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Translating Research to Practice for Latinx Students' Study Abroad Experiences

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Summary of Research on Latinx Students and Study Abroad

This research-to-practice brief examines the key outcomes of eight empirical studies that focus explicitly on Latin American and/or Hispanic students during study abroad programs (for background on the selection of these studies, see Brunsting, Dietrich et al., in this issue). These study abroad programs predominantly occurred in Central America. Given that all student participants identified in the research were of Latin American origin, we use *Latinx* for this population, acknowledging that there is no consensus on group nomenclature (see Salinas, 2020 for a critical examination of the term Latinx within the Latin American community). As further outlined below, critical to this brief are how heritage learners navigate Latinx cultures as Latinx or Hispanic students, qualifying one's own identity as both Latinx and as a U.S. citizen, and, in some cases, the re-examination of language ability in the context of being a heritage speaker. Seven of the eight included studies employed

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qualitative methodologies, indicating a need for more quantitative or mixed method approaches to foster enhanced understanding of the experiences of Latinx study abroad students.

Although Latinx students are underrepresented in study abroad, they experience a mixture of positive affirmation in their identity and experiences abroad, yet they also encounter a range of complex emotions as learners. The sample in research reviewed for this brief shows they are more likely to study in Latin America or Spain as heritage learners on short or summer programs (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Also, they draw on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds to adjust to their Latin American study abroad destinations (Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). For many of the represented Latinx students, their experience abroad allowed them to re-examine their own cultural and ethnic identities as both U.S. citizens and Latinx (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Overall, Latinx students who study abroad see large gains in their GPA and in their likelihood of and time to graduation (Bell et al., 2021). They also make gains in their identity development and their intercultural competence (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019), as well as in their career preparedness (Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008).

Key Findings

Experiential learning/study abroad is transformative for Latinx students to navigate and reify their cultural and ethnic identities abroad and upon return to home (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Heritage locations, in particular, allowed students to interrogate their ethnic and cultural identities in more complex ways. Conversely, some participants felt as if they were caught between two cultural worlds, where they were neither Latin enough nor fully American (Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). This was especially the case when locals and host families challenged them with respect to their language fluency (Quan, 2018). The students' heritage, language skills, and cultural curiosity helped foster deeper connections and engagement opportunities, but

the students still experienced cultural dissonance with respect to differences in socio-economic status and with respect to local accent and native fluency (Chang, 2017; Quan, 2018; Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019).

Despite these initial feelings, many of the students were able to reinforce their cultural heritage and ethnic identity, finding a sense of belonging while abroad (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Latinx students increased their knowledge of the Spanish language, even when they already had advanced or near fluent proficiency, particularly as pertains to professional Spanish (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Heritage students may or may not be able to fully identify the nuances of intercultural competence gained through time abroad in a country that is similar to their own cultural or ethnic background; however, some participants were able to recognize those nuances, enhancing their competencies (Teranishi, 2007) and their critical frame for interpreting cross-cultural information (Chang, 2017). Moreover, Latinx students confronted their unexpected privilege garnered through their American identity; they did so while also recognizing their lack of privilege at home (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Quan, 2018; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Finally, all participants from the qualitative studies that were focused on one or two programs chose to study abroad in Spain (Quan, 2018) or in Latin America (Chang, 2017; Kaneria et al., 2020; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi & Hannigan, 2008; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, 2019), indicating that they may privilege heritage sites for their study abroad experiences.

Best Practices

Incorporate Strengths-based Education

The studies reviewed demonstrate that many Latinx students carry significant community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) into their study abroad experiences and that they use their backgrounds for deeper and more complex personal and community-based interactions while away (Wick et al., 2019, p. 71). It would be helpful to embed personal reflection and recognition of these assets throughout the study abroad experience, i.e., before travel, while abroad, and upon return. This tactic would be in comparison to a deficit approach, which continues to be centerstage in many education communities. Deficit approaches focus on barriers and the unique hardships of underserved student

populations (Yosso, 2005). The study abroad experience offers an incredible opportunity for Latinx students to lean on and showcase their community cultural wealth. This can enhance Latinx students' intercultural competency development, deepen their sense of social identity, and encourage movement toward social justice and equity.

As practitioners, we can help encourage Latinx students' recognition of the unique familial, linguistic, and cultural strengths they carry by delivering journal, interview, and focus group prompts (Wick et al., 2019, p. 80-81). Such prompts can be directed before, during, and after the abroad experience to help clarify strengths. Additionally, such activities can help students identify the intercultural competencies they already have and distinguish the subtle cultural components of their host communities that can be more challenging to recognize, thus strengthening their intercultural competency. Helping students recognize and apply their community cultural wealth does not have to wait until the pre-departure stage; practitioners can restructure the application process. Many applications privilege formal Spanish language coursework and academic writing skills. Practitioners can include opportunities for applicants to showcase their 'familial and linguistic' background and discuss their aspirations for deepening their connection to their heritage (Wick et al., 2019, p. 81). All of this can be exemplified through various expressions outside of formal essay writing, e.g., interviews (in English or Spanish), artistic expressions, and sharing family stories.

Embed Opportunities for Critical Consciousness

Study abroad offers all students the opportunity to examine power, privilege, and oppression in a new context. Many Latinx students are well-versed in this area within their home communities but can report surprise when engaging with it on a global scale. Some students observe, reflect, and lean into the experience to create a more complex way of viewing social justice and advocacy activities. However, other students may notice but need additional support to interrogate and process events. For instance, some students reported realizing that they had racial, gender, and socio-economic disadvantages in the U.S. but that they carried socio-economic privilege on a global scale. Other students reported noticing difference in access between themselves and their host community peers but did not make the systemic connection (Wick et al., 2019, p. 75).

International educators have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to help guide students' critical reflection during and after the experience abroad. Like the suggestions above, practitioners can create time and space for critical reflection through journaling, group debriefs, and individual interviews that help students identify systems of power and oppression. It may be helpful, when creating the environment for such reflection with Latinx students, along with other minority students, to acknowledge personal experiences of oppression at home. As well as honoring the lived experiences of those in the debrief, this strategy can help draw the connection to systems of oppression in the host community.

Connect Latinx Students to Potential Identity-Specific Resources

Some Latinx students report feelings of not belonging when members of the host community treat them differently from their non-Latinx fellow participants. For some, this comes as a surprise. Their nationality, language, and other characteristics create a barrier to belonging. As Quan (2018) articulates, practitioners can help students identify resources to prepare them for their experience abroad. Some third-party providers and study abroad organizations have curated lists of articles, blogs, and other written resources describing the experiences of Latinx students. Furthermore, practitioners can go right to the source: past participants! We can connect outbound Latinx students with Latinx study abroad alumni by encouraging or sponsoring Latinx student groups to host mentorship events and/or simply by asking students upon return (perhaps as a part of end-of-program surveys) if they would like to serve as a point of connection for other students of similar social identities who are preparing to study abroad.

Examine Portfolio of Offerings

Although it may appear obvious to some practitioners, it is essential that an institution's program portfolio includes experiences in Latin America and Spain (short- and longer-term) with opportunities for advanced Spanish language and in-depth interactions with members of the local host community. As referenced in the summary, most of the Latinx students in the research reviewed for this brief studied in heritage locations. A basic, foundational step would be ensuring programs are offered in heritage locations and support cultural and identity development of Latinx students.

Gaps in Research

Generally, the field of study abroad ought to increase the study and understanding of the experiences of Latinx study abroad students. Consider, for example, the two following gaps in extant research. Although Latinx students may often study in heritage locations, the experiences of Latinx students in non-heritage locations remain under-researched. Also, most of the existing scholarship focuses on the experiences of students who study abroad with far less emphasis placed on outreach and marketing efforts that attract and encourage students to study abroad. In what ways does marketing language speak or not speak to Latinx students? Increased study of marketing techniques is essential in that it serves as the entry point to this high-impact practice, and without which, the field may be missing many Latinx students because the experience is not articulated as being something designed for them.

Conclusion

Study abroad practitioners who support Latinx students ought to recognize that study abroad is an incredible opportunity for students to recognize and showcase community cultural wealth, as well as to strengthen cross-cultural navigation skills. When in an international context, Latinx students should be encouraged to explore concepts and examples of power and oppression on a global scale. Given that some Latinx students have reported facing challenges with belonging and acceptance in the international experience as it relates to cultural/linguistic background, practitioners should explore targeted resources for Latinx students and be sure to make them accessible before and during the experience. Lastly, study abroad professionals should continue listening to and learning about Latinx student experiences, and then adjust policies and practices as new information is realized.

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Author Biography

Brynn Smith currently works at The Evergreen State College in a one-person office where she enjoys helping students maximize their experiences abroad to benefit their own personal development, and to positively impact their communities. Given the significant impact from her intercultural experiences through her undergraduate education, she pursued a career in international education, which started by earning an M.A. in International Education from SIT Graduate Institute in 2016. Brynn has worked in international education since 2015.

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