



Enhancing the cultural competency of prospective leaders via a study abroad experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether an experiential learning opportunity, specifically a study tour experience, would improve the cultural intelligence of prospective educational leaders and would challenge them to expand their own cultural understanding and behavior. Several prospective leaders who enrolled in a graduate program in Educational Leadership volunteered to attend a study abroad program that was intended, in part, to enhance their cultural competence. They were then asked to complete a survey that measured the four domains of cultural intelligence, namely metacognition, cognition, motivation and behavior. They were also asked to respond to prompts about how the experiential learning experience impacted their own cultural understanding and behavior. The results indicated that the study tour participants were cognizant of their cultural intelligence and that they compared and contrasted the norms of their own culture and those of the study tour country. In essence, participants acquired substantial cultural intelligence and reflected on how their leadership behavior should change to meet the needs of others.

Keywords: experiential learning, evaluation, educational leadership, cultural intelligence

Dwyer et al. (1985) alerted us to the fact that the success of students in schools is affected by the community, the beliefs and experiences of the teachers and staff, and by the school's context. It stands to reason, then, that by influencing the beliefs and experiences of staff, particularly the school leader, we would ultimately influence student outcomes. This is consistent with Leithwood, Patten and Jantzi's (2010) discovery that leaders influence the technical core of schools, including curricular, instructional and climate features of the school, which, in turn, impact student success. More recently, Dhuey and Smith (2014) substantiated this linkage by capturing evidence from over 160,000 elementary students who attended 820 schools that were administered by 1400 principals over a ten-year span. They concluded that principal quality, as measured by tenure and experience, "can have a substantial impact on student achievement in reading and math" (p. 656).

In recent years, a phenomenon that schools are confronting is the dramatic increase in diverse learners, many of whom are culturally divergent from the traditional school population. To illustrate, in parsing the 2010 census data for Houston, Texas, Lomi Kriel of the Houston Chronicle (2015) discovered that of the 2.2 million residents of Harris County, 1.6 million spoke a language other than English at home. This diversity is magnified in the schools.

During the 2016-17 academic year, 65.0% of the 5.34 million public school attendees in Texas identified themselves as African American or Hispanic. Persistently, these two groups of students do not accomplish/attain the success in graduation rate or mastery of academic subjects at the same level as their Anglo or Asian counterparts. In fact, for the 2015-16 academic year, only 21.6% of African American graduates and 28.5% of Hispanic graduates were college ready in both Mathematics and English Language Arts, compared to 55% of their Anglo peers (TEA, 2017a). This is particularly troublesome in that the state of Texas needs an educated populace to be able to advance its economic advantage in petroleum engineering, aerospace engineering, medicine, and other sciences. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board affirmed this expectation in its 60x30TX strategic plan, which aims to “help all students achieve their educational goals, which in turn, will help Texas remain globally competitive for years to come” (THECB 2015, p. 2).

To address the aforementioned academic gap, the Texas Education Agency has accepted the responsibility for “all Texas students [to] have the knowledge and skills, as well as the instructional programs they need to succeed” (TEA, 2017a, p. 33). School leaders are the educators primarily tasked with meeting this challenging. This is prescient in that as Sturgis, Shiflett and Tanner (2017) confirmed, even in highly diverse schools, principal quality, as measured by tenure, experience and training, does affect students’ academic performance. One explicit approach that TEA has identified to improve the quality of educational leadership in the schools is by expanding their span of control. The broadening span of control includes providing leaders with greater autonomy to select and train teachers, and increased oversight of the curriculum and instruction, which are the technical core of schools that advance student performance.

Cultural Intelligence of School Leaders

Doubtlessly, many schools are presently led by an experienced principal who received training via traditional educational leadership models. Given the growing diversity within our schools, we posit that one key “span of control” skill that leaders of diverse schools must master is the ability to “grasp, reason and behave effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity” (Ang et al., 2007, p. 337). This skill, referred to as Cultural Intelligence (CQ) requires that leaders become knowledgeable about the “norms, practices and conventions of different cultures” (p. 338) as well as the “capacity to plan, monitor and revise mental models of cultural norms for diverse cultural groups” (p. 338).

Another aspect of CQ requires that school leaders “reflect on the level of direct attention and energy generated to learning about and functioning across different cultures” (p. 338) and that they develop “the capability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting with people from different cultures” (338). Ang et al. (2007) refer to these four sets of CQ skills as cognition, metacognition, motivation and behavior. These are the domains that are captured in the Cultural Intelligence survey that they developed, called the E-CQ. Consequently, we conjectured that an experiential learning opportunity, specifically a study tour experience, would improve the CQ of participants and would challenge them to expand their own cultural understanding and behavior.

Whereas much of the prior literature described the four dimensions of CQ as drive, knowledge, action and strategy, in their groundbreaking analysis, Van Dyne et al. (2012) reconceptualized the dimensions of this

construct as metacognition, cognition, motivation and behavior. The definitions of these sub domains, as articulated by Business Consulting and Design (2017) are:

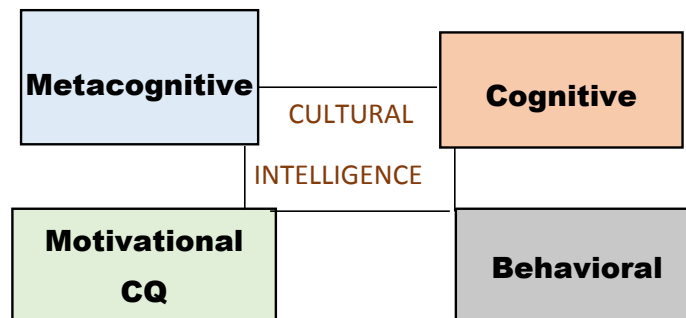
Metacognitive CQ: The ability of a person to assess his/her own cultural perceptions, actions and interpretations;

Cognitive CQ: An individual’s level of understanding and interpretation of the norms and practices of cultural groups;

Motivational CQ: The desire an individual has to learn about, understand, adapt to and communicate with others from different cultures; and

Behavioral CQ: The flexibility one has to modify his/her words and actions during cross-cultural exchanges.

Figure 1: Cultural Intelligence Domains



Van Dyne et al. (2012) attested that their confirmatory factor analysis determined that their E-CQ survey possessed discriminant validity. The Cultural Intelligence Center (2016) discovered that the four dimensions of the E-CQ survey each exceeded Cronbach’s alphas of 0.70.

The Context

There are a number of university programs in Texas that prepare leaders to transform public schools so that all students learn. These educational leadership preparation programs focus on broadening leaders’ span of control skills in order to create schools that focus on learning for all students, particularly diverse students that traditionally do not experience academic success. The conceptualizations of these skills are extracted from the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PCELS) that the National Policy Board for Educational Administration disseminates (NPBEA, 2015). Within these standards is a concentration on “equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). This standard identifies eight planks that constitute equity. We contend that they are not expansive enough by themselves to constitute a knowledge base for leadership programs to justly provide prospective leaders with the expertise to meet the needs of diverse students. Hence, we recognize the need to broaden the repertoire of training and opportunities prospective leaders must experience in order to meet the academic challenges of diverse students.

In one such program, prospective educational leaders are required to successfully complete a cultural diversity course that is designed to expand their cultural competence, consistent with the aforementioned PCELS standards. Additionally, these prospective leaders were offered the opportunity to become immersed in a diverse culture, through a study abroad experience, to further enhance their CQ. Thus, for five years, different cohorts of prospective leaders participated in a study tour in Belize for one week. Belize's advantage is that the population mirrors the socio-economic and educational perspectives of many of the students from Central America that are migrating to Texas Schools. Most of the participants of the Belize Study Tour lead urban schools with diverse populations. These are typically communities that serve as incubators for new immigrants, who generally seek opportunities to be productive, thus, positively impacting the economic viability of the communities.

The CQ Activity

The intention of this study tour was to acclimatize prospective leaders to a Central American culture with the expectation that they would further enhance their cultural intelligence so as to serve their diverse staff and student body with greater cultural competence, which would, in turn, lead to greater student success. To accomplish this, participants researched the different cultures of Belize prior to their visit and attended a two-hour session on the various Belizean cultures when they arrived in Belize. For several days they visited schools and participated in day-long classroom activities, conducted workshops for educators, attended musical and other cultural events and visited cultural sites such as Mayan archaeological sites. Their immersion into the cultural and educational milieu were as participant observers. As an example, during the day-long classroom visits, most of the participants joined in teaching of the entire class, or in some instances, provided one-on-one instruction to struggling students. Upon their return to the United States, participants transcribed their reflections of the study tour and discussed how it molded their philosophy of leadership.

Method

With five groups of prospective leaders participating in the study tour, we had a substantial sample from which to assess the study tour's efficacy in meeting the intended outcome. Thus, this evaluation is driven by our curiosity to ascertain whether the Belize Study Tour affected the CQ of participants, and to determine the degree to which participants were challenged to expand their own cultural understanding and behavior.

We asked all of the 2011-15 participants of the Belize Study Tour to complete Van Dyne et al.'s E-CQ survey. This was designed to determine the impact of the study tour on participants' level of the four dimensions of CQ: metacognition, cognition, motivation and behavior. We also asked participants to reflect on three prompts and document their perspectives. These prompts were:

1. How has your view of educating diverse students been impacted by the Belize Study Tour? Please provide details on the experiences that led to this.
2. What cross-cultural experiences did you have that challenged your philosophy of leadership? How has your philosophy changed?
3. What do you now do differently as an educational leader as a result of your Belize Study Tour experience?

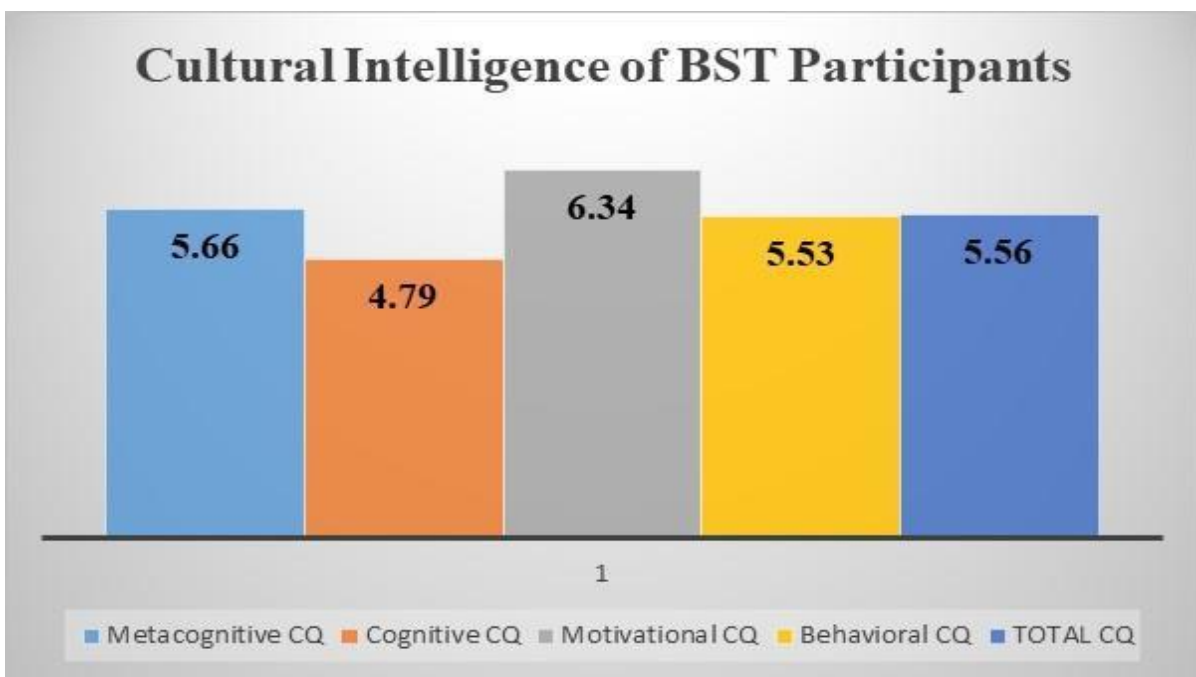
By virtue of the fact that we collected both close-ended (CQ survey data) and open-ended responses (participant reflections), we employed a mixed-method in which the data from the two processes were analyzed separately and then the results were compared. Creswell and Creswell described this as a

convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). We used descriptive statistics to parse the survey data. For the responses to the three qualitative prompts, we coded the data and identified the themes that emerged. Finally, we compared the results of the two-data gathering and analysis processes.

Results

In response to the need to gauge study tour participants’ level of CQ, we reviewed the descriptive statistics for each of the four dimensions of the E-CQ, as well as the total score. Each dimension was scored on a scale of 1 to 7, where 7 indicated a high level of competency in that domain. Figure 2, below, denotes the perspectives of the 21 respondents, which represented 42 percent of all participants.

Figure 2. Cultural Intelligence of BST Participants



These data suggest that the prospective educational leaders who attended the study tour were somewhat cognizant of their own cultural views and behaviors but were less confident about the views, practices and expectations of other cultural groups. These were reflected in their Metacognitive and Cognitive scores. It is instructive to note that they were very motivated to learn about other cultures, which is not surprising since they self-selected to attend the Belize Study Tour. They reported the highest scores for this domain. Their Behavioral CQ score of 5.53 is indicative of their exposure to other cultural groups in their schools and communities and their ability to interface with them effectively.

We next reviewed the responses to the open-ended prompts. Our first open-ended question asked respondents to indicate how their view of educating diverse students has been impacted by the Belize Study Tour. We generated a word cloud of the responses to this question and presented it in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Word Cloud for First Open-Ended Question

The three most frequent words were “students,” “culture” and “different.” This may be reflective of the notion that many of the participants recognize that leaders must be aware that their students are culturally different from each other. Most respondents detailed how their cognition of the Belizean culture expanded, in that they were able to compare and contrast the norms of the culture with their own. To illustrate, one respondent remarked: “I am more open minded and accepting of different cultures,” while another insisted that the tour “helped me to actually see how different cultures compare and contrast with each other.”

With this cognition, they began to scaffold their cultural experiences with their own metacognition. To illustrate, one respondent stated, “I understand more just how we are all the same and how education truly can change the world.” Another said, “The Belize study tour confirmed the need to continue to have compassion for students from countries and cultures that are different from my own.”

Some respondents also have begun to question their own behaviors and adjust their view of educating students of different cultures. Three such comments follow:

Being aware of the differences that may exist makes it easier for me to interact with and relate to both students and their parents who may view educators as "authority" figures with whom they do not relate.

As a result of the Belize Study Tour, my view of educating diverse students has expanded to now consider more characteristics that make people diverse. For example, prior to the tour, I generally thought of diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity/race but rather gave account for socioeconomic status.

Although I very often traveled internationally in a former life, I never took the opportunity to interact with students during my travels. Given this, the Belize study tour was truly an eye-opener that gave me a better understanding of how the values of those different from those within my

own culture were shaped from their adolescent years. Additionally, it gave me a better appreciation for how those outside of the U.S. value and sacrifice for their education.

Being immersed into another culture certainly forces one to test one's cultural cognition; thus, these observations are not surprising. What is encouraging, however, is that participants have begun to question their own views of the values and expectations of other cultures and are adjusting their own behaviors to account for those values and behaviors.

The second open-ended statement prompted respondents to describe how their philosophy of leadership was challenged because of their cross-cultural experiences. The responses suggest that these leaders were able to challenge their motives and adjust their behaviors to meet the needs of the various cultural groups they encounter. To illustrate, one respondent concluded, "I learned in the program a leader must be able to adapt to many situations." And similarly, another stated, "I have always believed that effective leaders should have a heart for All people." Another was even more prescriptive: "Any leader must know the culture, language and customs [of their students] to be successful with the teachers and the students."

One specific behavior that respondents identified that they need to change related to being patient, as one respondent reported: "I am more patient." In discussing the need for patience, one respondent related the following experience:

I think ordering food at the restaurants and not getting it not near as fast as we receive it in the States was one of the greatest lessons. Sometimes, we just have to slow down. Nothing has to be so very urgent. Just slow down and "be."

Communication percolated as an area in which the respondents believed that could make adjustments. One respondent stated, "I am clearer on how to communicate with people of all cultures, backgrounds, creeds, orientations, etc." One enterprising respondent shared the following:

I have since learned that I cannot assume that all experiences weigh the same and have found myself delving deeper into the student's situation in order to adjust my perspective. This drives what and how I provide assistance and any guidance I may offer. It has also fostered a greater degree of sensitivity.

Finally, at least one respondent reflected on the role of women and offered that he/she is "always mindful of the role of women in leadership in other cultures."

In effect, respondents were able to reflect on their leadership philosophy and determine whether their philosophy needed to be adjusted to meet the needs of the students and other members of the community they serve. Like many leaders, their philosophy is in a state of flux, given that they are being exposed to new ideas about leadership in the courses they take, and in the experiences they encounter with others.

The last open-ended question inquired into specific behavior or perspective changes as a consequence of their Belize Study Tour experience. In effect, we wanted to know if their change in metacognition resulted in behavior changes.

Paramount among the changes is the new focus on their leadership as service. One respondent articulated the following: "I have a greater sense of service. It is about "service" and nothing else, period. I am more committed to change or help transform my students."

In similar fashion, other respondents chimed:

I feel more empowered to serve and to be bold, not giving much concern to the status quo.

I am more sensitive to differences that exist in our school systems as they pertain to resources and the behavior of our students especially as it relates to their attitude and appreciation toward school.

Consistent with the service orientation is the desire to hear and understand others, and to motivate them. This is how three respondents presented this idea:

I make sure to take time to hear and understand each student's story. I also try to find out ways to encourage and motivate them so they can experience success.

I share my experiences with colleagues. Sharing my experiences has helped them understand that if they truly want to teach, they have to get creative and truly think outside the box.

As a result of my Belize Study Tour experience, I listen and observe more when I meet people from different cultures.

Perhaps the idea that participants are more resolute in bridging cultural divides for the success of all students is best summed up in one respondent's proclamation: "I hold the belief that all students, truly can and want to learn despite mounting roadblocks."

The central message we interpret from participants' response to these three prompts is that as a result of the Belize Study Tour, participants have been fine-tuning their philosophy to be more inclusive of all cultures. This is not surprising. Li, Mobley and Kelly (2013), concluded that in fact this form of experiential learning may indeed contribute to leaders' cultural competency. Finally, as Taysum (2013) discovered, leaders bring "balance and potential well-being to minoritized and marginalized groups" through strategies that are "sustainable and for the public good" (p. 444). Time will tell, no doubt, whether the outcomes of this study tour are sustainable and will continue to promote the public good.

Summary

By using two complementary data sources, we explored whether participants were convinced that the Belize Study Tour helped to increase their CQ. The E-CQ survey responses were designed to gauge respondents' level of cultural intelligence along four domains: metacognition, cognition, motivation and behavior. We reviewed the response to the prompts to explore further, how the Belize Study Tour affected participants' cultural intelligence and in what ways they developed in the four CQ domains. We conclude that the participants had acquired substantial cultural intelligence, although their cognitive CQ lagged somewhat behind the other domains. The responses to the open-ended prompts confirmed that participants were able to reflect on their own cultural views (metacognition), learn about the norms of others to some extent, reflected on their own leadership philosophy, and considered how their leadership behavior should change to meet the needs of others.

It is apparent that this type of experiential learning – the study tour, adds a cultural intelligence dimension to the skill set that prospective leaders develop in their leadership preparation program. This is of particular value to those leaders who steer organizations with diverse staff and students. As Holtbrugge and Engelhard (2016) confirmed, "study abroad programs should increase the CQ of students, which is regarded as a major prerequisite for effectively interacting with foreign customers" (pp. 435-6). Therefore, we recommend that leadership preparation programs explore ways of integrating these types of cross-cultural immersion experiential learning opportunities into their programs to better prepare prospective leaders to effectively lead diverse institutions for the success of all students.

It is our expectation that these leaders will continue to seek out other cross-cultural experiences and guide their institutions, consistently, with the service orientation they are advancing. Our thesis stems from those, like Darling-Hammond, who inspire us to “teach much more effectively, especially those students who have been least well supported in our society and schools” (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 35). If school leaders embrace this challenge, then, as Leithwood, Patten and Jantzi (2010) disclosed, they will lead their diverse institutions to greater success for the common good.

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