting discomfort (as opposed to guilt or shame) was a key ingredient to their reported transformation; this is in alignment with findings from general study abroad programs (Gibson et al., 2023). In our study, the discomfort of being in a culture outside of their own allowed students to achieve a perspective transformation – a change in their frames of reference as described by Mezirow (1997). Other researchers have described the transformation as occurring through intentional learning by which students learn as a result of a planned activity and incidental learning through self-discovery while interacting with others in a new environment (Younes & Asay, 2003). Conscientization, i.e., the development of an understanding and awareness of one's position in social, political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts, also accordingly to power, privilege, and oppression, may also play an important role (Dawson & Avoseh, 2018). O'Sullivan (2002) integrates all three reflective distinctions (critical reflection, critical self-reflection, and conscientization) as the basis for transformation through a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions that dramatically alters a person's "way of being in the world" (O'Sullivan, 2002). Furthermore, we believe that an important component involves what we call an Eco-immersion, which includes a multi-day immersion that students are unable to step out of. We posit that this may be a reason domestic practicum experiences though important may not have the same impact as short-term immersion experiences as students can then return to their familiar environments. Although we do not fully understand the transformative process

yet, the aforementioned concepts and how they may or may not lead to transformation should continue to be examined.

Last, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a harsh blow to study abroad generally speaking and short-term immersion programs as well. Our own program was suspended in 2020 and has yet to resume. The findings from this study indicate that we cannot abandon this high-impact practice to enhance social work education considering its potential to make such a transformative impact within a short amount of time. Considering that we have identified some best practices and qualitative descriptions of transformation, we hope that other schools of social work will continue to support faculty members and students to expand access to short-term immersion programs. This should also include funding to support underrepresented students from lower incomes and funding to expand existing initiatives to ensure that more than just a handful of students participate in this transformative, high-impact practice.

Limitations

As is the case in qualitative research, the generalizability of this study is limited due to the small sample size and due to the fact that all participants were from one diverse university in Southwestern California and may not generalize to dissimilar settings. Furthermore, we did not use standardized measures and quantitative methods to capture the reported student transformation nor can we exclude the possibility that the type of student that chooses to participate in short-term immersion programs may be the type that is more likely to have a transformative experience. Another limitation is that both countries differed in that one was a developing/middle-income country (Panama) and the other was a high-income country (Italy). Thus, it is possible that this difference can affect transformation in different ways though it did not appear to make a difference based on our findings. Last, we did not obtain detailed demographic information from students such as age, race/ethnicity, and previous experience abroad, which may also affect their experience during short-term immersion programs.

Conclusion

This study offers qualitative insights into how transformative learning took place among diverse MSW students that participated in a short-term study abroad program in either Panama or Italy. We found that short-term immersion programs were found to be transformative as reported by the students in their final projects, and we detail the various components of the trip that we believe contributed to the reported transformation. Furthermore, we discuss the potential of short-term immersion programs to facilitate student

transformation as well as how they can address issues related to equity in participating in short-term immersion programs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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