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**A CASE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP  
DOCTORAL STUDENTS:  
DEVELOPING CULTURALLY COMPETENT SCHOOL  
LEADERSHIP THROUGH STUDY ABROAD**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Aim/Purpose	This study focuses on how a short-term international study abroad program to England impacted doctoral students' cultural competencies.
Background	The case study captures the experiences of six school leadership doctoral students who traveled abroad to East London, England. The overarching goal of this experience was to improve their self-efficacy for culturally competent school leadership.
Methodology	Through this case study of six doctoral students in an educational leadership doctoral program, the researchers sought to answer the following question: How do knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors around cultural competencies of U.S. school leaders shift because they participated in an international internship? Through pre-post surveys and follow-up interviews, the researchers explored how the international experience impacted cultural competencies.
Contribution	The primary goal of this experience was to improve self-efficacy for culturally responsive school leadership. The doctoral students were either aspiring school leaders or were currently serving as a building leader of a P-12 school. It is from these students that we can learn how a short-term international experience might impact school leaders, and in return, the students and staff they serve.

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	<p>This study adds to the limited literature about the benefits of study abroad programs for educational leadership students in doctoral programs.</p>
Findings	<p>The doctoral students in this case study gained knowledge and skills because of this study abroad. Knowledge was gained about educational systems and self-awareness. Skills learned included relationship skills, travel skills, and skills related to empowering teachers. Attitudes about diversity shifted to be more encompassing. Further, the behaviors of doctoral students changed because of this trip. The results from the pre-test and post-test on cultural competence indicated a significant improvement in cultural competence for the group.</p>
Recommendations for Practitioners	<p>The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavioral shifts captured in this study spoke to profound growth around cultural competencies. It is through preparing these doctoral students before the international sojourn, guiding them during the experience, and following up with them upon return that we were able to create a supportive, meaningful, and impactful study abroad experience for future school leaders. Thus, these experiences will likely impact their collective leadership in the future.</p>
Recommendations for Researchers	<p>Though research about the benefits of study abroad programs for graduate students is limited, several studies are about the benefits of study abroad and international programs in undergraduate education. There is all but a lack of literature focused on doctoral educational leadership students and study abroad. Nevertheless, for many students who choose to study overseas, it may be the first opportunity they have to explore a new country and to be fully immersed in a culture that is different from their own. Through these experiences, many development opportunities can affect how students view their professional work.</p>
Impact on Society	<p>Through exposure to others, by experiencing diverse ways of thinking and doing, and through critical conversation, institutions of higher education can develop school leaders to be culturally competent, culturally responsive, and socially just. As demonstrated in this study, international experiences are one decisive way to start this conversation.</p>
Future Research	<p>Research has shown that it is possible to increase students' cultural competence through study abroad. As such, in the current study, the researchers took a mixed methods approach to understand how cultural competencies around knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors shifted. As a result, we found that each doctoral student increased their cultural awareness in significant ways. Students gained knowledge by comparing the cultures within education systems and gained self-awareness about their own cultural awareness issues. More research needs to be done to better understand the impact of study abroad experiences on graduate students in educational leadership programs. These experiences could be short experiences (i.e., one to two weeks) or longer experiences (i.e., more than two weeks). Further, focusing on developing cultural competency before, during, and after a trip in different educational fields other than educational leadership (e.g., literacy, curriculum &amp; instruction) could have significant school-level effects. Lastly, extending study abroad experiences into locations where English is not the first or primary language could provide opportunities for developing language skills while enhancing patience, cross-cultural communication, and problem-solving skills that could be beneficial personally and professionally.</p>

Keywords leadership preparation, school leaders, cultural competency, culture, intercultural, study abroad, educational leadership

## INTRODUCTION

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In today's globally connected world, people are migrating to different countries for a better life, to seek adventure, or to realize personal goals. According to the United Nations International Migration Report "the number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly in recent years, reaching 258 million in 2017, up from 220 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000" (United Nations, 2017, p. i). As such, not only must school leaders be aware of this trend, they must also be prepared for the cultural shifts that are an inevitable result of this diversification. These cultural shifts, and the broadening of communities, ultimately shape local schools.

Emphasized in the educational leadership standards of many states, including North Carolina, is that a school leader must understand "the competitive nature of the new global economy and be clear about the knowledge and skills students will need to be successful in this economy" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2011, p. 11). In support, in researching global dispositions of school leaders, Richardson et al. (2013) noted that "school leaders must have a global perspective" (p. 93) and that higher education institutions play a pivotal role in developing that perspective. The authors detailed that an effective way to give future leaders a better perspective on diversity is through "well-planned and well-orchestrated short-term international experiences" (p. 94). As such, educational leadership programs should provide opportunities to develop culturally competent school leaders; study abroad is one approach that may foster school leaders' cultural acumen. Hence, the focus of this study.

The current case study captures the experiences of six school leadership doctoral students who traveled abroad to London, England as part of their educational doctoral (EdD) program. The overarching goal of this experience was to improve their self-efficacy for culturally responsive school leadership. The students were either aspiring school leaders or were serving as a building leader of a P-12 school in North Carolina, U.S. It is from these students that we can learn how short international experiences might impact school leaders, and in return, the students, and staff they serve.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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For many students who choose to study abroad, it may be the first opportunity they have to explore a new country and to be fully immersed in a culture that is different from their own. Through these experiences, there are many developmental opportunities that can affect how students view their professional work (Gray et al., 2002; Green, 2002; Ritz, 2011). Future school leaders who study abroad get the opportunity to explore different school systems and to come to understand the different ways that leaders in other countries engage in teaching, learning, and leading schools. This may lead to deeper introspection and self-learning for these future school leaders. As a result, these new educational professionals might combine different skills and tactics experienced while studying abroad and apply those learning to their own work (Ingle & Johnson, 2019; Tuleja, 2014). Additional benefits of studying abroad include gaining "intercultural sensitivity, increased autonomy, and [increasing] openness to cultural diversity" (Cushner, 2007, p. 29). Students gain more than just memories and mementos when they travel to another country. A deeper change can occur within one's self through such a transformative, experiential learning experience. The literature on how this occurs for doctoral students in the field of educational leadership is promising, however, is scant.

Irrespective of the field, it is essential that students have fulfilling experiences when studying abroad. These experiences can then lead to developing more globally and culturally aware citizens. This is especially important for those who plan to serve as school leaders. School systems today can be very diverse hosting students of all cultures and backgrounds (Easton-Brooks et al., Szeto & Cheng, 2018). Thus, being culturally competent can have a positive impact on the school leaders, fellow

school administrators, teachers, and students. The experiences future building leaders have when traveling abroad might impact their competencies to engage with cultural differences.

Diversity is an increasingly important area of competence in which school leaders must learn and grow (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Laroche-Audet et al. (2019) posited that reflective thought on diversity is a primary issue in an education system while further noting that “school principals have a significant leadership position that can support changes in the school environment aimed at implementing and sustaining inclusive practices” (p. 3). According to Richardson et al. (2014), “transforming classroom educators into diversity embracing school leaders starts with the leader questioning their own diversity competence by giving them opportunities to examine what it means to be a professional” (pp. 355-356). This first step of self-examination can create more accepting school environments where learning leaders can foster deeper, understanding relationships with the students they are trying to mentor and guide to become productive global citizens.

This process of self-examination and reflection might be more impactful if combined with an international program such as study abroad. Moreover, “culturally responsive leaders develop and support the school staff and promote a climate that makes the whole school welcoming, inclusive, and accepting of minoritized students” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1275). The importance of culturally responsive leadership in schools becomes essential to developing and sustaining environments that are accepting of cultural differences while taking advantage of the opportunity to grow as global citizens.

On a personal level, changes in educational choices, occupational options, lifestyles, perspectives, behaviors, personal beliefs, and social skills are listed among the long-term impacts of study abroad participation (Fry & Paige, 2009; Potts, 2015). Some researchers have found that by taking a group of graduate students abroad and “putting them in contact with differences and having them question their competency about diversity, in groups and as individuals, may impact individual diversity awareness abilities” (Richardson et al. 2014, p. 356). Thus, international sojourns might positively impact students professionally and personally.

Studying abroad and experiencing a different culture and new environment can have a positive impact on an individual’s career advancement and personal accomplishments. Cushner (2007) noted several benefits for educators after studying abroad that include returning home with “a new sense of authority and a greater desire to share their knowledge and experience with others” and having “greater academic prestige” (p. 29). Additionally, students who study abroad return home with better attitudes, a deeper passion for learning, and tend to read more on international studies and international topics. For the traveler, studying abroad experiences can foster “new directions and focus on their career paths” (Cushner, 2007, p. 30).

Aside from cultivating diverse school environments, society benefits from students who choose to study abroad. The United States is a diverse mixing pot of cultures, ideas, and interconnectedness that needs citizens who are willing and able to work through intercultural and global contexts. These individuals must engage in global learning experiences to understand others and be culturally aware. Olson et al. (2006) defined global learning as:

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students acquire through a variety of experiences that enable them to understand world cultures and events; analyze global systems; appreciate cultural differences; and apply this knowledge and apperception to their lives as citizens and workers. (p. v)

Researchers have found there is value in short-term study abroad for students. Paige et al. (2009) examined potential long-term impact of study abroad. The authors engaged in a longitudinal study that consisted of more than 6,000 students who studied abroad. The researchers concluded that students who studied abroad were more likely to become globally engaged citizens. However, the length of time spent overseas has been found to not be critical element in creating these global paradigmatic

shifts. Consequently, what students did before, during, and after the international experience was found to be the most essential aspect of study abroad.

Shifts are also occurring in reimagining the educational doctorate (EdD) since its humble beginnings at Harvard in 1920 (Toma, 2002). In 2007, a group of 24 doctoral-granting universities convened to redefine what the EdD should be and determined that the mission of the EdD is to “develop high-level practitioners” (Boyce, 2012, p. 26) by emphasizing applying knowledge that should include internships. This group determined that the working principles of the EdD include a focus on ethics, equity, social justice, and working with diverse communities. These principles align well with work that has been done in other doctorates. In short, researchers of doctoral programs have called for more applicability of the degree. For example, in the business doctorate, researchers found that students desired “personal or professional transformation” (Grabowski & Miller, 2015, p. 257).

Additionally, Jones and Warnock (2015) researched the importance of biology doctoral students to engage in internships to prepare them for the market better. In support, Malakyan (2019) examined 70 doctoral programs in leadership studies across eight countries and found that 91.4% were course-work driven where learning was devoid of contextual considerations. Taken in totality, the research on the doctoral studies in the field of leadership generally, and research on the EdD specifically, indicates that educational leadership students in EdD programs would be well served with internships that focused on equity and social justice, that were context-driven, and that allowed for both personal and professional transformation. Study abroad is one mechanism that supports these ends. However, there is a dearth of research focused on the study abroad experiences of educational leadership students in EdD programs.

Nevertheless, policies at the state and national levels are evidence that school leaders need to cultivate global skills in students. Shifts in the EdD make it evident that this degree program should be more applied, more pertinent to practice, more embedded in the realities that these practitioners will face, and more focused on the equity challenges represented in today’s schools. The literature is clear that one way to do this is through international experiences such as an international practicum. The current study thus serves to understand better how a short-term international internship can foster self-efficacy towards cultural competencies for school leaders in an EdD program.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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The current study is conceptually framed around the construct of cultural competency. The term culture can have many meanings. As such, we adopted the definition of culture from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2001), who defined it as a “distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or social group, encompassing all the ways of being in that society; at a minimum, including art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs” (p. 3). Further, UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity applies to school leadership because of its focus on future generations, shared humanity, and the human experience. In this document, UNESCO stated, “as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations” (p. 4). This statement resounded with us given our belief that schools are incubators of the society we want to see, and school leaders should live out these ideals. As such, the work we undertook is grounded in UNESCO’s work on cultural diversity.

Our definition of cultural competence is informed by the work of Deardorff (2020), who defined this as “improving human interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity, and so on) or across borders” (p. 5). Deardorff noted the importance of fostering intercultural competencies. Such competencies are best understood as a learner-centered process where intercultural competencies are developed

when an individual takes part in clarifying, promoting, learning, reflecting, and participating in intercultural competencies through specific activities.

Developing intercultural competencies can occur through formal intercultural learning. A short-term study abroad experience is an example of one such formal intercultural learning experience. Based on these two constructs, we conceptualized that well designed, short term international experiences for pre-service school leaders may be a lever to developing intercultural competencies and cross-cultural adaptability.

## **METHODS**

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Through this mixed methods case study, the researchers sought to answer the following question: How do knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors around cultural competence of U.S. school leaders shift because they participated in an international internship? In response to this question, the researchers collected data from two sources. The first source of data was pre- and post-surveys that were administered electronically to each graduate student traveling abroad to East London, England. The second source of data was semi-structured interviews conducted with each graduate student two months after the study abroad experience.

### ***PARTICIPANTS***

Six graduate students who participated in an international internship in East London, England at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, U.S agreed to participate in the study. The students were enrolled in an EdD program. Two of the students were male, and four students were female. Two students were African American, one student was biracial, and three students were White. For all these students, this was a first-time experience to England. For one student, this was the first time being out of the country. The remaining students had previously traveled abroad, but only to vacation to places close to the United States such as Mexico or Jamaica, and primarily on cruises. As such, this was the first intensive time in a foreign country for each of these students.

### ***STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE***

The doctoral students spent ten days in and around East London, England. The group visited schools in two boroughs with roughly the same demographics. White British students made up about 30% of the student population, while Asian British or Asian (e.g., Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese) made up about 30% of the student population. Black African students comprise about 25% of the student population. These schools serve diverse families where over 300 different languages are spoken as the first language. Regarding poverty, schools visited were within the top 10% to 20% of the most deprived areas in the country. This area was purposely chosen because despite the high levels of diversity and poverty, schools in these boroughs were mostly ranked as high performing (i.e., good or outstanding) by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), and are generally ranked high on various achievement measures.

While in country, students visited a variety of schools and met with students, parents, teachers, building leaders, and district leaders. During the school visits, students observed classrooms, toured schools, engaged in discussions with local teachers as well as with foreign teachers, and met with various leadership team members. The internship was focused on understanding curriculum, instructional, and leadership differences. The internship was designed to give the students an array experiences where they would be exposed to intercultural differences. Outside of the direct school experiences, the group attended cultural events and engaged in tourist activities in and around Greater London. The group was led by two faculty members; one lived in East London for two years and has been taking graduate students in the field of educational leadership to this area for the past decade. An in-country British retired head teacher also supported the group. The two faculty members and

the retired head teacher led whole group discussions daily to focus on learnings and to clarify questions and misconceptions.

The students engaged in course activities before and during the internship. The course before their departure focused on the British education system, history, culture, politics, and contemporary issues pertinent to England. The course also focused on issues specific to East London (e.g., immigration, language, poverty, and school reform). While in the country, the course content focused on issues of diversity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural communication.

### ***INSTRUMENT***

The quantitative data were obtained using the Self-Assessment of Cultural Competence that was self-administered to measure cultural competency before and after traveling abroad (Gozu et al., 2007). The instrument consisted of 49 questions in four key domains: knowledge, attitude, skills, and behaviors. Gozu et al. (2007) developed the instrument through a systematic review of 45 articles published in social sciences over two decades. In the current study, the researchers modified the language slightly to focus more explicitly on educational leadership.

The qualitative data were gathered from 60-minute interviews with each student two months after returning from the trip. The interviews focused on eliciting examples of knowledge, attitude, skills, and behaviors that shifted because of the summer experience to London. The interviews were recorded in Zoom, transcribed, and analyzed deductively to elicit themes around each of the four constructs of the survey.

### **FINDINGS**

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We wanted to understand what knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors changed because of the trip. What follows is a presentation of the data by those four constructs. Within those, we detail the themes that became apparent. The results from the pre-test ( $M=3.78$ ,  $SD=.48$ ) and post-test ( $M=4.26$ ,  $SD=.40$ ) on cultural competence indicate that there was a significant improvement in cultural competence at  $p<.05$  for the group as a whole (Table 1).

**Table 1. Pre- and post-survey results**

Construct	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference
Attitudes	3.33	3.76	.43
Knowledge	4.45	4.58	.13
Skills	3.58	4.11	.53
Behaviors	3.76	4.60	.84
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>4.26</b>	<b>.48</b>

### ***ATTITUDES***

All the students discussed attitudes about diversity, which was defined as the overall personal perspective that was altered or unaltered by the trip. Five of the students reported that their attitudes about diversity changed significantly after the London trip. Only Catherine reported having unaltered attitudes regarding diversity. Being biracial, she attributed that to her diverse upbringing. In contrast, Antonia shared that her confidence in working with diverse individuals increased since the trip. She stated:

I feel like I'm probably more prepared than some other educators who have not been abroad, or who have not seen this level of diversity. There's an increased confidence level

that I have gained. I fully believe every educator, particularly when they're getting their masters and definitely doctorate, needs to go abroad. It needs to be a requirement. It just gave me so much.

The trip also seemed to make a difference for J.T., who reported having an increase in acceptance of diversity. He stated, "I definitely have a better acceptance of different philosophical views, political views, culture views, and traditional views." These comments indicate that shifts in attitudes for these two students revolved around more macro issues such as educator preparation and being open to divergent worldviews.

Antonia and Donna shared how their attitudes shifted around the value of diversity, primarily through a professional perspective. Antonia reported:

I always valued diversity and knew the importance of it. I think it just makes me hunger for it even more. I now see more diversity in my community and in the places in which I work and the schools with which I work. I would say if it shifted any of my thinking, it's more about it made me hyper-aware of how much more important it is. We have a way to go here in the States.

Likewise, Donna shared, "Through my whole experience, I see the need to value different cultures and to integrate their lens into our lens." These comments evidence how the international experience shifted attitudes around how diversity can impact cultural norms.

Shanita discussed how the trip helped her recognize and respect diversity more readily. Regarding recognizing diversity, she shared:

You know, being somebody who was born and raised in the South you tend to, if I'm being brutally honest, you tend to see the world through Black or White. Then there's literally this whole other group that you lump into 'other.' I can say that I did that. But now I see things differently. I now see that it's more like a kaleidoscope of people. The more that I'm aware of the things that separate us, I become more aware of the things that join us together. That will make me a far better educator and a person who supports fellow educators.

Antonia also reported being able to recognize nuances of diversity within her school after the trip. She noted, "That's one thing that I'm very cognizant of now is that we must honor the children that we have within our buildings as they did in England." Shanita added, "Sometimes it's just the simple things like just being aware of the foods that they eat or being aware of certain holidays coming up or celebrating them through bulletin boards." She continued, "Seeing children navigate being inclusive in society provided me with a different lens to look at being in that religion and operating in a school setting." These two students, who identified as Black, exemplified how the trip pushed them to see diversity differently. As such, their previous notions of diversity proved to be myopic and limiting.

Prior exposure to diversity may have influenced the degree to which the trip impacted some students' attitudes about diversity. For instance, Catherine indicated that her attitudes about diversity have "stayed the same." She went on to explain:

I've always been very comfortable with how I see different cultural groups. So, to me, it validated things. I grew up in a very multicultural environment. With my Filipino culture, growing up in a city where I had friends from China and India. So to me, I've always just seen culture as the norm. It's my normal.

Further, she stated how the trip:

Reinforced for me the importance of being culturally aware of the students that you teach and making sure that not only one person is prepared to handle the different cultures and the diverse religions in the classroom. It is not just one teacher. It is about making sure that everyone in the building knows what's going on and how to handle diversity.

While Catherine's prior exposure to diversity may have limited the impact that the trip had on her attitudes towards diversity, she indicated that it changed her attitudes towards people from England. She noted, "We actually have two teachers from London at our school this year. So actually if nothing else, I feel more connected with them. I feel very connected with them because I understood their culture." The trip did not shift Catherine's attitudes about diversity in general, but it did shift how she viewed the host culture.

As noted in Table 1, attitudes was the construct that had the least evidenced quantitative change (.43). However, through the interviews, attitudinal changes were elucidated. For some students, their worldview shifted, and for others, attitudes changed primarily around diversity in schools. Even with the one student who reported no shift in attitudes about diversity, it became clear through the interview that a change did occur regarding how the host culture was viewed. In sum, attitudinal changes occurred on various levels and seemed to be impacted by prior experiences.

## ***KNOWLEDGE***

We sought to understand what knowledge these educational leadership doctoral students gained from this sojourn. We defined knowledge as concrete learnings gained from the experience. Sub-themes identified were knowledge of the educational system and self-awareness.

### **Education system**

All students noted how their experience in East London schools impacted their views of education systems. Some students focused on the similarities between U.S. schools and British schools. For example, Catherine shared that she did not realize that school leaders in England dealt with a high poverty rate the way U.S. schools did and that British leaders must also worry about high-stakes testing. J.T. discussed how he learned that schools in England also deal with mandates from the government and that school leaders must support an increased number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the classrooms. Additionally, Donna discussed learning how the schools in England also experience teacher shortages and high turnover rates, mirroring her experience in North Carolina. Through the interviews, it became clear that students were better able to see commonalities across international contexts and understand that many educational issues transcended location.

Students also noted differences in how U.S. and British schools handled similar issues. For example, Donna stated, "The schools in London offer a lot more support to their population, such as school-based healthcare and emotional support that we don't have on campuses in the United States. Yet, our struggles are very much the same." Likewise, J.T. noted, "I think they have a lot more resources in England for schools than we do as far as funding. As far as funding, it's out of this world. Tremendously more than we have." Differences in how diversity is treated within the educational system were also noted. For example, Shanita shared that "One of the things that really stands out to me is the melting pot. They truly had a melting pot of different people. When we talk about diversity in the States, we must be intentional about it. There, it just existed."

Other differences between U.S. schools and the schools visited in London were also mentioned. For example, one student noticed an overall difference in how educators were viewed in England. Shanita explained, "Education still had some type of reverence to it. Whereas in contrast to the States, I'm not quite sure if there is reverence still remaining for educators." The students also noted different things that London schools emphasized, such as instructional leadership and trade skills. Catherine stated, "Another big takeaway for me is instructional leadership and how they put such huge emphasis on the instructional leadership for the leaders of the school being the executive headteacher."

Similarly, in discussing the school leaders in East London, Antonia remarked that "She was so empowered as a leader. I think she would be considered somewhat the principal, but then she considered herself a teacher-leader." Through these experiences, students understood how differences in policies and procedures impacted the schooling experiences for both teachers and students.

Shanita mentioned that the East London schools had more of an emphasis on trades and more acceptance of alternative postgraduate learning routes that are not higher education. She discussed that:

One of the major pieces was their emphasis on trades, tradespeople, such as plumbers, electricians, and things like that. How they viewed education - it's an acceptance. Whereas here [in the United States] we don't really honor the fact that not everybody is going to go to college. Somebody has got to be able to fix my plumbing and that's okay. They make really great money. I can't say that it just affirmed what I knew but offered me an international lens.

Antonia noted the importance of formative assessment in London schools, stating that "I came away with some additional examples of what formative assessment should look like. That it's actually wholeheartedly accepted and put into practice by a school." Both Shanita and Antonia highlighted the importance of creating an educational experience that truly meets the needs of the whole child - be that how learning is assessed or what curriculum routes are provided and honored.

Overall, students expressed that the London trip impacted how they viewed education systems. Similarities and differences between the U.S. and British educational systems were noted, and insight into these similarities and differences seemed to shift how they viewed their education system. Students learned how the educational system can be structured and how different aspects can be emphasized, such as instructional leadership, formative assessment, and trades.

### **Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness (i.e., knowledge gained that is self-reflective in nature) was identified as a subtheme of knowledge. For example, Antonia shared how her cultural awareness was altered after spending time in these schools. She said,

Ever since that London experience, I wanted to have a personal conversation about how she [the British school leader] empowered her fellow teachers and how she maintained a positive work-life balance. So, it's kind of shifted my thinking in that way there. I know for me, to have some kind of positive work-life balance, I've got to empower those teachers that are considered leaders in my school. That's become even more important to me through that London experience.

Antonia indicated that the importance of diversity was "increased and affirmed" for her. In support, self-awareness about one's life path and how diversity was integral to it was discussed by four students.

In contrast, two students stated that their self-awareness regarding diversity was unaffected by the trip due to their previous experiences. For instance, Catherine shared, "I have always been very comfortable with how I see different cultural groups. So, to me, it only validated it. This is probably because I grew up in a very multicultural environment." While another student, J.T., reported noticing that he is now more accepting of different points of views, but is unable to distinguish if it is from recently experiencing a life transition (i.e., divorce), from the trip, or both. He explained that "I definitely caught myself, you know, just being less judgmental and more acceptive of just a different lifestyle whether it's from an American or from my teachers who are Indian or, from teachers who may have grown up in more poverty." Further, J.T. stated, "I think my tone has become more passionate, more caring, and more understanding." Thus, even though the trip did not impact knowledge for these two students, there was still a detectable level of self-awareness that was sparked as a result.

As noted in Table 1, the construct of knowledge increased .13 from the pre-test to the post-test. By design, students' knowledge about education systems increased. It was through discussing similarities and differences between systems that students were able to understand that the educational experience can and does look different for teachers and students depending on the context. Through their experiences in East London, the students also gained self-awareness knowledge around diversity and

cultural competencies. It should be noted that the pre- to post-survey change was relatively small. However, that might be attributed to the fact that students participated in an online course that focused on many factual issues about England before jetting overseas.

### ***SKILLS***

Skills, which were defined as knowledge that can be translated into actions, were also explored as a theme. Skills identified by students included relationship skills, travel skills, and skills related to empowering teachers. Shanita reported gaining self-awareness and confidence in her ability to travel and navigate new spaces and cultures. She stated, “Some of my big takeaways would honestly be that traveling to a different country was not as difficult as I originally thought it was going to be.” She added that understanding “how to navigate in a different country was something that I found to be frightening originally. Now I realized that it’s just a matter of understanding some of the transportation.” She also reported becoming “more savvy with transportation.” Learning in advance about transportation and money in other countries is something “I could take away with me and use in my next travels.” Shanita’s trip to London seems to have increased her travel skills and comfort in traveling in the future. Additionally, J.T. noted that this trip has made him want to travel more. Building one’s self-awareness and fostering one’s self-efficacy around travel to new places was thus discussed as an outcome of the trip.

Shanita, Antonia, and Donna indicated gaining relationship skills from the trip to England. Shanita shared that she is now better able to have “critical and difficult conversations” due to having the opportunity to do so in London. Further, she explained, “I realized while I was in London that the consequences of having those conversations were not as drastic as I thought it would be.” Additionally, Antonia reported, “I would say it has increased my skillset in terms of forming relationships and having conversations with people from a different background.” Antonia also reported gaining “an increased comfort level” in working with diverse individuals.

Similarly, Donna shared, “I think professionally, you must acknowledge, and you have to welcome the differences that we have. The differences are what’s going to give you an advantage within a business or an educational standpoint.” In reflecting on her hometown, she added, “I just don’t have that much opportunity to practice that skill.” At the same time, some students noted gaining interpersonal relationship skills while other students indicated that the skills gained were explicitly related to interactions with diverse individuals.

### ***BEHAVIORS***

All the students indicated personal behavioral changes resulting from the trip to England. Subthemes identified within behavioral changes were implementing policy, seeking out diversity, and providing support regarding the diversity of teachers and students.

#### **Implementing of policy**

Three of the students noted behavioral changes through the implementation of policy (i.e., professional decisions made because of the trip). Donna shared that after seeing how the London schools we visited positively impacted diverse students, she is now having conversations regarding changing her school’s structure to “best meet the needs of students.” A conversation she discussed would not have happened “if I hadn’t seen the changes that the school made for the students.” Donna also shared:

The big takeaway for me is sensitivity to different cultures and how you have to always be thinking and reflecting on decisions we make. From an educational standpoint, how do we make our environment conducive to welcoming different cultures? And how to make the changes to policies and procedures that we have in place. How do we do that and make it fit everybody and benefit both the student as well as the organization itself?

Likewise, Catherine discussed advocating for policy changes when working with diverse students and teachers. She shared that the trip:

Reinforced for me the importance of being culturally aware of the students you teach, and making sure that it's not just one person who is prepared to handle the different cultures and the diverse religions in the classroom. It is not just one teacher. It is making sure that everyone in the building knows what's going on and how to handle diversity." Catherine also reported that she "talked with the ELL district coach to do training with the entire staff on how teachers can best meet the needs of ELLs.

These doctoral students indicated that changing policies at their schools directly resulted from seeing how diversity played out the London schools we visited.

In discussing her diverse teachers (e.g., teachers from Jamaica, St. Lucia, and England), Catherine shared that she has arranged for these teachers to have mentors within the building who can support them. Further, she stated:

I was talking with our district elementary department, and I told her that we need to have some sort of support for these teachers before they even go to schools. These two-day orientations aren't going to cut it. Even as far as learning the SMART Board. Some of them have only taught in the provinces of Jamaica. They never used a SMART Board before. Same with Common Core. So, then I had to train them on Common Core. What is this? What is that? So, teaching itself is not an issue, it's the culture.

Contrarily, J.T. shared, "I don't think it's changed who I am as a leader. I mean I think I lead in very much the same way. I'm a little old school like that. I believe in consistency, whether you're White, Black, Hispanic, male or female, American, or not." Although J.T. did not report shifting his behaviors, he did admit that he is more aware of treating everyone equitably. These two students both gained a better understanding of support and how they treated their teaching staff. While J.T. did not change his actions as directly as Catherine, both were more mindful of how their leadership behaviors intersected with the needs of their diverse teaching staff.

### **Seeking out diversity**

J.T., Shanita, Antonia, and Donna indicated an increased prevalence in seeking out diversity after the trip. They shared how they now are more comfortable and will seek diverse groups or individuals, whereas prior, they were more reluctant. J.T. shared that he now "tend[s] to flock towards finding more out about those cultures." Further, J.T. shared that it is much easier for him now to befriend people that are not White. For instance, he stated, "I found myself talking with the Indian teachers. I really like talking to them. They are very much different, and so that kind of excites me." Similarly, Shanita shared that she is now able to have conversations and inquire about diverse topics with her hairstylist, who is Muslim.

Antonia and Donna indicated that they are now more likely to look for diversity and ways to support it. Antonia shared:

I realized we have a small number of diverse students at my school. They are Muslim. I've never had the thought that the ethnicity or religious background of a student negatively impacts their education. But now, I think I have an increased comfort level and a desire to see even more diversity. So, I felt really excited to see that we do have students from different religious backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, even though the majority seem to be Black and White. Perhaps it is a result of the London trip. Just to see that better and be excited about that and be affirmed and encouraged that it can happen.

Further, Donna stated:

I can see that you have to look for the opportunities to support differences and really see it as a strength of the students and of the parents. I guess I now look for opportunities to identify where I can mediate some of the shortcomings that we have within our environment.

Antonia also shared that she now seeks out diversity in her experiences. For instance, she noticed that the trip has “increased [her] desire to want to learn more about different ethnicities and foods in particular.” As a result of engaging with diverse leaders, teachers, and students in London, as well as engaging in various activities in and around London, these students gained a passion for learning more, for doing more, and for engaging more with diversity. As such, the international internship impacted who these students chose to interact with both professionally and personally.

### **Instructional support**

All six students indicated a desire to improve instructional support for teachers and students, especially when working with diverse learners. J.T. and Antonia shared how the London trip impacted how they directly support their students from diverse backgrounds. J.T. stated, “I’ve got a large class of about 12 kids with students with severe disabilities. I found myself going in there and helping them out a little bit more and communicating with them and sitting with them at lunch.” So, although J.T. seemed to be providing more support to diverse students, he indicated that it is limited to students with disabilities and not necessarily culturally diverse students. However, in those interactions with the students with disabilities, he reported trying “to make sure I’m going above and beyond and have a little bit more of meaningful interactions with them.” These comments exemplify how the student is now willing to instructional support students who previously he may have overlooked.

Antonia noted that after the London trip, she is now providing more support to culturally diverse students. She shared an example of this in describing a recent scenario:

A student came up to me yesterday. She’s Latina, and she wanted to know if she could start two projects for our school. Of course, I was so excited to hear her mention those two ideas and we have some plans to try to get those ideas implemented. But that’s an example of how my appreciation for diversity and the importance of diversity I think has been affirmed by the London experience.

Antonia’s example shows how she is directly providing support to diverse students and how she linked that change in behavior to her experiences in London.

Catherine, Donna, and Shanita reported that the London trip led them to provide more support for teachers. Catherine shared that she now includes support for diverse teachers. Catherine described having conversations with them regarding their background and finding ways to support teachers in their struggles, such as through peer mentoring. Catherine also shared that the London trip influenced how she prepares teachers to work with diverse students. She stated, “How it’s impacted me is with teacher preparation. I now make sure that the teachers are more culturally aware of the students they teach in the classroom.”

Similarly, Donna reported that she now has conversations about meeting the needs of diverse students. Something which she indicated might not have happened if she had not seen how the welcoming environment of London’s schools positively impacted diverse students. Shanita also shared that she now has conversations in her school regarding cultural competence. She explained that while in the East London schools, she realized that small gestures to make students feel included could significantly impact. She stated, “Those little things that can make somebody feel inclusive. Those are things I’m able to speak of now when I’m talking to teachers or building level administrators about

being more culturally aware, culturally diverse.” As exemplified with these comments, students attributed how they changed their instructional support for teachers and students directly with the experiences they had in East London.

Table 1 shows that the construct of behaviors reflected the most considerable change (.84) for these students. Through the interviews, it became evident that these students changed their behaviors in impactful ways. These students acknowledged that those changes were a direct result of their experiences in East London. Differences in how policy was implemented in their own schools, changes in how they interacted with diverse stakeholders, and changes in how they supported their diverse teachers and students were all evidenced in the interviews.

## DISCUSSION

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Researchers have shown that it is possible to increase doctoral students’ cultural competence through their university program (see Boyce, 2012; Flynn et al., 2015; Malakyan, 2019). One such effort proven to be effective is study abroad (see Ballesta & Roller, 2013; Krishnan et al., 2017). The results from the current study indicated that the same is possible for educational leadership doctoral students. For the six educational leaders in this study, based on survey results, intercultural competence collectively increased .48 points for the group by engaging in a short-term, structured study abroad experience in East London.

This collective change in cultural competencies did not come without individual struggles. For example, a few students indicated that their attitudes and behaviors towards diversity did not change because of the sojourn. Through the interviews, it became clear that after the trip, these students viewed diversity in more nuanced ways beyond race, which now included seeing ability, nationality, language, and background as elements of diversity. Even when students reported not changing their behaviors because of the trip, the interview data painted a different story. Each of these students walked away with an affirmed sense of duty to better understanding cultural diversity and a more profound commitment to being a school leader who embraces cultural diversity.

By taking a purely quantitative approach, this research would have missed out on understanding the struggles, internal shifts, challenges, contradictions, and changes experienced by these individuals. As such, in the current study, the researchers ameliorated the limitation of a purely quantitative approach and took a mixed-methods approach to understand how competencies around knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors shifted. As a result, we found that each student increased their cultural competencies in significant ways. Students gained knowledge by comparing the cultures within education systems and gained self-awareness about their cultural awareness issues. The students gained skills related to relationship building, travel insights, and ways to empower diverse teachers. These pre-service educational leaders understood better and thus change their behaviors around setting policy, supporting diversity, and seeking out diverse learning and living experiences. Their attitudes about diversity also changed in meaningful ways. In sum, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavioral shifts captured herein spoke to profound growth around cultural competencies that resulted from spending time in East London schools and interacting with diverse people in diverse settings. It is through preparing these doctoral educational leadership students before the international sojourn, guiding them during the experience, and following up with them upon return that we were able to create a supportive, meaningful, and impactful study abroad experience for future school leaders.

## CONCLUSION

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This case study captured the shifts in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors around the cultural competence of six educational leadership doctoral students. We demonstrated that a well-orchestrated international experience, even short term, can significantly impact how students view diversity, how they react to cultural differences, and how those impacts can shift how they work with teachers and students. The current research adds to the limited research available on graduate students’ study

abroad experiences generally, and graduate students' in educational leadership programs study abroad experiences specifically. As such, this research highlighted the important benefits of infusing study abroad into a school leadership preparation program.

Further research should be done to understand better how international internships for school leaders ultimately impact teachers and students. For example, it would be interesting to know if school leaders who travel abroad engage in more culturally responsive practices within their schools. It would be interesting to investigate how intercultural communication with teachers might shift because of an international immersion of the school leader. Further research should also be conducted with cohorts of graduate students where researchers could study those who travel abroad versus those who do not travel abroad. Comparatively investigating study abroad for educational leadership students and understanding what happens if students stay in the U.S. for their entire program versus travel abroad during that same program is needed. This research might be a call to action for other university leadership preparation programs to infuse such an experience into their curriculum. Finally, future research should focus on understanding the impacts of international internships for in-service school leaders.

The implications of practice are also essential to note. Educational leadership doctoral programs will not shift overnight to include a study abroad experience. However, these programs might find creative ways to focus on intercultural competencies in their programs via guest speakers or local diverse internships. The implications for practitioners are clear. Pre-service (and likely in-service) school leaders can significantly benefit from spending time in another culture. Individuals who choose to serve the public good and become stewards of our schools must also be willing to engage in self-expansion through international travel.

International experiences for teachers are not uncommon. However, providing international experiences to aspiring or in-service school leaders is all but an anomaly in the field. If pre-service leadership preparation programs within institutes of higher education indeed seek to change the status quo of P-12 schools and develop students who are resilient in diverse settings, interculturally competent, and internationally minded, we must start with changing the hearts and minds of school leaders.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

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