

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A CASE-STUDY OF  
SECONDARY STUDENTS' STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES

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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Jennifer Nicole Ayers

## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A CASE-STUDY OF SECONDARY STUDENTS' STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES

According to the Institute of International Education (2019, np), in the 2017-18 school year, 314,751 American students participated in study abroad (SA) programs, indicating a potential need for understanding the impacts of SA on students. This study explored the experiences of American secondary students as they navigated a SA partnership between American and French perspectives throughout the 2018-19 academic year, including during family homestays. Using a case study approach, two American focal students were selected for close analysis, while the remaining seven participating students provided additional data for comparison. Data comprised student and parent interviews, students' classwork, researcher notes, and students' ongoing written reflections.

Building on Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and Hammer's (2009) Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), this study explored the impact that a short-term SA exchange had on secondary two focal students' development of intercultural competence and self-described sense of self/identity. Identity is perceived as a socially influenced sense of self that may be impacted by events throughout an SA exchange experience. This further develops the work by Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2013) who see identity expression as being impacted by experiences which are often found while studying abroad. Data analysis and discussion were organized around the four primary themes of *practical challenges*, *connections and common ground*, *lessons learned*, and *establishing oneself/identity claims*. Focal students exhibited a general trend toward greater acceptance toward another culture along the IDI spectrum shaped notably by affective and familiarity factors, though the degree and types of change varied within each individual experience.

Shifts in identity were explored through students' own voices in the ways that each participant described themselves within their experiences, both in written and oral form. Implications for fostering

intercultural development for secondary schools preparing a SA opportunity for students are also discussed. Practical suggestions for in-service secondary educators and the school staff who also support students are made.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

The idea of studying abroad conjures ideas of excitement, often tinged with coming-of-age memories, it can seem to be something undertaken before embarking on ‘real’ life. The reasons for which students decide to study abroad may be tied to goals for language learning, cultural exploration, or future competitiveness in the job market. This study focuses on the impacts of short-term exchange experiences of high school students. The timeline and structure for this program differ from traditional study abroad or student travel in that they extend throughout an academic year and focus on a reciprocal exchange. This study focuses on a group that is less frequently explored, high school students, in a program that places emphasis on developing a reciprocal relationship between partners. Students from the United States partnered with a high school in France, primarily interacting digitally until each group took their turn hosting their partners for two weeks. The goal is to deepen understanding of how this program impacts students’ sense of self and intercultural competence.

According to the *Open Doors* report from the Institute of International Education (2019), in the 2017-18 school year, 341,751 American students participated in a study abroad program (np). Amongst which, 87.8 % of those who participated in a study abroad experience were part of a program that lasted a single semester or less (Institute of International Education, 2019, np), making short-term programs the most utilized by American students. Only 7.1% of students in this same year were from either foreign language or international studies programs, meaning that the vast majority of students participated in study abroad from outside of what might be traditionally considered typical fields for study abroad. Notably, 25.6% of this group come from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields which demonstrates a need for programs that can be applicable to a wide variety of backgrounds (Institute of International

Education, 2019, np). Women comprised 67% of the participants and 70% of all students were white (Institute of International Education, 2019, np). According to the *Open Doors* report, 87.7% were in undergraduate programs, 12.1% in graduate programs, with only 0.2% of participants listed as being of another academic level (Institute of International Education, 2019, np). With years of continued growth in numbers of participating students (Institute of International Education, 2019), it seems clear that study abroad, particularly programs of shorter durations, will remain an important option for American students.

Many post-secondary institutions are placing an increased importance on internationalization, which then translates into a growing desire to prepare students with a skill-set that meets the needs created by this continued global shift (McGregor, 2016). Further, “[m]igratory movements and globalization have contributed to the increase of cultural plurality and the construction of hybrid identities” (Delgado-Algarra, Bernal-Bravo, & López-Meneses, 2019, p. 166), which results in a shift in local needs in addition to skills for international contexts. We “encounter culturally different people in every realm of our lives” (Campbell & Walta, 2015, p. 1) and we must prepare students to interact with different cultures and perspectives as they navigate their future in an interconnected world.

Largely, students participating in any kind of study abroad or exchange are post-secondary students (Institute of International Education, 2019, np). While travel with secondary students is far from rare, the range of program types and school involvement may be factors in why clear, consistent numbers are difficult to find. There are a multitude of student-oriented travel facilitation options, ranging from for-profit businesses to non-profit organizations or even individual school partnerships, all eager to aid in organizing a trip with secondary or post-secondary students. Regardless of motivations for travel, the opportunities generally exist for

those who can afford them. My goal is to explore a view of study abroad as a context for transformation through joining ideas of identity negotiation with the development of intercultural competence; thus further equipping students with the groundwork they need to become global citizens.

### **Highlighting cultural exposure**

The motivations for study abroad are diverse among students, but for schools and researchers, the focus ought to be in understanding how this experience impacts students and how to maximize the opportunity for them. Travel can be costly; if an academic trip is the only opportunity for a student to be immersed in other cultures and languages to this extent, then schools owe students a strong effort toward creating a meaningful experience. Engle and Engle (2003) argue that the core reason for study abroad (SA) “should be to present participants with a challenge – the emotional and intellectual challenge of direct authentic cultural encounters and guided reflection on those encounters” (p. 7). This challenge can best be met by closely examining the diverse ways in which SA can impact students as well as how students are influenced depending on their individual goals or beliefs.

Our world is increasingly interconnected and we “encounter culturally different people in every realm of our lives” (Campbell & Walta, 2015, p. 1). Stebleton, Soria, and Cherney (2013) describe SA as a “high impact practice”, particularly for the development of “global and intercultural competencies” (p. 15). The Douglas Fir Group (2016) say that “[i]n today’s multilingual world, the rising tide of globalization has penetrated all aspects of L2 learners’ lifeworlds” (p. 22), which further highlights the importance of creating opportunities for students

to develop skills needed to navigate such diverse contexts. SA is far from the only way to develop these skills, but it is a forum for an intense exposure that pushes individuals outside their normal realm. Bennett (2004) argues that “individuals who have received largely monocultural socialization normally have access only to their own *cultural worldview*, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of other people who are culturally different (np). Byram (1997) suggests striving toward a “world which allows and encourages all the people in a cultural or linguistic group, not just its diplomats and professional travellers, to take up contact with people in other groups” (p. 1). Changes in a globalizing landscape is “creating a natural demand for multicultural education and a culturally competent society” (Alvarez & Rodriguez, 2020, p. 160). Koriakina (2018) says that “multicultural education should be the most important component of the general preparation of a person for life in the XXI century” (p. 703). Whether motivated by a desire to become more marketable or by a genuine hope to be more understanding of other cultures, we live in a world where we must actively focus our educational efforts toward developing the skills needed for working with a variety of people and contexts.

## **Definitions**

Throughout this study, I focus on culture as a socially driven way of understanding or categorizing behaviors. I build on Bennett’s (2013) description of culture as something that establishes a context. Further, he argues that subjective culture, that which is specific to the individual, forms the foundation of how we see the world (Bennett, 2013). Within the context of

SA, language and culture (Kramsch, 1998) as well as culture and identity (Morgan, 2007) are all intertwined as individuals navigate their known and not-yet-known worldviews.

In order to make sense of the individual experiences, social identity offers a way to explore the impacts of SA as they relate to changing perspectives. Hallajow (2018) argues that everything about what we choose to do reflects an aspect of our identity. Additionally, identity is seen here as being a fluid structure, constantly evolving throughout the life of an individual (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Himura & Hayashi, 2019). SA is a unique opportunity for critical experience that can elicit identity shifts (Benson et al., 2013; Himura & Hayashi, 2019). Within this study, identity navigation is seen as an internal process with outward expressions, reflecting changes in an Intercultural Mindset.

Mezirow's (1997) work with transformative learning is embraced as a means for exploring the ways in which SA impacts students. He suggests a process that is initiated by a disorienting dilemma, something in which SA experiences are often rich. This disorienting dilemma can then serve as a point of reflection, which in turn may allow for transformative experiences (Mezirow, 1997). Individual student's experiences also create a context for understanding the possible selves that they may embrace (McGregor, 2016; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Within all of this, it is important to remember that simple exposure to novel situations or disorienting dilemmas does not automatically result in a transformation (Mälkki, 2012).

Intercultural Competence (IC) is a means for relating to and understanding people from other cultures. IC is important in a world that continually becomes more blended as borders are navigated across space by people from a variety of backgrounds. People who grow up in a community that allows for limited exposure to different perspectives are less likely to be able to develop the skills they need to navigate different contexts (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman,

2003). There are two primary models that are used for measuring the development of IC, one is Byram's (1997) work with Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and the other is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) from Bennett's (1986) work. Byram's ICC focuses closely on a language learning related approach, tying it to different skills that are developed throughout language acquisition. This approach is heavily focused on language and communication, rather than more generalized skills for different contexts. Bennett's DMIS, on the other hand, adopts a more nuanced continuum that is based on the stages through which people tend to develop from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective (1986). This latter approach is more broadly applicable to different contexts and is the foundation for Hammer's (2009) work with the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).

Hammer's (2009) IDI is a quantitative tool, built on principles which are an extension of the DMIS. The expanded principles of Hammer's IDI are more reflective of my goals for this study. Hammer (2009) frames a model that includes stages along a spectrum which span from a Monocultural Mindset to an Intercultural Mindset (Hammer, 2009). Hammer (2009) includes the stages of Denial and Defense/Reversal at one extreme within the Monocultural Mindset end, Minimization is a transitional stage between the two, while Acceptance and Adaptation are the stages that are present in an Intercultural Mindset. This approach provides a lens through which we can understand the types of behavior and choices that students make throughout a SA experience.

This study looks to blend work done with the qualitative nature of most DMIS work with the more updated terminological framing from the IDI into a lens that allows me to better recognize the ways in which this unique experience impacts secondary students' development of Intercultural Competence (IC). Further, research into transformative learning provides a way of

understanding the ways in which students experience and articulate these changes. Lastly, leaning on literature about study abroad, culture, and identity aids in understanding the contexts through which students are navigating.

The research questions guiding this study focus on the development of IC in students as the result of a short-term study abroad experience. Data is gathered from a variety of sources and ranges from journal entries to interviews. Detailed information is found in Chapter 3, with examples of prompts and questions outlined in the appendices. The research questions guiding this study are:

- How do a group of American high school students develop their cross-cultural perspectives within shared physical and digital academic spaces before, during, and after a cross-cultural exchange?
- In what ways do these high school students present and/or position their self-defined social identities during the navigation of cultural differences before, during, and after the exchange?

Throughout this study, pseudonyms are used for all participants and care is taken to anonymize any personally identifiable information.

This study focuses on a small group of students and their experiences. My aim is to focus in depth on these students so that I can generate more information for an area with less developed research, namely on study abroad and intercultural competence with secondary students. The following chapters will outline the related literature, the data analysis methodology, the findings, and will conclude with the implications for future research.



## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

This study situates itself by blending together the literature around culture, social identity, intercultural competence, and global citizenship as a way of exploring the study abroad experience for students. Each of these areas have a substantial depth of research, though not all tie to the overarching needs of a study related to study abroad. Care has been taken to prioritize this connection and contrasting aspects are included in order to support an explanation for why a certain branch of research was selected over another.

### **Study abroad**

The terminology around travel-related experiences ranges depending on sources; the most common terms are related to study abroad and student travel. Building on Engle and Engle's (2003) frequently-cited work, I use student travel to refer to any type of student-related travel, domestic or international. This is where one can find the majority of student travel organizations who work with secondary students because this best matches the efforts of these groups. This does not necessarily involve study and is the most broad of terms that applies to travel opportunities which are geared toward a student group.

Study abroad (SA), on the other hand, is used to refer to instances where students participate in some form of organized learning or classwork in the target culture. This term can also be used in instances of service learning because part of the goal is personal development, whether intellectual or social emotional in nature. While broadly used, the term SA does not carry the nuanced image of a reciprocity between students that exists when students both host and are hosted in each other's homes. However, the literature largely refers to SA broadly, even

with the variance between types of programs, so this term is functionally useful and thus is included here.

For illustrating the idea of a reciprocity, I use the term exchange when speaking to the specifics of the program in this study, because this mirrors the type of dynamic explored here. Studies that focus on a reciprocal exchange, as is outlined in this study, of any sort are scant; I have been unable to find any that explore the type of exchange structure in this study. This creates a need for care in blending terminology to best represent the dynamic of this particular experience.

There are a number of studies focusing on post-secondary students' SA experiences cited here (Kimura & Hayashi, 2019; McGregor, 2016; Santoro & Major, 2012; Dwyer, 2004; Campbell & Walta, 2015; Sobkowiak, 2019; Jackson, 2015; Berg & Schwander, 2019; Stebleton et al., 2013; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2013; Kishino, 2019; Lilley et al., 2015) and only a single study that focuses on secondary students (Heinzmann et al., 2015). This is largely as a result of there being a significantly higher degree of research focused on post-secondary SA experiences. While this trend is consistent across the SA literature, the reason for this is somewhat less clear. There may be fewer studies focusing on secondary students because of a lack of access, it could be that travel for younger students brings a host of other complications depending on the district or governmental supports, or because there are fewer SA opportunities for younger students in some geographical areas.

## **Considerations for student travel**

Student travel of any kind can be costly, both in organizational time and in funding (Heinzmann et al., 2015). Liability concerns or personal beliefs of school leadership can limit districts' support for travel, with or without a travel company. The question of approval for a trip can be cumbersome or non-existent, making the path toward creating a student-travel opportunity daunting for teachers. I have experience with one school building where there was a principal for several years who refused to allow any international travel because he personally did not believe in the value. Upon his departure, there were trips to Germany, Costa Rica, and England the following school year. While this story is anecdotal in nature, it illustrates that while students, local community, and faculty may support student travel, a single administrator can have an incredibly heavy impact on a community's options.

Companies that organize student travel will happily do so, for a cost, but those frequently focus on topical exposure rather than deeper cultural understanding. The programs that are targeted toward secondary students largely would be considered student travel, rather than study abroad, and lack the deeper aspects that university programs frequently highlight. Instances of governmental support provide common expectations, training, and funding for teachers which also may help to allay the fears of the school district. One such instance is with the German government through the German American Partnership Program (GAPP). However, programs like this are not always easy to find. Additionally, they generally rely on the goodwill of the government of the host country because the American government does not offer study abroad supports in the same, standardized way for secondary students.

Another consideration when examining the SA field is that not all programs are created equal (Engle & Engle, 2003); the most involved, and potentially the most beneficial for students,

require the largest investments to organize. Thus, the amount of commitment from the teacher cannot be overlooked. Regardless of the type of travel, secondary teachers invest a substantial amount of uncompensated time, and frequently their financial resources, into creating these opportunities for their students. When considering the possibility of establishing any kind of SA program, teachers have to be persistent in their effort, have a supportive district and administration team, a student body that can afford travel, and a community that values SA. The teacher must also have job stability, enough economic support to not require a second job, and a family who is supportive of their absence as they are traveling with students for a large portion of their unpaid breaks. The time needed to create a SA opportunity and the travel time itself are generally not compensated time. It is substantial work, so teachers and their immediate circle will need to be willing to donate the resources and time to establish, then undertake, this effort. For SA programs that involve integration within the target community, teachers must also negotiate expectations between their personal values, those of their school, the host school, and a partner teacher who brings their own expectations and cultural influences.

### **Impacts of short-term study abroad**

While comparing types of programs, Engle and Engle define a short-term study as one that lasts three to eight weeks, requires less advanced language proficiency levels, offers limited reflection, coursework that is a mix of first and target language, and includes a possibility for a collective or a homestay context (Engle & Engle, 2003, p. 10). Bunch et al. (2018) note some inconsistencies in the impacts of short-term SA with some researchers speculating that a short-term experience may be insufficient to result in a substantial change for a participant. However,

they ultimately suggest that, at the very least, a short-term program is a “better alternative to students having no education abroad experience at all” (Bunch et al., 2018, p. 121). The various sorts of SA do not all carry the same types of benefits; the specific value related to each one appears to depend, in part, on the type of program and the way it is structured. Broadly, it does appear that short-term experiences do generally bring a benefit to students (Bunch et al., 2018).

The timeline for SA is important to consider because different lengths of time or approaches to travel have differing types of benefits (Dwyer, 2004). Here, I focus on a very narrow subsection of the SA world, building onto the discussion of short-term study as is described by Engle and Engle (2003). Shorter programs are the most popular for American students (Institute of International Education, 2019), so it is reasonable to focus on this type of program in greater detail. The high interest in short-term programs also increases the need for teachers or organizers to maximize the experience for students throughout their travel time. Additionally, care in planning is important since a short-term experience may be a trigger that spurs future travel and exploration (Bunch et al., 2018). All of these elements underscore the importance of understanding the influence of this experience and how teachers can positively impact the benefit gained by students.

The popularity of short-term SA may be partially due to a greater ease of scheduling around other coursework or lessened financial constraints (Dwyer, 2004). Further, it is also far more feasible for a secondary teacher to consider the establishment of a three or four week SA opportunity than the longer options sometimes seen in post-secondary institutions. These three to four week trips still allow teachers to preserve some of the cultural and language focus that are lessened in the shorter types of SA opportunities or can be eliminated in a more tourism-focused approach to student travel.

Largely, studies examining the long-term impacts of short-term SA programs for post-secondary students appear to support the argument that they have a positive impact, despite the shortened length of time (Dwyer, 2004; Berg & Schwander, 2019; Vanden Berg & Schwander, 2019). Dwyer (2004) explores the ways that former participants pursued their post-SA life, while contrasting between types of program lengths. She found that year-long experiences resulted in more substantial gains in language learning, cultural understanding, and carried a higher overall impact of this experience to direct future decisions. However, Dwyer (2004) also notes that all study lengths positively impacted participants and that the shortest of the options she explored, summer programs, resulted in potentially more focused approaches that also had a marked positive impact on participating students. This may be due to the intensive nature of the programs or to the attitudes of the students themselves, as summer students may be motivated to make the most of their short time (Dwyer, 2004). Throughout this study, Dwyer highlights the importance of intentionality in designing a short-term program that maximizes reflection and opportunities to interact with the target culture as these options are increasingly popular. In their study on the post-SA experiences of former participants, Vanden Berg and Schwander (2019) also highlight the cultural awareness that is developed specifically through a short-term program. They found that a short trip can have long-term effects, as the experience impacted the later travel choices and activities pursued by former participants (Vanden Berg & Schwander, 2019). Ultimately, in looking to fully encompass the priorities for this current study, a look at term short-term exchange is the most fitting as it addresses the shortened travel timeline within the exchange process.

The program described in this present study builds on Engle and Engle's (2003) definition of a short-term study. Thus, a shortened timeline and inclusion of novice-high and

intermediate-low students are highlighted in this study. Meanwhile it deviates from Engle and Engle's (2003) broad definition by focusing on a reciprocal exchange between students from two cultures, parts of which extend beyond the bounds of group-level travel time. This reciprocity is imagined through the use of the word exchange, which illustrates a back and forth dynamic between groups.

### **Language learning and study abroad**

Study abroad literature largely follows two major avenues, either by studying the language skills developed or the cultural connections established, both of which have been studied in a variety of contexts (Sobkowiak, 2019). These primary areas diverge in many ways, yet they have some common research motivations; part of this is due to there being a continued trend toward shrinking borders and mobile citizens. The Douglas Fir Group (2016) argues that “[g]lobalization, technologization, and mobility, however, are forces that exert especially profound and continuous pressure on what it means to learn and use more than one language” (p. 22), underscoring the importance of language learning and ability to use that language in practice.

A focus on language learning is well documented, largely indicating that there is a positive impact between SA and second-language (L2) skills, particularly related to speaking and listening skills (Allen & Dupuy, 2013). However, there are some limits to SA in that it is less likely to have as substantive an impact on reading and writing skills as compared to students who remain in the classroom (Allen & Dupuy, 2013). All of this is somewhat variable as differences in program types, student personality or motivation, host-family dynamics, language skills prior

to travel, and program length can all impact the development of different language skills to differing degrees. Also, it appears that SA creates opportunities for individuals to expand their L2 use beyond the realm of what the Douglas Fir Group (2016) describe as the meso levels of social activity, or that which concerns family, school, and work.

While SA for language learning is still a common motivation (Allen & Dupuy, 2013), considering the variety of fields of study pursued by participants and the trend toward increasing numbers of students (Institute of International Education, 2019), it is important to consider the additional types of changes that take place during these shorter trips in order to meet the needs of a diverse array of students. To that end, this study strives to explore different areas which will aid in understanding the impacts beyond language-based skills. The participants in this study have diverse interests and future goals for their post-graduation lives, making a focus that is not bounded by language development skills, one that offers insight into the different aspects of the experience.

## **Culture**

In order to capture the cultural component of the present study, it is important to relate it to youth and identity factors. Culture is a broad categorization for understanding the social influences of a people. According to Bennett, “culture is a kind of context” (2013, p. 6). We outline boundaries between cultural aspects (Bennett, 2013). While drawing on a constructivist approach, he suggests that it is “we, the observers, who are responsible for choosing the appropriate cultural boundary for the purposes at hand” (2013, p. 53). Bennett describes subjective culture as reflecting the experiences of a society’s people, namely their *worldview*



(2013, p. 7). Objective culture refers to the large scale institutional aspects or products of a culture (Bennett, 2013). By contrast, subjective culture varies through a focus on an individual's life experiences (Bennett, 2013). Bennett notes that we need to have "*cultural self-awareness*" as we are unable to "distinguish between projecting our own categories of perception and accessing the alternate categories of a different culture" (2013, p. 58). This relates to the cultural identity of participants on a SA as well as those with whom they will interact, understanding is vital for making sense of the process.

Identity and culture are intertwined (Morgan, 2007) as are language and culture (Kramsch, 1998). Morgan (2007) encourages educators to "examine the degree to which classroom instruction in an L2 constitutes different ways of being and knowing in the world" (p. 1046). While a SA extends beyond the classroom, it is still fundamentally a school or academically grounded experience. Thus, teachers should approach this experience with an eye to how institutional influences factor into students' choices and their priorities. This also creates a need to communicate with students to understand how students see their identities as being enhanced by SA.

### **Identity negotiation**

The individual goals for joining in a study abroad experience may vary from person to person, which may in turn impact how students position themselves through the experience. According to Hallajow (2018), "[e]verything we do (or do not do) tells something about us" (p. 43). The choice to participate in a SA may reflect an orientation toward this type of experience, whether externally imposed by societal influences or an internal desire for something deemed

best provided by studying abroad. Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2013) take the stance that SA largely serves as a means for personal development and growth, while also arguing that “learning a new language changes the learner as a person” (Benson et al., 2013, p. 1). They see identity as a fluid structure where individuals navigate continued development throughout their lives. Kimura and Hayashi (2019) echo this idea, saying that “over the course of their lives, people are perpetually constructing and reconstructing their identities” further, that “[i]dentities are not invariant and stable, but fluid continuously transformed and multifaceted” (p. 475). McGregor (2016) highlights the role of participants during SA as they “play an ongoing and active role in the creation of diverse ways of situating themselves in unfamiliar contexts and actively participate in redefining themselves” (p. 16). Identity navigation is flexible, multifaceted, and socially influenced throughout a SA experience.

In both the studies presented by Kimura and Hayashi (2019) and by Benson et al. (2013), SA is seen as an opportunity for a critical experience that can elicit identity shifts in how individuals present themselves in multicultural contexts. Benson et al. (2013) suggest that positive experiences, those that involve successful navigation of uncertain or unfamiliar contexts, can result in growth of confidence for future interactions. In their study examining the long-term impacts that a short-term SA has on the identity formation of post-secondary students, Kimura and Hayashi (2019) argue that the experiences of these students result in a shift in self-perception where students grow to see themselves as more open-minded individuals with a greater degree of empathy. Overall, Kimura and Hayashi (2019) suggest that short-term SA, namely those wherein the focus is less on L2 learning and more on cultural connections, can be particularly important for novices who may then incorporate those experiences into an identity that sees cross-cultural exploration and language learning as meaningful. Each of the individuals in the Kimura and

Hayashi (2019) study were at the start of their university programs when they participated in a SA program. They all went on to pursue extended SA opportunities later on. This is important as it additionally highlights the importance of SA for novices who may have further opportunities to continue their exploration in the future.

McGregor (2016) argues that learners should have “an ongoing, active role in the creation of the diverse ways of situating themselves in unfamiliar contexts and actively participate in redefining themselves in relation to their experiences with learning an L2 and living in a new context” (p. 16). Hallajow (2018) describes the active negotiation intrinsic in the development of an identity that blends life experiences with larger societal influences. An active role in the process is important to consider, but also harkens to each individual’s perspective; ideas for reasonable amounts of social interaction may vary between each person. What an extroverted individual considers to be a normal amount of socialization may overwhelm a person who is more comfortable with an introverted lifestyle. The Douglas Fir Group (2016) argues that “social identities are aspects of L2 learners’ personhoods that are defined in terms of ways in which individuals understand their relationship to the world” (p. 31). Hallajow (2018) states that “identity is a social process and it is performed through social practices” (p. 44). Houghton (2013) found that within a language learning context, approaches that underscore an intercultural competence focus can facilitate identity development for students. SA opportunities may support the development of an aspect of an individual’s social identity by allowing them to expand the horizons of how they understand the world through social interactions with specific individuals from another culture.

A view of identity that is “dynamic rather than static” (Cao and Newton, 2019, p. 2) is adopted here in relation to L2 development, with SA providing a context for identity navigation.

Morgan (2007) describes identity as “fundamentally a social practice” (p. 1037), seeing culture and identity as connected within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) contexts. Within research into the impact of SA on L2 identities and language learning for Japanese students, Sato (2014) sees identities as “multiple, contradictory, and subject to change across various settings and interactions” (np). Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) state that identity and language are “mutually constitutive” (p. 249) as language provides the structure needed to express identity. In adopting the definition provided by Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001), negotiation of identity is seen as “the interplay between reflective positioning, that is, self-representation, and interactive positioning” with the aim to “reposition particular individuals or groups” (p. 249). In a study with post-secondary students, Kishino (2019) likens SA to an “incubation period” while students grapple with identities tied to global citizenship, however, upon their return they appear to incorporate their experiences into becoming more globally aware individuals. The process may not be linear and clearly defined for each person, but internal negotiation may result in outward expressions of a view of themselves as situated in a global context and with increased cultural awareness.

SA creates a context that can discombobulate students. This can be important in creating opportunities for successful navigation of the unknown. Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) explain that:

...in a culturally unfamiliar environment, individuals may experience identity vulnerability or insecurity because of a perceived threat or fear. Satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes in conversational interaction include the feelings of being understood, valued, supported, and respected, despite the intercultural differences that may surface in the process. (p. 244)

For students participating in SA, successful navigation can translate to growth while perceived failure can slow development. A SA experience has the potential to expand the ways in which individuals situate themselves, particularly if they have had limited exposure to diverse communities. Kinshino (2019) argues that “students feel an increased sense of self-awareness, awareness of others, interconnectedness, and intercultural competence through study abroad experiences” (p. 537). Despite their desire to encourage exposure to such diverse communities, Santoro and Major (2012) noted in their study of preservice teachers, that pushing participants too far can result in hindering a “transformative experience” (p. 319). Students who have limited exposure to travel or multicultural communities, are less likely to have developed the skill set that will result in consistent success throughout the experience, which indicates that organizers or teachers should be intentional in their pre-travel preparation information that they share with students. Within this study, identity navigation is seen as an internal process with outward expressions, reflected by changes in intercultural competence.

### **Transformation in Study Abroad**

The intercultural competence development that is explored within much of the research into short-term SA indicates that something key is taking place during those few weeks of living and existing in another culture. Heinzmann et al. (2015) note the variety of research methods and approaches that all largely support this idea by saying that this “argues rather persuasively for the transformational experience of study abroad activities” (p. 189). Kishino (2019) targets global citizenship as the result of SA having a “transformative effect” (p. 536). Lilley, Barker, and Harris (2015) additionally build on the idea that a transformative shift in late adolescence into

adulthood can allow for greater understanding of oneself. This is particularly important to consider as 87.7 % of SA participants in the 2017-18 school year were undergraduates (Institute of International Education, 2019, np).

Mezirow (1997) describes ethnocentrism as a “habit of mind” that predisposes one to view people outside of “one’s own group as inferior” (p. 6). He sees critical reflection as a means for questioning and transforming the grounds upon which our assumptions and biases are based, making it vital for supporting a transformative experience. Mezirow (1997) suggests that critical reflection, combined with exposure and additional experiences, can result in transforming an ethnocentric perspective into one that is more open and inclusive. He argues that learning should be “critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is key to transforming one’s taken-for-granted frame of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 9). This approach involves interventions that encourage exposure to other perspectives while developing a reflective stance throughout.

Supported critical reflection is key for a transformative approach as well as being one that allows for understanding of the inner workings of an individual’s navigation of social identity and developing intercultural competence (IC). By continually returning to intentional reflection and encouraging students to question their assumptions (Mezirow, 1997), a SA experience can be a viable context for shifting from a Monocultural Mindset to a more Intercultural Mindset, which in turn, supports the social identity shift that allows for the development of IC and global citizenship.

Where IC is a more broadly applicable term, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) focuses more narrowly on skills related to communication, thus it is often tied to the language-based gains of an experience. That said, SA “does not necessarily enhance ICC

development, and the lack of curiosity in other cultures implied by students' lack of interest can be considered a barrier to it" (Houghton, 2014, p. 370). This is vital to consider as it may be tempting to assume that simply dropping someone into an unfamiliar context will result in greater degrees of ICC or ability to navigate novel environments. Mezirow's theory for transformation (1991) suggests that disorienting dilemmas can spur critical points of reflection and change. SA can offer plentiful opportunities for disorienting dilemmas, however, it is still vital to remember the value of reflection to this process. Again, exposure to disorienting dilemmas does not automatically generate change, it is the subsequent reflection that allows the process to progress (Mälkki, 2012).

In addition to situations that may prompt these internally experienced dilemmas, SA also supports the development of additional views of one's ideal, or possible, self as described by Markus and Nurius (1986). Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that "possible selves are important because they function as incentives for future behavior" and that "they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self" (p. 955). McGregor (2016) highlights the desire and imagination that are often tied to the beliefs of SA participants. These internally generated beliefs may provide instances for disorienting dilemmas that prompt reflection as reality may differ from the imagination, while also challenging the assumed boundaries of possible selves that were established based on limited prior knowledge. Additionally, the backgrounds of students provide a context for understanding the impact of the SA experience (McGregor, 2016). If SA experiences provide an opportunity for transforming one's view of oneself while developing perspectives tied to an Intercultural Mindset, then it is important to retain a view of multifaceted possible selves as this is flexible for the ways in which individuals can see themselves becoming.

Motivation factors into creating an environment rich for transformation and curiosity impacts students' drive to explore. Lowenstein (1994) suggests that curiosity is tied to the desire to fill an information gap, thus motivating students to expand their knowledge horizons. Further, he says that "curiosity is the feeling of deprivation that results from an awareness of a knowledge gap" (Lowenstein, 1994, p. 93). Houghton (2014) argues that these gaps should be acknowledged by teachers in order to highlight these areas for students as well as by encouraging connections to their current knowledge base. With regard to SA experiences, Houghton says that "curiosity can be developed through the development of critical cultural awareness" (2014, p. 377). Curiosity may be a driving force for motivation and should be considered when striving to support students' reflection. In this way, the questions students have can be pondered during the evolution of their mindsets which shifts as a the result of these novel experiences.

### **Models for understanding Intercultural Competence in study abroad**

Campbell and Walta (2015) argue that "culture is fundamental to how we make sense of the world" (np). Individuals develop their understanding of the world by building upon their view of their own community, and when the community is homogenous, they are "unable to construe (and thus are unable to experience) the difference between their own perception and that of people who are culturally different" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 423). Medina-López-Portillo (2004) argues that intercultural sensitivity is the internal mechanism that is outwardly reflected by intercultural competence. While these aspects are intertwined, it is important to carefully consider approaches for analysis. There are two primary models currently used for understanding intercultural competence, one is based on Bennett's (1986) work and the



other is based upon Byram's (1997) efforts. While both are widely utilized, there are some key differences in their assumptions and priorities that merit a closer examination.

Bennett's (1986) Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) examines ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism, considering these opposing perspectives as means for developing an understanding of intercultural competence. It is an attempt to "describe how people become more interculturally adaptive" (Bennett, 2013, p. 84). In examining the interplay between SA, social identity, intercultural competence, and global citizenship, the DMIS offers a way of exploring the outward expressions of the internally developing changes supported by SA. This model sees development on a spectrum that reflects an outward expression of the inner shifting in an individual's ability to relate to other cultures. Bennett's DMIS model is not restricted to language learning, but rather can be used to look at the development of intercultural competence as a relatively predictable process where one moves from one area category to the next. This model has been critiqued as being too rigidly linear in its approach (Garrett-Rucks, 2014). However, Bennett (2017) argues that while there can be some navigation between the subcategories housed in the larger ethnocentric and ethnorelative groupings, one is unlikely to shift backward into ethnocentrism after moving into the ethnorelative realm. This distinction is important because it assumes a transferability of perspectives from one culture to another. Bennett (2017) further asserts that if someone seems to move backward from an ethnorelative view to an ethnocentric one, then that individual may not have truly had an ethnorelative perspective in the first place.

Where Bennett's DMIS looks to understand the process by which people navigate their own cultural understandings as they relate to other groups, Byram (1997) looks at growth in five different categories or *savoirs*. His model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is

tightly tied to principles of language learning, looking to highlight competencies that are valued in language education within the broader development of intercultural skills. In this way, he problematizes the notion of the native speaker ideal while also supporting an approach that embraces an individual's culture whilst remaining open to understanding from external cultural input. The five *savoirs*, through which Byram (1997) looks to understand the development of ICC are: (1) *savoirs* (knowledge), (2) *savoir comprendre* (understanding), (3) *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills), (4) *savoir être* (attitudes), and (5) *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness) (p. 88). These areas of development are not linear and allow for development in differing areas in various ways along an individual's journey.

While Byram's model for ICC is valuable, I believe that it would be limiting for this current study. An approach built on Bennett's DMIS allows me to appropriately explore a data set which focuses on a short-term exchange of individuals who have varying levels of second language skills. The DMIS is broader in defining communicative competencies beyond second language learning theories; focusing on "communicative behavior" (Bennett, 2017, np). This shifts the focus away from being primarily situated on language skills and focuses more on the behavioral aspects that individuals exhibit within a given context. Considering that the participants in this current study vary in their second language skills, primarily ranging from novice-high to intermediate-low language levels (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012), it seems wise to prioritize an approach that allows for more generalized understanding of participants' experiences. While language development is an important aspect, my goal is to understand the broader impacts for students as many of the participants have stated that they have no immediate intent to continue second language learning courses beyond high school.

## **The Developmental Model of Intercultural Competence**

Although Bennett (1986) and Hammer (2009) both embraced similar approaches for exploring intercultural competence; the recent iterations developed from Bennett's DMIS model more closely align with my goals for this current study. I will expand upon the differences between Bennett and Hammer in chronological order. This will allow for a more complete explanation of both the foundational elements initially developed by Bennett as well as the different structuring that Hammer emphasizes. There are ample overlapping areas, both utilizing similar definitions and sharing the general approach that was started by Bennett in his 1986 work. As one approach is functionally an expansion of the other's, I decided to start with Bennett's initial DMIS model (see Figure 1) and then develop it further through the inclusion of Hammer's more recent expansions of DMIS research, which resulted in the blended model (see Figure 7) for this current study.

The original foundation of the model for this study is found in Bennett's original DMIS, proposed in 1986. Bennett's DMIS assumes "that as one's *experiences of cultural differences* becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's potential competence in intercultural relations increases" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 423). As seen in Figure 1, the original DMIS, focuses on six stages, which are divided into the two larger categories of ethnocentrism or ethnorelativism. An ethnocentric view sees one's own culture as being the most important or primary perspective. By contrast, an ethnorelativistic view is when one is able to consider other perspectives, where one's culture is simply one of many, and where all have value. Bennett (2004) is careful to highlight that belonging to one end or the other of the DMIS continuum

should not be an indication on whether someone is fundamentally more morally good than another as this would imply a morality based on a singular type of goodness. The six stages through which individuals develop, according to the DMIS, are *Denial*, *Defense or Reversal*, *Minimization*, *Acceptance*, *Adaptation*, and *Integration* (Bennett, 2004; Hammer et al., 2003).

<i>Denial</i>	<i>Defense / Reversal</i>	<i>Minimization</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>	<i>Adaptation</i>	<i>Integration</i>
<b>Ethnocentrism</b>			<b>Ethnorelativism</b>		

**Figure 1**  
*Ethnocentrism versus Ethnorelativism (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003)*

The *Denial* stage is where “one’s own culture is experienced as the only one” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 424). Bennett (2004) describes a primary issue in the *Denial* stage as the “tendency to avoid noticing or confronting cultural difference” (np). From this perspective, individuals are only able to see the existence of their own culture and are incapable of entertaining the notion that others’ perspectives may exist that differ from their own. They may also “experience themselves as more “real” than others – even to the point that others may not seem fully human” (Bennett, 2017, np). This point is the furthest away from an ethnorelativistic view and is highlighted by a complete focus on the individual’s view of a reality, one which has clearly defined parameters, thus isolating themselves from the potential existence of other perspectives. Conflict for individuals at this point can arise in circumstances that challenge their

view of ‘normal’, as may be the instance of an influx of immigrants or with shifts to expectations within the workforce (Bennett, 2017).

At the *Defense* stage, individuals are aware of some differences but still cling to ideals related to the fundamental value, or superiority, of their own. They rely on “stereotypes” and see the world as “organized into “us” and “them”, where one’s own culture is superior and other cultures are inferior” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 424). This point is defined by growing awareness combined with a desire to preserve ideals of cultural superiority. There is a tendency to blame “cultural differences” for societal problems (Bennett, 2017). Related to the *Defense* stance is the *Reversal* stage, where an us/them dichotomy exists, but lacks the view that other cultures pose a threat. By contrast, “them” is deemed superior to “us” with a tendency to extol another culture while becoming overtly critical of one’s own (Bennett, 2017). The unifying theme between both the *Defense* and *Reversal* stages is the us/them dichotomy, Bennett (2017) suggests that this can be addressed through finding common grounds between values or other shared perspectives.

The final stage housed within the ethnocentric grouping is *Minimization*. At this stage, individuals acknowledge that other cultures exist and are not threatened by them. However, in looking for commonalities, they “obscure deep cultural differences” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 425). This particular stage is mainly important when considering interactions with a majority culture that may use this view to reinforce their culture as ‘normal’, thus minimizing others and ignoring their own privilege (Hammer et al., 2003). Bennett (2017) notes that confrontation of the privilege held by the majority culture can result in a shift back into the *Defense* stage. Hammer (2009) views *Minimization* to be a transitional stage that does not truly belong in either large-scale categorization.

Shifting into an ethnorelative view starts with *Acceptance*. This stage involves recognition of cultural differences while seeing people as still being “equally human” (Hammer et al., 2003, p.425). At this point, individuals can recognize differences but cannot navigate the relativity involved in each cultural perspective. Bennett (2017) notes that “*acceptance of cultural differences* does not mean agreement – cultural difference may be judged negatively – but the judgement is not ethnocentric” in that this determination “is not automatically based on a deviation from one’s own cultural position” (np). The struggle for individuals navigating this stage is a need to determine a means of reconciling ethics with cultural relativity, Bennett describes the “paralytic position of “it’s not bad or good, it’s just different”” (np) as individuals strive to avoid overly broad generalizations or any sense of cultural superiority.

A key aspect to the next state, *Adaptation*, is the development of empathy for other cultures (Hammer et al., 2003; Bennett, 2004). Koriakina (2018) alludes to this idea of empathy in cross-cultural education by describing a social perspective when an individual “knows how to put himself in the place of another person” (p. 701). Further, she underscores the need of cross-cultural awareness to develop “empathy and transposition, respect for other people’s points of view, traditions and cultures, and readiness for the peaceful resolution of conflicts” (Koriakina, 2018, p. 703). Ethnocultural empathy is an aspect of empathy that is directed to those who come from a group different from one’s own (Wang, Davidson, Yakushko, Savoy, Tan, & Bleier, 2003). This allows individuals to see reasoning and cultural values from the perspective of putting themselves into the position of another. Zhu (2011) argues for the “cultivation of culturally empathic ability” specifically in foreign language learning contexts as this competence is intertwined when learning about another culture (p. 116). This growing flexibility is the foundation for “biculturality or multiculturalism” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 425), thus allowing

individuals to develop the range for interacting in a variety of contexts. Bennett (2017) cautions that the *Adaptation* stage can lead to a sense of inauthenticity for individuals who shift between bicultural perspectives. He argues that this is resolved through “the extension of the definition of identity into a more dynamic container” (np).

The final stage in the DMIS is *Integration*. At this point, people navigate close interactions and start the incorporation of other cultural perspectives. This stage can carry a sense of feeling on the fringe of society, as individuals may struggle to feel that neither one or the other culture is entirely their own. Hammer et al. (2003) note that the *Adaptation* stage is likely sufficient for intercultural competence and that *Integration* is not better, but that increasingly people are having to navigate the blending of cultures and thus it is a stage worthy of consideration. Hammer’s (2009) later work does not include this stage as it is largely that which is experienced in instances of cultural liminality that might be experienced by immigrants, refugees, or third-culture kids (Hannaford, 2016). This is not to diminish the value of this stage, however, it is not one that ties to the experiences of those who are included in this study, making the slightly narrower focus embraced by Hammer (2009) somewhat more applicable.

### **Intercultural Development Inventory**

Bennett’s (1986) foundational work with the DMIS is embraced by Hammer (2009) to develop the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Beyond changes in terminology to focus on mindsets and some slight shifting of the stages, Hammer’s (2009) work created the IDI as a quantitative tool for measurement. There have been three versions of the IDI, the most recent is from 2007 (Zhang, 2014). The IDI has been used in a variety of contexts, including with

secondary students (Straffon, 2003). Hammer (2009) argues that the shift toward “adapting behavior to cultural context represents an intercultural mindset” while “perceiving cultural differences from one’s own cultural perspective is indicative of a more monocultural mindset” (p. 205). This model focuses on organization into two overarching perspectives, a Monocultural Mindset and an Intercultural Mindset rather than utilizing the terms Ethnocentric and Ethnorelative that are suggested by Bennett (1986).

Functionally, Hammer’s (2009) categories retain the same broad definitions as Bennett’s, but the changes within organization, to include a more clear focus, that Hammer suggests in the IDI fit this study better. Firstly, the terminology around having a Monocultural Mindset versus an Intercultural Mindset underscores a changeable aspect rather than what may be implied with the labels Ethnocentric and Ethnorelative. A mindset is something that one *has*, rather than a label indicating what one *is*. Within Hammer’s IDI, the stages overlap with Bennett’s work, retaining the Denial and Defense/Reversal stages within the Monocultural Mindset. However, Hammer shifts the Minimization stage to that of a transitional mid-point that does not clearly belong to one or the other ends of the spectrum. Acceptance and Adaptation are the remaining categories that reflect an Intercultural Mindset. The simplified approach that considers Minimization to be a transitional stage allows for better understanding of the negotiation undertaken by individuals as they navigate through these competing mindsets. Lastly, the Integration aspect from the DMIS is missing from Hammer’s (2009) model. This aspect is the least likely to be a consideration for this current study as the students in this group were about to embark on their journey and largely do not come from a background that would suggest biculturality, as defined by Bennett (1986).



For this current study, I am building on Bennett's DMIS (1986) and Hammer's IDI (2009) into a blended model (see Figure 7) which allows for effective exploration within my current context. In blending the models, I am preserving the core definitions described by both Bennett and Hammer. However, I am leaning on the broad categorization established through Hammer's work instead of Bennett's. For my analysis, I follow Bennett's (2017) suggestions to follow a qualitative approach over Hammer's quantitative efforts.

### **Intercultural competence and study abroad**

In building on the work developed by Hammer et al. (2003), Hammer (2009), and Bennett (1986), Campbell and Walta (2015) strive to further explore the DMIS in relation to SA. They argue that this model is useful for understanding the development of students' intercultural competence. In their study, they structure their analysis around the types of behaviors associated with the different stages. While the terms used by Campbell and Walta (2015) stem from Bennett's (1986) work, they follow the grouping developed by Hammer (2009). Rather than Ethnocentrism, Cultural Adjustment, and Ethnorelative categories, they could apply the Monocultural Mindset and Intercultural Mindset stages with Minimization in the middle as an adjustment stage (see Figure 7). SA of any sort involves a need for communicative competences and Bennett (2013) cautions that "[i]ntercultural communication... cannot allow the easy assumption of similarity" (p. 5). Further, he argues that "Intercultural communication is *difference-based*" (Bennett, 2013 p. 5), which underscores the importance of being able to understand one's own culturally-motivated perspectives as well as developing an awareness and sense of empathy toward others' views.

Ethnocentrism	Cultural Adjustment	Ethnorelativism incorporating global competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Deliberate isolation</li> <li>● Superiority</li> <li>● Denial</li> <li>● Defense</li> <li>● Minimization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Anxiety</li> <li>● Fear</li> <li>● Helplessness</li> <li>● Irritability</li> <li>● Alienation</li> <li>● Loss of the familiar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recognition and respect of other cultures</li> <li>● Recognition that one's own culture is one of many</li> <li>● Respect for others and their values</li> <li>● Open-mindedness</li> <li>● Seeking knowledge of 'otherness'</li> <li>● Interacting effectively in another culture</li> </ul>

**Figure 2**  
*DMIS in SA as described by Campbell and Walta, 2015, np*

Another major avenue of SA research looks to understand how the experience impacts general cultural connections or awareness, rather than mindsets specifically. There is a growing body of literature on how students develop skills related to multicultural navigation that may prepare them for a world that is increasingly interconnected (Benson et al., 2013). This stems, in part, from a view that cultural awareness can lead to intercultural competence (Bunch et al., 2018), an area that appears to be increasingly important in our ever-expanding global interactions. Despite a spark in nationalism sentiments, which are illustrated through the elections of the American President Trump and the British Prime Minister Johnson, our world is becoming progressively more connected. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how much we impact each other; while the virus spreads across borders, people worked to remain connected through digital platforms to soften the divide, whether across a city or an ocean. Even as outrage and protests stemming from the death of George Floyd spread across the United

States, international news and social media extended news of the fight for justice across the world, creating a context where issues that impact one person have the potential to impact all.

Heinzmann, Künzle, Schallhart, and Müller (2015) argue that the value placed on developing language skills should imply “more than learning and mastering abstract linguistic tasks related to the language’s structure or vocabulary” (p. 187). Rather, they suggest that when learning a language, students are expected to develop the communicative skills needed to interact with a wide variety of people and cultures. To this end, Heinzmann et al. (2015) state that language learning should be tied to the development of intercultural competence (IC). They go on to explore the IC development of students participating in a SA, ultimately finding a clear connection between SA experiences and the development of IC in post-secondary students. Deardorff (2006) describes IC as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 247) Sobkowiak (2019) argues that “students’ growth in intercultural competence is a prerequisite for preparing them for diverse cultural settings” (p. 682). SA contexts create a reasonable means for students to explore a variety of cultures and people, while teacher or organizer involvement can aid in guiding and supporting throughout the process.

When studying SA experiences for upper secondary students through the contrasting of a control group without SA experience and an intervention group who had been exposed to a culturally and linguistically diverse context, Heinzmann et al. (2015) noted a marked increase in the IC development of the intervention group, further supporting the idea that SA has the potential to positively impact students’ IC development. They also noted a clear long-term impact, as the experiences and growth were not limited to the timeline of the SA experience or

the time directly following, but rather “seems to be a lasting asset” (Heinzmann et al., 2015, p. 203). Again, this supports the potential value in SA as impactful to the development of IC.

In an interview study with students who participated in either one or two semesters of SA, Sobkowiak (2019) found an increased awareness of different facets related to cross-cultural competence. Sobkowiak (2019) highlights the importance of preparing students before departure as this helps them to more readily adapt, which may enrich their study abroad experience. Additionally, Jackson’s (2015) study of university students’ development of cross-cultural competence underscores the importance in careful structuring of the experience in order to support student growth throughout the experience. Simply existing in the target culture is unlikely to make a significant impact, so it is vital that participants are facilitated in their integration into the target community (Heinzmann et al., 2015). This must be considered alongside the finding that it is “culture shock or the experiences of unfamiliarity and difficulty that forces exchange students to grow interculturally” (Heinzmann et al., 2015, p. 188). Further, Heinzmann et al. (2015) explain that it is important to match members of a SA group along similar interests or common social standings in order to aid in developing connections rather than creating a context for students to shut down. There is a balance between culture shock that spurs growth and overwhelming experiences that result in limiting development.

In a study striving to understand the impact of SA on post-secondary students’ development of intercultural competencies, Stebleton et al. (2013) explore the capacity for travel organizers to maximize the experience toward development of IC. In a study comparing location, whether at home or abroad, and course content on the development of global citizenship amongst post-secondary students, Tarrant et al. (2013) suggest that location and course content are both

important to consider for growth. This indicates that care should be taken to guide students' learning throughout the process.

In structuring a SA experience, it is also important that students' experiences are mediated in a way that encourages individual reflection because without this structure it is possible that students see their experiences as confirmation of negative cultural views (Jackson, 2015). This "guided reflection" (Stebbleton et al., 2013, p. 19) is important throughout the process in helping students to make sense of their experiences. Lilley et al. (2015) state that "[a]ll cultural understanding is comparative because no understanding of others is possible without self-understanding" (p. 239). Students can better situate novel experiences within their own perspectives if offered the supports to reflect on both.

### **Global citizenship and intercultural competence**

Continually, the world seems to be shifting toward interconnectedness across borders with ties in everything from markets to media. This seems to contribute to buzzwords in education related to 'global citizenship.' The term itself is incredibly broad, yet there seems to be consensus that there is a strong connection between global citizenship and intercultural competence (Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin, 2017; Trede, Bowles, & Bridges, 2013). Trede et al. (2013) suggest that core values of global citizenship, namely those of social responsibility, global equality, and human rights, are closely tied with intercultural competence, thus it is worthwhile to focus on development for individuals living in an interconnected world (p. 443). Agreement on a definition for global citizenship is hard to isolate; it ranges from a focus on the obligations of a global citizen to a more open view that the idea reflects a stance which

encompasses a broad set of characteristics (Klein & Wikan, 2019). Despite the range of definitions, the key characteristics generally highlighted in a view of what it means to be a global citizen include: “openness, tolerance, respect, and responsibility (self/others/planet)” (Lilley et al., 2015, 231). According to Lianaki-Dedouli and Plouin (2017), an important element to global citizenship is the “capacity to imagine shared or common futures” (p.48). SA can be tied to development through the ways that some experiences look to expand horizons. Specifically, this can aid in creating a context for critical experiences that push students outside of their comfort zones, which can then be the “fundamental facilitator of “change”” (Lilley et al., 2015, p. 233). Examples of these types of experiences are “being away from family and friends, language difficulties, cultural differences, coping, interpersonal conflict, and differences in university structure and support and approaches to learning” (Lilley et al., 2015, p. 233). As these are largely experiences that are likely to occur during a SA, it is reasonable to extend the view that a SA experience may result in positively developing global citizenship.

While Lianaki-Dedouli and Plouin (2017) argue that development of intercultural competences also supports the development of global awareness, thus it is tied to global citizenship, Klein and Wikan (2019) caution that some SA experiences may reaffirm a view of otherness, further hindering the development of global citizenship. In their study, Klein and Wikan (2019) found that while students reported being more “tolerant and open-minded at one level, at another level they reproduced quite ethnocentric and neocolonial attitudes” (p. 99). These findings make it very clear that teachers or program organizers must make the learning approach one that fosters critical reflection, while continually pushing students to question and expand their perspectives in order to mitigate the affirmation of negative stereotypes.

If SA directly impacts the development of intercultural competence, and intercultural competence supports development of global citizenship, then a connection between the ideals is reasonable to explore. SA is far from the only path toward developing IC or becoming a global citizen, but it provides a very specific structure for exploration. In order to heighten positive development and limit reaffirming negative biases, continued care must be made to aid students in reflection and making sense of their experiences in a way that supports, rather than hinders, growth.

### **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

This study focuses on the impact of a study abroad exchange between two groups of high school students, one from the United States and the other from France. Data is primarily drawn from the American students, with supplementary perspectives shared from their parents, the French high school students, and the researcher's notes. Within this chapter, I will outline the community context and exchange itself before explaining the data gathering and analysis procedures. The goal is to illustrate the context and valid data-gathering procedures while also wearing both the teacher and researcher hats throughout this process, thereby aligning this study with practitioner research procedures.

Briefly, the timeline for this study abroad exchange process began in the fall of 2018, when students were put into pairs of one American and one French student. Students interacted from a distance until the French students arrived in the United States in April, 2019. They stayed with their American partner for the entirety of their two-week visit, while attending the American school and participating in group activities. In May, after the American school year ended, the American students traveled to France to stay with their partners for two weeks, also attending school and participating in group activities. After the host visit was completed, the American students continued on to travel in France for an additional week without their partners. The data that this study relies on were gathered from school-based assignments, application information including introductory letters, pre-travel group meetings, interviews with the American students, interviews with the parents of the American students, and researcher notes (see Figure 3).



### Research questions and data sources

Research Question	Type of data that addresses this question
<i>How do a group of American high school students develop their intercultural competence within shared physical and digital academic spaces before, during, and after a cross-cultural exchange?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Introductory letters / ‘about me’ profile</li> <li>o Reflective journals</li> <li>o Digital chats</li> <li>o Student interviews</li> <li>o Parent interviews</li> <li>o Researcher memos</li> </ul>
<i>In what ways do these high school students present and/or position their self-defined social identities during the navigation of cultural differences before, during, and after the exchange?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Introductory letters / ‘about me’ profile</li> <li>o Digital chats</li> <li>o Group discussions</li> <li>o Student interviews</li> <li>o Researcher memos</li> </ul>

**Figure 3**  
*Research Questions and Data Sources*

This case-study explores two focal students’ experience with study abroad in-depth and additionally, the case studies lean on the experiences of the additional seven other students to better contextualize the process. Ultimately, I organized my findings into practical themes that encompassed the types of experiences that students described in the data. For the case studies, I selected two students based on the breadth of they offered and a high degree of contrast they brought between their backgrounds, gender, and personalities, while also bringing full data sets from which finer-grained analysis could be gained. For the first in-depth case study analysis, I started with Reggy, the first participant, coding his data with an initial round of *in vivo* coding in order to preserve his voice when moving forward. After a round of data analysis, I moved into a secondary level exploration of “category codes” (Yin, 2016, p.197) that look to make

connections. After these initial stages, I pulled *a priori* codes from Hammer's (2009) work with the IDI. This allowed for a more focused approach to understanding the development of intercultural competence. Following the *in vivo* coding process with *a priori* code allowed me to have greater familiarity with the data and the ways that each individual described their experiences. After completing this two-tiered analysis process with Reggy's data, I repeated the process on Beatrice's data set as my second in-depth case for analysis. This allowed me to compare the two focal students, looking for a degree of generalizability between the two cases.

This is a multiple case study, where each of my two focal students constitute an embedded unit of analysis. My goal for this multiple case study is to find a degree of replicability (Yin, 2018). The overall structure for this study relies on treating the intercultural exchange as a longitudinal case, with the focal students serving as embedded units for analysis. To this end, one unit (Reggy) was selected for analysis first before analyzing the second unit (Beatrice) with the goal of finding cross-case generalizations buttressed by patterns found in the seven other students' data. Yin (2018) suggests an approach for multiple cases within a single study where the first case is analyzed completely before subsequent cases, with the goal of looking to explore generalizations that can be developed from each case.

In this chapter, I begin by explaining my processes for data analysis for a degree of clarity. From there, I describe the Alaskan and French contexts that impact the exchange process. Finally, I describe the data types as they relate to the exchange itself, in order to illustrate the interactions between data types and the cultural context around them.

## **Data Gathering and Analysis Procedures**

All transcriptions of audio interactions and journals were saved to a password protected computer using pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. After the transcriptions were completed, the digitally-formatted data was transferred into MAXQDA to be coded and analyzed using this software. Letters, journals, recordings, and interviews were transcribed using pseudonyms to preserve participants' anonymity. Digital discussions from the Facebook group were captured through screen shots and identifying details were then redacted.

MAXQDA is one of several Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDS) options, all of which have varying features. This program does not complete the analysis for researchers, but provides tools for organization and navigation of the data. I've chosen to use it here due to my familiarity with the software and confidence in it as a tool. While data analysis can be undertaken through manual or digital means, the researcher still undertakes the analysis so the difference is largely due to a matter of access, preference, and applicability of the type of tool to the type of data analysis (Yin, 2016). This system allows me to organize the variety of data sources that I've gathered while also allowing for some consistency in analysis.

Throughout, I completed memos in order to preserve the non-text based data, for example the information connected to a student's choice in materials for letters or gestures during interviews that are not encompassed within the audio recordings or subsequent transcription. Every effort was made to preserve the anonymity of participants throughout the data gathering and analysis process. Additionally, consistent steps were taken to preserve the nuance and quality of the data with the goal of establishing validity and transparency (Yin, 2016).

Prior to starting any data gathering, approval was gained through the Indiana University Institutional Review Board in order to prevent any ethical concerns. Consent forms were given to parents and students of the French and American students, in their respective languages. The French teacher distributed a flier in French with the information about the study goals and scope, with contact information for both the IRB and researcher listed. The American families and students were given an English form of the same information, but were also given an additional verbal explanation from myself during one of the general informational meetings about the trip, (see Appendix D for forms that students and families were given during the informational meeting). As the focus for the majority of the data was centered on the American students' experiences, it was more likely that they would have questions. Lastly, permission for the study was obtained in writing from both the French and American school sites before the start of the study.

All of the students who participated in the exchange were invited to join the study. The only factor that could disqualify them is not participating in the exchange, so there was no exclusion based on gender, age, race, or beliefs. In order to avoid any sense of coercion, all consent forms were held by one of the building principals until the final grades for the exchange were submitted. After submitting the exchange grades and gathering the consent forms, the interviews were scheduled. That created a small delay between the end of the trip and the interviews, but was necessary as grades could not be finalized until the school reopened for the year.

As the teacher-researcher in this context, my motivation is to establish a SA program that can endure while positively impacting students' long-term intercultural growth. Studying the impact of this experience allows me and my fellow secondary school teachers to better meet the

needs of future students and to understand how this experience can affect the students who decide to travel. It also provides a deeper understanding of a less-often explored group of students within SA and how their intercultural experiences impact their identity, world-view, and development. However, wearing both researcher and teacher hats requires that I remain consistently reflective on my motivations and assumptions in order to remain ethically grounded. My own positionality on the value of a reflective first-time study abroad for high school students is biased toward believing in the importance of developing intercultural competence.

A qualitative approach is suitable for exploring the DMIS as it “builds on thick descriptions of human behavior” (Bennett, 2017, np), however, research into the IDI frequently utilizes a quantitative structure (Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & DeJaeghere, 2003). Garrett-Rucks (2014) says that qualitative work “can provide more personalized, detailed accounts of the process of IC development” (2014, p. 183). This qualitative approach best addresses the research questions that look into gaining depth of understanding while focusing on a small number of participants, two participants in the present study.

A multiple case study approach has been selected here for a few reasons. Firstly, a case study can allow for understanding contemporary events or issues where the researcher has a lack of control or ability to manipulate (Yin, 2018). While I have control over many of the elements within the initial structure for the exchange, there are also a very large number of variables that I simply cannot impact. These elements include things such as school policies, student/family motivations or goals, problems that arise during travel, or social interactions (digital or face to face) between all the involved parties. Considering my inability to control for all elements of this case study, it is also important to consider Yin’s (2018) point that findings are likely to be somewhat observer-dependent as they allow for multiple realities and interpretations. A case

study also aligns with my goals to expand understanding on how this type of experience impacts secondary students. Yin (2018) suggests viewing a case study as “the opportunity to shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts or principles” (p. 38). Considering that research into this type of experience with secondary students is an area without a substantial research base, this increases the literature available for study.

A good case study requires deep understanding of the case, necessitating multiple types of data in an effort to understand the broad themes within the study (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Further, the variety of data types and sources allows for triangulation within and between data sets (Yin, 2016). More specifically, I take an epistemic stance toward the research as this study looks to understand the individual views and experiences of each participant. This perspective allows me to “try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21) in an effort to understand their experiences. The goal is to create a sense of validity through rich data descriptions, triangulation of data, and comparisons between cases (Yin, 2016).

As this study is bounded by the academic context of the exchange itself; social interactions are limited to this realm. As a result, some aspects of students’ interactions are unexplored within this current study. Additionally, my role as teacher researcher poses some limits, even while this also allows access I might not otherwise have. Ethically, I strive to remain consistently reflexive as I approach this process in order to juggle my researcher and teacher roles with interactions between students and families.

Within my analysis for this study, I have strived to place emphasis on detailed and clear descriptions of the setting, participants, and data in order to allow for the impact of each of these aspects through a cohesive understanding (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). These thick descriptions

allow for a greater degree of information for the analysis process. After creating a consistent format for the data to be analyzed, through transcribing audio and written information or creating digital files of images, data was compiled into a database that is housed on the researcher's computer (Yin, 2016). This aids in access, organization, and navigation between both an overview and close up view of the data.

Ultimately, I developed four themes related to social identity and the study abroad experience. I analyzed data from all nine participants, but only developed the themes fully for the two focal students. Findings related to intercultural competence were kept separate for discussion as the analysis was undertaken in a different manner. I worked to establish validity through the detail of my descriptions and transparency of the process in analyzing a variety of different data types and sources. My goal in this study is to strongly enrich the SA experience for future students and teachers alike. In the following chapters, I discuss the findings through analysis of the research questions, extant research literature, and recommendations for future steps in this research.

### **Alaskan context**

In order to lay out the rich cultural settings of this study in which the participants reside, four areas are described to better understand the unique context of this study. Each of these areas bring social and economic factors that are important for visualizing the uniqueness of Alaska. The areas for focus include: the Alaskan high school community, the historical positioning of the indigenous and non-indigenous populations, an overview of the geopolitical influences, and the types of cross-cultural exposures that are common within the community immediately

surrounding the school. For the adolescents who participated in this study, these are not necessarily areas that they highlighted directly, but are worth noting because they speak to the community influences that may impact these students' reactions to the exchange experience.

### *The Alyeska community*

In the middle of Alaska, is a small town with a high school that is very similar to thousands of other high schools across the nation. This study focused on a group of students at Alyeska High School situated in a small town of roughly 9,000 people. Alyeska is a pseudonym for the school; *Alyeska* is an Aleut word that means *Great Land* and is the word from which the name Alaska was derived (State of Alaska, nd). This community is nestled in a valley, surrounded by mountains, and adjacent to the largest city in the state. The area where these students live is relatively small, lacking some of the opportunities for cross-cultural exposures that might be found in larger cities. By contrast, the school district within which Alyeska High School (AHS) is located, serves approximately 48,000 students and covers an area of 2,000 square miles (Anchorage School District, nd). It is home to the most diverse high schools in the nation and there are 110 different languages spoken in students' homes throughout all of the schools within this school district (Anchorage School District, nd). The student body in the district is comprised of over 50% minority students, with 41% white (Anchorage School District, nd).

While the overall school district includes this diversity of backgrounds, AHS exists in an adjacent bubble. With such a large and geographically widely distributed district, there is a lot of room for variability; some schools have higher transiency rates, income disparities, or diverse



backgrounds amongst the student body and others have less extremes. In 2020, the AHS student body of roughly 800 students was comprised of 69% white, 1% African American or black, 5% Alaska Native or American Indian, 2% Asian or Pacific Islander, 14% noted two or more races, and 7% Hispanic or Latino (ASD Ethnicity Report). The 20-minute ride into the city creates a clear divide between city and small town life. The majority of the community do not seem to be actively afraid of the big city, but there is a solid sense of removal felt amongst the student body toward those who live ‘in town’.

Throughout the past 14 years that I’ve lived in Alaska, I’ve noticed a tendency for the people here to have a touch of distrust toward the government and a fierce desire for independence. The small town where AHS is located is a place where people often choose to live in order to balance between preserving a short commute into the city for work and keeping their home outside of the city - either by choice or necessity. In most other American communities this creates a suburban perspective, however, where many American suburbs are home to wealthier families, this community has a higher number of blue-collar workers. Housing is at a premium in the city, with geographic features preventing further expansion; the most expensive homes in the area are within the city limits and many families simply cannot afford to live there. The most economically limited areas are also located in the main city; the homes and trailer parks situated there are often not the first choice for families who do have the option of living elsewhere. As a result, there’s a mixed variety of motivations for those who live outside of the city. Rather than being purely suburban, the area feels more like a small town with a strong rural influence, despite a lack of rural industries and the general proximity to the city. The properties outside of the main city often have lots that are slightly larger, yet sometimes slightly more affordable, so families can feel their dollar going further. Alternatively, some families

choose to live in the smaller community out of a general distrust of the ‘big’ city. The city has a comparatively high crime rate and substantial homeless population, both are aspects from which many families wish to remain removed. As a result of these factors, the motivations of the community or assumed privileges in this community may vary from what might be expected in a ‘typical’ American suburb.

### *Political leanings*

Alaska is firmly a “red state” (i.e. politically conservative) where even the local liberals might arguably be considered moderate or right leaning compared to other areas of the nation. Similarly, the high school’s community is largely politically conservative, all local representatives are Republican and have consistently been so for many years. There are also a large number of religious institutions that represent the Christian, Mormon, and Jehovah’s Witness communities. While Christianity is easily the most widely claimed religion, the Mormon community is present, if slightly less visibly. The socioeconomic level for students is not terribly diverse, most are middle to lower-middle class, primarily working families, many with military backgrounds. There are outliers, but the most wealthy and most impoverished areas in the district are situated within the limits of the big city; the majority of the people in this small town reflect less of these extremes.

### *Historical context*

The Alaska Native cultural influence is notable and highlighting some of the history can aid in establishing a context. According to the Native Federation, in 2014, 18% of the Alaskan population was Alaska Native with the city of Anchorage having the largest proportion of Alaska Native peoples in a city of over 100,000 at 12% of the population (Native Federation, 2020b). All terminology that I used here reflects the terms that are used by the Alaska Native community and pulled directly from Alaska Native sources. Throughout areas of the US, terminology and underscoring derision toward American Indigenous peoples varies. In Alaska, the terms Alaska Native or Native are not always automatically assumed to be negative, though there are certainly those who will put every possible ounce of derision into any term related to the Alaska Native peoples. As someone who has lived in Alaska for several years, I've seen a substantial difference in attitudes toward Alaska Native peoples compared to how American Indigenous peoples are often treated in the other American states. Again, this is not to diminish the struggles or problems that Alaska Native peoples have faced from colonizing forces. Neither does this excuse the harm that has been done to communities related to loss of culture, community, or life through institutions such as the forced boarding school programs or through practices that have intentionally harmed Alaska Natives. The existence of a higher degree of harm to one group does not excuse damage done to another.

Most of the students with whom I have worked, and who identify as Alaska Native, also know their tribal affiliations. Many, though far from all, participate in Fish Camps or other types of traditional subsistence living. Unlike some areas in the 'lower 48' (i.e., the 48 contiguous American states), the tribes in Alaska also have relatively strong corporations that manage resources on tribal grounds while also supporting access to health care through the Alaska Native

Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC). The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA) resulted in the establishment of 12 for-profit Alaska Native corporations and over 200 for-profit Alaska Native village corporations as well as transferring 44 million acres to these corporations to manage for the Alaska Native peoples (ANSCA Regional Association). This is very different from the reservation system in the lower 48, thus offering different supports and protections for Alaska Native peoples than are seen elsewhere.

The power dynamic that has been established by the Native corporations, combined with legislation that was developed after learning from the history of treatment of Indigenous groups in Canada and the remaining American states, results in a more complex view of Alaska Native peoples within the state. The corporation structure for Alaskan regions allows the tribes who have historically had access to the resources of a specific territory to continue to utilize those resources in a legally protected manner. Further, this creates a more substantial voice for advocacy because the corporation unites and legitimizes the perspectives of the people who inhabit those lands. Initially, the primary task of the Native corporations was to manage land and resources, however, this role has evolved to include advocacy. Where smaller tribes may have a voice that is easily overlooked, the corporation under which they fall under can amplify their needs while also looking to care for the land and resources of all who share the land.

There are 11 distinct and geographically delineated Alaska Native cultures: Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Iñupiaq, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Yup'ik, Cup'ik, Athabascan, Alutiiq, and Unangax (Native Federation, 2020b). These are the broad cultural territories and individual tribes fall within these larger cultural groupings; there are 168 federally recognized tribes in Alaska (Native Federation, 2020a). The land where AHS is located is within the Athabascan cultural territory and on the land of the Dena'ina tribe. There are a few reasons for which it is important

to underscore this dynamic. The Alaska Native peoples very clearly have a long relationship with the land upon which AHS was built, something I wish to acknowledge out of respect for the history shared by the peoples of these lands. Additionally, one cannot divorce Alaskans from the history of the land we share. A course in Alaska Studies, including tribal history, is required for graduation from high schools and Alaska cultural studies courses are also required for all certificated teachers in the state. The laws requiring acknowledgement and education in Alaskan issues creates a context where students are at least loosely aware of tribal affiliations and how they themselves relate to this history.

### *Cross-cultural exposures*

While people do move in and out of the state, generally for work with a couple of key industries (oil, fishing, or tourism) or through the military, AHS has a relatively low transiency rate. Most of the students here have grown up knowing all of their classmates, either starting in Kindergarten or by the time they move into one of the bigger middle schools. Over half of the AHS staff graduated from there and have remained in or returned to the area to work; at one point there were two principals and one of the teachers who graduated in the same class and were on staff at the same time. The result of this is that there is a high degree of connection within the community, while also creating an environment where students have less exposure to outside perspectives or cultures.

The required class that most aligns with learning about different cultures is the Alaska Studies class. Since this is a Freshman-level class, students are provided with a base of sorts to build on, however, at AHS there is often still a gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Hammer et al.

(2003) describes the need for developing IC in highly homogenous communities. All of the historical context that I outlined above is information covered in the Alaska Studies class, but there seems to be a frequent assumption of a white, Christian ‘normality’ driven by this community’s majority thereby, again, marginalizing local Alaska Native perspectives. Cultural perspectives not within this in the white, Christian majority or covered in coursework about Alaska Natives are often ignored entirely. Due to this normative sociocultural situation, the students in this community are severely limited in their individual exposures to other perspectives, beliefs, or backgrounds. I usually spend a substantial amount of time teaching my French I students, most of whom are Freshmen, about stereotypes and how to define culture. Every year, the majority Anglo students describe their culture as ‘normal’, giving the impression that they’ve really not known anyone who had different beliefs, history, or attitudes. I do not have the impression that they are maliciously making assumptions; they are genuinely surprised to consider the possibility that not everyone believes in Jesus, supports Donald Trump, or celebrates the same holidays. As a teacher, my desire for establishing the exchange upon which this study is focused is largely to create opportunities for my students to interact with people from different backgrounds, allowing them to see the world outside of their little valley.

Students who have less exposure to a variety of cultural backgrounds may be less equipped for navigating the diversity of perspectives they may interact with as adults. Thus, by creating an opportunity for structured interactions, students will have an increased exposure to French peers and culture, while still retaining a school-community social and emotional safety net throughout. While this study focuses closely on the American high school students involved, interactions with their French partners, as well as parent perspectives, and teacher observations are included as a way of offering a more robust view of how this experience impacts students.

Further, intentional points of reflection are incorporated throughout in order to allow students to make sense of what they're learning and experiencing (McGregor, 2016; Mezirow, 1997). The chronological overview (see Figure 4) for the exchange allows for students to have time to get to know their partner digitally before meeting face-to-face, with group travel meetings along the way.

### **French context**

Contrasting to the narrow cultural exposures of the small-town Alaskan high school students, the French students at the partner school are in a larger metropolitan area. The French high school is in a town of about 150,000 situated in the French Alps, not far from Geneva, Switzerland. As a result of this proximity to Geneva, many inhabitants work there and commute back to France to live, where the local living costs are somewhat more affordable. Due to this factor, there are a large number of students at this school who come from a higher socioeconomic status with a substantially higher degree of travel or international experience. During the same school year as this study, the school supported trips to Canada, Germany, and Spain, in addition to the trip to Alaska.

The students in the French school all have at least an intermediate-mid to intermediate-high language proficiency level in English on the ACTFL proficiency scale (some are higher); they were all required to begin learning English by third grade. These areas are some general highlights of just a few of the most apparent commonalities and divergences between the French and American communities. Further, some areas, such as racial demographics are not gathered by the French government as they are in the United States, making perfect comparisons

impossible. The goal is to provide some contextualizing background as the main focus of this study is on the American students.

### **Participant inclusion criteria**

This study abroad exchange opportunity was open to all Freshmen, Sophomore, and Junior French-language students at AHS. Seniors were not included because they would have already graduated at the time of the trip, meaning they are no longer held to school rules in the same way as the other students. As a result of the grade limitations, the majority of the American students were 16 or 17 years old at the time of travel. Meanwhile, the French students were in *Première*, which is equivalent to Junior year, meaning that most of them were 17 years old. There were more students applying from the French side, so the final group size was essentially dictated by the American student numbers, with a maximum of 16 students agreed to by both French and American teachers. Each of the 14 final SA participant students were paired with a French student, so the numbers of participants on each side along with the balance of male and female students needed to match.

In order to apply, American students needed to be in a French class, have a C grade average or higher in their classes, positive teacher recommendations, and no behavioral concerns on their record in order to be accepted. Behavioral concerns that could preclude them from joining varied depending on the type and timeline of the incident as some jeopardized my ability to keep students safe on an international trip. Thus, serving a lunch detention for a dress-code violation was not considered a major infraction, while recently drinking alcohol in the bathroom or fighting with other students were exclusionary factors because they are more likely to translate



into an unwillingness to follow local laws or school guidelines while traveling. In addition to travel and hosting elements, American students were required to participate in the pre-travel meetings, complete journal entries and reflections, and participate in the group activities. At the end of the entire process, they receive a graded half credit that went on their high school transcript indicating that they completed all associated work for the exchange.

## **Participants**

There were 14 American students who chose to participate in the exchange. Of that group, nine elected to participate in the study. I have chosen to focus primarily on two focal students from this larger group so that I can delve deeper into their perspectives through a finer grained analysis. I selected the two focal students in order to provide a broad range of perspectives based on their prior experiences, genders, and attitudes toward travel. I chose one male and one female student, both in the same grade, but with fairly different backgrounds and individual experiences. These two students also represent some of the more complete data sets; both students and their parents were fairly forthcoming when expanding on students' experiences. The other students who have chosen to participate in the study have been included through occasional examples as applicable, however, the primary focus remains on the two focal students.

Involved in this study are the nine American students who are central to the research, as well as their American parents and their French peers. The American parents and French peers are included as peripheral participants, further informing the data. Claire, the French teacher of English and myself, as teacher-researcher, are the final two participants. Both Claire and I are

white, educated, second language teachers. We're both in established relationships with our partners and have financial stability. We both have experience working in multiple schools with differing cultural influences. We also both 'fit' within our school communities, that is to say that our beliefs, appearance, and income do not make us stand out as aberrant. These areas all impact our decisions and interpretations of students' needs within the exchange.

Claire and I both see the value in creating a context that strengthens the cultural awareness and intercultural competence of our students. We are both motivated to create a valuable experience for our students, both for the real-world application and for the value this adds to our respective language programs. Our willingness to create this experience for students demonstrates our personal orientation toward intercultural competence; neither of us would have been involved in this process without our personal beliefs in the value. However, it is worth noting because this indicates a belief that impacts our decisions and structuring of the process for our students. Furthermore, this indicates areas that impact my interpretation of data within my researcher role for this study.

### **Exchange program design and timeline**

The timeline of this exchange largely followed the school year and is outlined in Figure 5 from the Alaskan perspective. As this program was established without another organizing agency involved, I have included a brief description of the timeline and process that I followed for creating this exchange. The journey for establishing this exchange started in September of 2017, when I submitted a form to the French consulate looking to find another school for a partnership. They do have a program for matching schools for digital collaborations or penpals,

so I went through the same department and they posted my request for an exchange. There is not a specific program in place for matching high schools between France and non-European countries, so I was uncertain about whether this would result in a pairing but my options were otherwise limited.

My decision to seek out a French school for an exchange, rather than from another French-speaking area, is largely because of student and family preference. Before every trip that I've taken with students, I've gathered input from parents and students to determine what destination they would be most likely to support. Even though Canada is notably closer to Alaska than Europe, the consistent feedback is that families would prefer France. I've proposed Quebec, Martinique, Louisiana, Belgium, Switzerland, and France as options several times, but always have the same response. Thus, when planning a partnership with the intention that it become a long-standing tradition, France is a logical choice for me to make. The reasons for students' preferences seem to be broad, ranging from a desire to see specific monuments like the Eiffel Tower, to a sense that French in France is more 'authentic' (a view that can be potentially problematic), or even just that it feels like more of an adventure to go somewhere they wouldn't be as likely to be able to go on their own (as might be the case for Canada or Louisiana).

In January of 2018, I heard from a school who wanted to work with me and we began planning. Unfortunately, this partnership was dissolved in April 2018 when the French teacher developed health issues that precluded her from being able to travel so I began my search again, this time emailing people directly listed on the consulate page and through the local *rectorat* (similar to an American school district, but covering more territory). In late May, I was then put into contact with Claire, a teacher in the *Haute-Savoie* region, and we began working on a partnership between our schools. She gained approval from her school in July 2018 and I

requested approval from mine as soon as school recommenced in August 2018. The process on the Alaskan district's end was a little less linear as there are not a large number of similar programs, meaning that additional explanations and clarifications were needed in order to gain approval. Ultimately, I received approval for students to sign up in mid-September, and began the process of enrolling students in the exchange during October, 2018. These further steps are outlined in Figure 4: Exchange Overview.

<p><b>September 2018</b></p>	<p>School district approval of travel is granted.</p>
<p><b>October 2018</b></p>	<p>Parent/student meeting to outline the trip, expectations, costs, and process. American student sign up begins at this point.</p>
<p><b>November 2018</b></p>	<p>Students are matched with their French partner by the French and American teachers, who use students' application information for pairings. American students exchange letters with their French families and begin communicating digitally.</p>
<p><b>December 2018 – May 2019</b></p>	<p>Group meetings take place every two weeks for American students about travel preparation as well as for home group building. These meetings included cultural learning and reflection – both on students' own culture and on the target culture. Students also had monthly reflective journals to complete. These journals are turned in for review and so that concerns or questions can be addressed in the next group meeting.</p>
<p><b>Late April – May 2019</b></p>	<p>French students (N=14) arrive in Alaska and stay in their partners' homes for two weeks. During this time, they attend school with their partners and share cultural presentations in English with other classes at the high school. We host group activities roughly every two days. American students have written reflections to complete during this time. French students return to France with no further Alaskan travel.</p>

<p><b>Late May – June 2019</b></p>	<p>American students (N=14) travel to France and stay with their partners for two weeks. During this time, they attend classes with their partners and share cultural presentations in English with the English language learning classes. Group activities take place every two or three days.</p>
<p><b>Mid-June 2019</b></p>	<p>The American group leaves their partners' homes to travel in France for an additional week as an American group. Students return home and spend the remaining time for summer break with family.</p>
<p><b>September – October 2019</b></p>	<p>Students turn in their travel journals and grades are finalized for credit. At this point, I receive the forms from students who elected to participate in the study.</p>
<p><b>November 2019 – January 2020</b></p>	<p>All individual interviews are completed with participating Alaskan students.</p>
<p><b>February – April 2020</b></p>	<p>Interviews with parents of participating students are completed.</p>

**Figure 4**  
*Chronological overview*

The English-teaching French teacher, Claire, and I made the intentional decision to keep the exchange confined to a single school year in order to maintain continuity amongst students, teachers, and school expectations. Claire and I also decided that a two-week visit at each school would be a good balance of cultural exposure and concerns about the school-related impacts to instructional time that a prolonged group visit might have. We prioritized the home stay component in order for students to gain some degree of integration into the local community, we

hoped for students to have supported opportunities for growth in a variety of levels and contexts (Kimura & Hayashi, 2019).

The American students were taking French as an elective and the soonest opportunity they have for starting their studies is during their Freshman year of high school, so they were all in the novice-mid to intermediate-low proficiency range of French competency. Thus, for the American students in particular, the shorter timeline for the host-stay was likely beneficial, as Engle and Engle (2003) say that “a student possessing an elementary or low-intermediate entry level in the host language, for example, can manage a very successful host-family visit of a weekend to about three weeks” (p. 9). This is not to imply that they were able to be fluently communicative with their host families, but rather that the types of language required are limited in nature and complexity. As novice-mid to intermediate-low L2 users, students in this current study rely primarily on memorized language over generating complex language that can consistently navigate novel situations (ACTFL, 2012).

### **Data sources and procedures**

The data for this study were gathered from students’ applications for the program, student work (journals, presentations, reflections), teacher/researcher observations and notes, chats from a private Facebook group for student discussions, teacher/researcher notes from American students’ group meetings, audio recordings of post-travel interviews with students, audio recordings of post-travel interviews with parents. With the exception of the interviews, all other work is completed as a normal part of the exchange coursework. The research question chart

illustrated in Figure 3 highlights how each data form ties to the research questions guiding this study.

With their initial application, American students wrote introductory letters in French and filled out an ‘about me’ profile, both of which were sent to their French partners and their partners’ families. This served as an initial point for understanding how students see themselves and how they may wish to be seen, providing insight into their initial identity claims. The French students wrote introductory letters in English as responses, before shifting into digital mediums for communication until the arrival of the French students in Alaska. The initial letters were hand-written, then scanned and emailed to the French teacher who delivered them to her students. The decision to write traditional letters was made in order to have time for both of the teachers to sort through applications for matches while verifying that there were no major issues with the matches related to health concerns, such as allergies. Matches were made by French and American teachers through a combination of shared interests or self-identified personality traits and any health-related issues that would preclude students from staying together. As an example, there were two students who would have been a reasonable fit based on several shared hobbies, but one student was severely allergic to cats and the other student had three cats in their home.

### *Digital Communication*

Once student pairings were established, participants were given their partner’s information so they could begin communicating from a distance, this mostly took place through social media (SnapChat, Facebook, Discord) or texting. There were a couple of interactions that

were prompted by teachers, allowing students to introduce themselves to their partner and their partner's family.

We set up a private Facebook group with the intent of prompting students to discuss some practical differences between cultures before meeting in-person. After pairing students, American and French students were given discussion prompts to explore every two to three weeks between December and April within the shared private Facebook group. The teacher-chosen topics ranged but were all focused on prompting students to begin exploring their cultural differences and similarities. The language used for discussions varied to support a balance between both French and English use. This was to allow students to begin establishing connections that they then could develop throughout the school year. Facebook was chosen as a platform because it is accessible both in the United States and in France, while also allowing teachers to moderate the discussion. We introduced topics like family routine, meals, or hobbies - topics that are commonly explored in a world language class, regardless of level. Students were also free to begin talking via other social media means, but the goal was to have each person interact with their partner in at least a minimal way prior to hosting and meeting each other. The intent was to have seven or eight discussions through the Facebook group, however, participation lagged to the point that this endeavor was dropped early on and students focused on communicating via their personal social media. Data from these discussions were limited to the five discussion that ultimately had some limited degree of participation.

Facebook is a widely available social media platform, in France and the United States, that has been available for long enough that students and their parents are likely to be familiar with the overall structure. The value to Facebook is that it is free and it is simple to add pictures, video, and text; all of which can be searched and referenced later. However, this is far from the



most commonly used means of social interaction by high schoolers, many of whom have chosen not to have Facebook accounts. Additionally, this website is blocked by the school filter at both the French and American high schools, meaning that students were required to complete the discussions at home and could not do so at school. Facebook was a good starting point, but left much to be desired as it is no longer relevant to the students who participated in this study.

### *Journal prompts and pretravel group meetings*

Starting in November, American students were given monthly reflective journal prompts that, while remaining fairly open-ended, still encouraged reflection. Medina-López-Portillo (2004) suggest using a guided journal for gathering data that is targeted toward understanding the development of Intercultural Sensitivity. The group meetings also started at the same time as the journal tasks and took place every two weeks.

There were a total of seven monthly reflexive journal entries (see Appendix B) and nine student meetings before the French students arrived as well as one between their departure and the American students' arrival in France. Students' questions and concerns that were noted during the bimonthly group travel meetings served as focal points for the subsequent meetings. Notes from these meetings were gathered for later analysis. Throughout, great care was taken in creating opportunities for cultural reflection and processing during the school year of the exchange. This was done through journal prompts and discussions. In addition to directly prompting students to describe their own culture alongside the sharing of practical travel-related information, in these discussions students were routinely asked to share something they were excited about, something they were nervous about, and a question. Through hearing each other's

perspectives, while having the space to consider, I continually aimed to encourage active reflection.

Group meetings took place several times and all included some element for reflection, generally based on some aspect of students' voiced concerns. This encouraged points of discussion and reflection at all stages of the experience. Engle and Engle (2003) suggest that "culture learning is a process" (p. 7) and that prior preparation allows students to "begin their sojourns closer to the goals they most define for themselves abroad" (p. 8). These points of reflection are key for processing this new information (McGregor, 2016). Throughout this current study, prompted reflection, in the form of discussions or journals, was integrated at the start, during the process, and post travel in order to maximize the impact of the experience for the participating students. The data from these reflection points are included in the study and were analyzed for indicators of how students navigated areas within the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (see Chapter 2).

### *Travel reflections and guide booklet*

During the active travel period from late-May to mid-June, American students were assigned a simplified version of their journal prompts to complete each day, for a total of 20 entries per student. They also had a substantial booklet that was designed to aid students in developing academically and inform them about French customs, while also satisfying the required coursework for the credit they earn through AHS for their participation in the exchange. This booklet includes cultural information, group activities, a log for new French words, along with logistical information such as contact information for each other, the schools, and our

lodging while traveling. I modeled the content for the booklet after the one that the German teacher at AHS has created for her students, in large part to allow for some continuity between programmatic expectations. The AHS German teacher has run an exchange with the German American Partnership Program (GAPP) for the past 20 years and had valuable experience from which to pull in establish coursework for this French exchange. The booklet and reflections were all completed in English, with the exception of continuously logging in new words with the goal of pushing students to find novel French words or phrases during our travels.

### *Cultural presentations*

There was a clear imbalance in target language skills between French and American students, however, the goal for both groups use as much of the target language as possible while in each country was established early on in the process. The reality of this goal emerged differently for the groups due to the gap between their second language (L2) skills. As an example, the cultural presentations were implemented differently in Alaska and France. Each group shared cultural presentations with several classes at their respective host schools but to promote comprehension, English was used for these presentations, both in France and the United States. The presentations that the French students made in English were within their capabilities, whereas the American students would have struggled to effectively present in French for half an hour about cultural topics that ranged from the environment to Alaskan traditions, while still being able to answer relevant questions. It is important to consider the comfort zones of students (Santoro & Major, 2012), in order to avoid pushing them to the point of becoming resistant.

The student presentations on both the French and American sides of the exchange were created by small groups of three or four students prior to departure and were on topics that students thought would be interesting for an audience comprised of peers in their host partner's school. Presentations generally lasted 20-40 minutes and teachers in each high school signed up for a presentation from the visiting groups based on the topics they thought would be relevant or interesting to their respective classes. There were seven English teachers at the partner school in France and all students are required to learn English, so the American students were able to present in a wide variety of classes. American students worked in groups of two or three the topics included: *Food and nutrition in the United States*, *School in America*, *Nature and climate in the North*, *Alaskan life and history*, and *Differences between Alaska and the Lower 48*. These topics were chosen by the American students after asking the partner French students which topics might be interesting to learn more about for classmates.

### *Final interviews of students*

After their trip, upon returning to school in the fall, American students were invited to participate in a final interview. During the individual interviews, students were asked to choose a pseudonym so they could have a voice in how they present themselves. Most of these individual interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes and took place at the school in order to be in a familiar environment while also preserving increased accessibility for students. The interviews with students were semi-structured with follow-up questions asked throughout (Cresswell & Poth, 2018); see Appendix A for interview questions. Thereafter, the parents of the American students were invited to also participate in a similar semi-structured interview to explore their

perceptions of any changes they observed in their children throughout this experience. Their interviews took place at a time and place of the parent's choosing in order to be flexible around work schedules or other obligations. The majority of the parent interviews also lasted 30-40 minutes. Almost all of the interviews were completed face-to-face, however, the final two parent interviews were done via Zoom due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Audio from all of the interviews was recorded on a handheld digital recorder, the audio file then uploaded to a password-protected computer, before being transcribed using pseudonyms.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

The longitudinal nature of this study allowed for deeper analysis of change over time in order to answer the two research questions, which are:

- *How do a group of American high school students develop their intercultural competence within shared physical and digital academic spaces before, during, and after a cross-cultural exchange?*
- *In what ways do these high school students present and/or position their self-defined social identities during the navigation of cultural differences before, during, and after the exchange?*

This chapter first focuses on the four broad themes that form the conceptual framework of the study. After gathering and analyzing the data from this exchange between French and American high school students, I have solidified my findings into four primary themes for discussion to complement students' shifts that indicate their development of intercultural competence, these areas for analysis are *practical challenges, connections and common ground, lessons learned, and establishing oneself*. This study followed a year-long reciprocal exchange between 14 high school students in Alaska and 14 high school students in France that took place during the 2019-2020 academic year, directly before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this chapter, I strive to illustrate the experiences of two focal students throughout the process. I begin by detailing the exchange itself in order to establish a clear understanding of the exchange process, as well as the data types and gathering for all individuals involved. From there, I move into a discussion of the participants and how their experiences are explored through

the four themes of *practical challenges, connections and common ground, lessons learned, and establishing oneself*.

### **The exchange experience**

While the two collaborating teachers, Claire and myself, worked together in pre- and post-travel preparation on either end of student involvement, the majority of the data extends from the point where students signed up in 2018 to the end of their post-travel interviews in early 2020. The approval process varied between each country's schools, but the student side of the experience was very similar. At both the French and American schools, students received information about the trip from their second language teacher and filled out applications in October of 2018. As the one who was more experienced with student travel, the overall design of the exchange was mine and based on my previous study abroad travels with students. The American group of interested students was smaller than the French one, which required that the French school to be limited in sending a matching number of participants. Once applications were submitted, the French and American teachers matched students based on gender, health concerns (e.g. allergies to animals), and common interests. This meant that some students had more in common with their partners than others, however, safety and school protocols for all participating students needed to take priority.

One difference between the American and French groups were the pre-travel meetings that were required for the American group. This difference was needed for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the American students earned high school credit by actively participating in all parts of the exchange, necessitating a substantial enough learning opportunity to justify the credit. As a

bigger, functional reason, the American students are far less experienced with travel than their French peers. In my experience from traveling with Alaskan students, I have consistently found that I frequently have participating students who have never left the state or have never left the country. On every trip that I've ever taken with students, I've had at least one student who has never been on a plane. As a teacher, one of my primary goals is to set students up to succeed. Pre-travel meetings allow time for students to ask about the things they are worried about, learn about things they might be surprised by, and to bond with each other as a cohesive group. Pre-travel meetings for the American students took place every 2-3 weeks, starting in December and ended right before our departure in May. Conversely, Claire did not host consistent meetings with her students; the school culture around student travel does not encourage these types of gatherings. This is an area of which I had little ability to control, but also likely impacted the types of experiences Claire's students had, although with students with different lived experiences, it is also possible that they did not require the same types of supports as the American students.

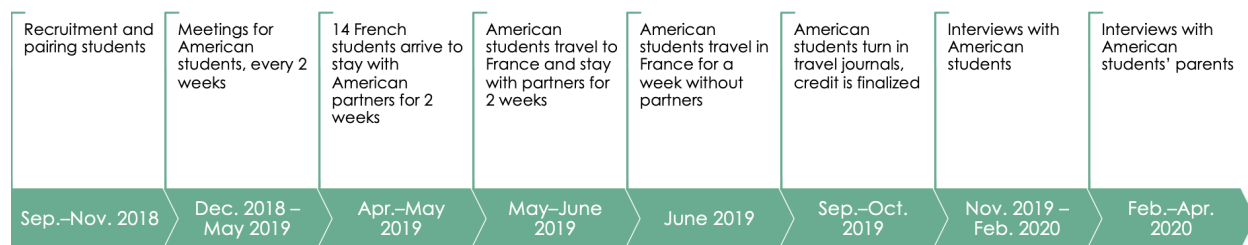
The hosting portion of the process began when the American students welcomed the French students upon their arrival in Anchorage in late April, the French students left in early May after a two-week visit. I have found that giving my less-traveled group the opportunity to host first can help to mitigate worries on both parental and student sides that exist due to a lack of knowledge of what to expect during the process. By hosting first, we are also able to establish some norms for types of activities and expected involvement from students, teachers, schools, and families. As a generalized observation, the American side tended to have stricter school rules and guidelines than the French communities, so hosting first can also establish a base-line that can aid with the transition between groups. During the year that my French/American exchange



was taking place, there were no other international trips for students at AHS planned. The only consistent opportunities at AHS have been the French trip and a similar option with the German program; the two languages rotate so that there is a trip scheduled every year. This current exchange took place during the 2018-2019 school year, meaning that the 2019-2020 school year was slated to be a travel year for the German program. By contrast, there were several international trips available to students at our French partner school in the same academic year as our exchange, including a six-week trip to Canada. This indicates a familiarity with international travel for students that the American families do not have, and, frankly, have not had an opportunity to develop.

Directly after the school year ended, the group of 14 Alaskan students and two AHS staff chaperones departed for their stay in France for three weeks. The chaperones included an administrator from the school and myself. A consistent expectation within my school district is that an administrator serves as a chaperone, if one is available. As teachers sponsoring the trip, we sometimes have a say in who joins the group and sometimes we are assigned a person to work with. There is no guarantee that this will even be someone from the same building or that this individual has any experience with international travel or with the target language. I have had experiences where the other chaperone made the process better and where they have made the experience worse for students, this is simply a district requirement that has to be met. In this particular instance, the school administrator, Brittany, was a kind person who looked out for students' needs, even if she didn't speak any French and did not have any impact on the exchange structure itself. Due to the language barrier, Brittany was very limited in how she could be involved with the exchange.

We attended school with our French partners for two weeks while residing in the homes of the French partners, students were with the same partner they had been getting to know throughout the process and I stayed in the home of Claire, my partner teacher counterpart at the French high school. American students shared cultural presentations in small groups of two to three students on topics they thought other high schoolers would be interested in. These presentations were in English, and topics included *Food and nutrition in the United States*, *School in America*, *Nature and climate in the North*, *Alaskan life and history*, and *Differences between Alaska and the lower 48*. After two weeks with our hosts, the American group left the host town and we continued to travel in France for another week. When we left the host partners, we traveled as a group of 16 Americans (students and chaperones) from southern France as our starting point and ultimately ended in Paris. Figure 5 illustrates the timeline of our exchange process.



**Figure 5**  
*Exchange Timeline*

**Teacher / Researcher role**

My role and positionality in this practitioner research study are important factors in this study. As both teacher and researcher, my roles shifted based on the needs of the situation. As a teacher, I strive to offer my students the best opportunities that I can for learning. I have developed connections with students and the community over the past several years at this school

and it is impossible to ignore the access that I have due to my role as a teacher who is closely tied to the community. I've been able to get to know almost all of the participating students for several years, making my view of them fairly nuanced because I have seen their growth and struggles in both their language studies and throughout their adolescent years. Navigating the teacher and researcher roles is a continual procedure because I have to acknowledge my personal beliefs and school expectations as they impact this entire process.

The teacher side of my role necessitates closeness and responsiveness to my students' needs. Meanwhile, the researcher side requires some degree of distance and clarity in structures for analyzing the process. Foundationally, this exchange exists because I value the opportunity it offers my students; the work and time involved to establish this program are not justifiable otherwise. This indicates my personal orientation toward valuing exchange and what I'm likely to anticipate from results. I also have the advantage of access to these students and these schools due to my role as the teacher organizing the SA process. There is a gap in research involving secondary students on exchange programs, and part of this gap appears to be due to a lack of researcher access to these groups of students or programs.

### **Personal motivations and beliefs**

I chose to establish this exchange due to my own personal beliefs that traveling where people can connect with a community different from their own can be positively impactful in how they view the world. I believe these opportunities allow a space for exploration and learning to see others as still being relatable to oneself, while still staying within the relative safety of a program designed to support students' growth. My students are in high school and will soon shift

into adulthood; they are at a point of transition in a variety of aspects in their lives. My hope is that this experience helps them in forming a view of the world that is nuanced enough to allow for humanization of others while embracing the differences between groups.

Intercultural involvement happened on multiple levels, rippling outward into each participant's sphere, starting with self, family, friends and contact communities, reverberating into the international contact zones. A desire to expand the impact of this process so that non-traveling students are still able to experience some degree of potential benefit is another factor in why I chose a reciprocal exchange. While there were only 14 students directly affected by travel; the impacts were felt by far more than just that group, due to the nature of this exchange. The Alaskan families of the students were actively involved in the intercultural growth through their role in hosting a French student for two weeks. Student's friend groups are also brought into the experience because their friend had a French exchange student they needed to invite along for their routine activities. Moreover, students not taking French classes were impacted when their teachers signed up to bring a group in for a cultural presentation by the visiting groups or when American students brought in their French partner to the class. Lastly, all of my non-participant French students were impacted because they had French teenagers in their classes with them, with whom they interacted during class daily during the two week visit. This dynamic expands some of the equity to the students who were unable to travel but are still able to develop some connections with French teenagers, both for cultural or linguistic impacts as well as with the development of intercultural competence . Expanding the impact of this exchange is important to me because my previous experiences traveling with students have had very limited community impact, as only traveling students were directly impacted and their families were minimally impacted as they had no interaction with any part of the experience beyond financial

supports. For programs where just a handful of students leave and then come home, without the community connections, the impact is fairly limited to just that group, which misses the potential gain that could be reasonably experienced by the immediate community in some capacity.

### **Introduction to the participants**

There were a total of 14 traveling American students, of which nine elected to participate in all phases of the study. While data was gathered from all nine of the participating American students, two cases (Reggy and Beatrice) were selected for close analysis. This decision was made in order to more fully develop individual experiences in-depth, leaving the remaining seven participants' data as reference in contextualizing the experience. First, brief profiles of the two chief participants, Reggy and Beatrice, then there will be a brief introductions of the male participants, followed by the female participants. Each case of the focal cases are presented in sequence with embedded analysis.

Reggy, a white male, was a Junior during the exchange year and was in French III. He had traveled to other American states, either with the school's band program or for vacation with family, but otherwise had fairly limited experience outside of the country. He had been born in England while his father was stationed there; his father retired from the military and returned to Alaska before Reggy was old enough to form clear memories of living overseas. He's gone through his entire public school career with the same group of friends. Reggy tends toward being the class clown and is comfortable being the center of attention. He sometimes struggles with text-based activities in class and tends to mask this by having a ready joke or directing the conversation into some type of outrageous philosophical or political question. He is an atheist

who readily shares his liberal-leaning views, something that makes him stand out in a heavily conservative, Christian community.

Beatrice, a white female, was also a Junior during the exchange year and in French II. Her mother is German and her father is American; her parents met while her father was stationed in Germany. Beatrice and her older sister were born in the United States and do not have memories of living in Germany. Her father is still on active duty, which has resulted in far more frequent moves and travel for Beatrice than many AHS students. She arrived at our high school as a Sophomore, so the exchange year was her second school year living in the community. Upon transferring to AHS, Beatrice decided to continue learning Spanish and started French. Her Junior year, she added German to her schedule while she continued with both Spanish and French. After the SA, She graduated high school having earned the Seal of Biliteracy in all three languages. Beatrice is a steady and kind individual, socially open and accepting. She quickly takes under her wing every transfer or exchange student she meets. She is more reserved about sharing her belief system with others and is rarely comfortable when she inadvertently lands herself in the center of attention within a group setting.

The remaining seven group members offer helpful perspectives, but who are not the two focal students, include three boys and four girls. Their input contributes to the overall understanding of the experience, though theirs is more of a supporting role for context than being explored in-depth. Below, I've provided a brief introduction to each SA participant in order to establish a sense of their backgrounds and the general makeup of our traveling group. As with the focal student, all names are pseudonyms, chosen by each individual, and each participant provided additional data for this study.

All of the participating students were from different French classes, so they had different degrees of skills based on the amount of time they had spent learning the language. The French level indicates the number of years that each participant had been working to learn French. Level one indicates a person is in their first year, while level three indicates the exchange year was that individual's third year of French learning. Worth noting, this does not automatically indicate strength of French skills, but does give some context for how much time in the French program each person has spent. Figure 6 (below) provides a brief overview of all nine students (with self-chosen pseudonyms) who chose to participate.

	Gender	Race	French class level	Age at time of travel
<b>Reggy*</b>	male	White	III	16
<b>Béatrice*</b>	female	White	II	17
<b>Shaggy</b>	male	White	II	17
<b>John</b>	male	White	II	17
<b>Patrick</b>	male	White and Alaska Native	II	16
<b>Luna</b>	female	White	I	15
<b>Emma</b>	female	White	II	16 (turned 17 during the trip)
<b>Beth</b>	female	White and Pacific Islander	II	16
<b>Sarah</b>	female	Asian and Alaska Native	II	17

**Figure 6**  
*Demographics of Nine Study Participants; focal students are marked with an asterisk*

Shaggy, a white male, was a Junior and student in French II. Prior to the exchange, he had aspirations of joining the military both to see the world and because he wanted to serve his country. He'd traveled out of state with family for vacation, but had not left North America. He

was consistently an active member in the Navy Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC) for every year of high school. He'd lived in the local area for his whole life. Shortly after graduating from high school, Shaggy went on to join the military.

John, a white male, was a Junior and student in French II. He was homeschooled all the way through his Sophomore year, when his parents put him in French, though he was still homeschooled for the rest of his classes. The exchange school year was his first year of being a full-time public school student. John is a gamer whose early questions about the trip indicated a desire to bring his gaming system with him across Europe. Ultimately, he brought a handheld gaming system after I explained our itinerary and how much he would be responsible for carrying his bags. He had spent his entire life in the immediate AHS community.

Patrick, a white and Alaska Native male, was a Sophomore in French II. His family has strong local ties and position in the community; Patrick had grown up surrounded by the same people. He's a quiet individual who tends to daydream and frequently had to be reminded about meeting points and scheduling; he was the first to be left behind at the metro when he didn't move quickly enough to get through the doors and stay with the group. He's very active and spent much of his time with his French host family biking around the area.

Luna, a white female, was a Freshman and in French I during our exchange. She's one of two French I students on the trip, and the only one who elected to participate in the study. Luna is painfully quiet and tends to seek out small groups of friends with whom she feels comfortable. She is a Harry Potter enthusiast and very focused on succeeding with the goals that she sets for herself. Luna worked hard to graduate high school at the end of her Junior year so that she could begin college early, her plan was to focus on a business-related major. She has spent her whole



life in the same general region of Alaska, though not in the immediate area surrounding AHS as some of the other students.

Beth, a white and Pacific Islander female, was a Sophomore in French II. She's goofy with her core group of friends, but tends toward seeing herself as being not as capable as her peers. She was the only student who highlighted her sexuality in her introduction letter to her host partner; she was the only openly lesbian member of our group. Beth has a big heart for family and friends. She'd been in Alaska for about four years and lived with her grandmother, two dogs, and three cats - all of whom she prioritized when highlighting her view and presentation of her family.

Emma, a white female, was a Junior in French II during the exchange. She was easily the least involved with the whole process out of all of the American students. This created some conflict as it extended to a perceived lack of interaction with her host partner. It is unclear from my perspective if this lack of participation was motivated by discomfort, shyness, or other mitigating factors. She also struggled to participate in her other classes that year, leading to the possibility that there could have been additional elements contributing to an overall disconnect with the school as a whole for that year. Emma has grown up in the community, she lives with both parents and two siblings. Due to her involvement with the group throughout the exchange process, I have the least substantial data related to Emma's experiences from which to extrapolate.

Sarah, an Asian and Alaska Native female, was a Junior in French II. She is an easygoing individual who seems adaptable to just about any situation. Her family moved across the district while she was in France, so she did not return to AHS in the fall. She's a smart girl with a bit of a

self-described “hippie vibe”. She lives with her mom and toddler-age sister. During the hosting portion of our exchange, her mom had just returned to school in order to earn a nursing degree. The change in schooling is a factor in the family’s need to move to be closer to work and university for Sarah’s mom. Sarah has grown up in Alaska, but had only lived in the community around AHS since Freshman year.

### **Partner teachers**

My partner teacher, Claire, a white female, is the French teacher of English as a foreign language with whom I worked to develop this exchange partnership. At the start of the exchange, she had worked at the partner school for three years, after working in the suburbs around Paris for several years. She and her husband both teach at the same school, though in different content areas. They met at the previous school where they worked. They have two children and chose this community in the French Alps and about from Lyon, to raise their family due to a perceived high quality of life. This includes highly rated schools, easy access to nature, and available housing.

When setting out to establish this exchange, I had applied through the French embassy to be paired with another school and Claire contacted me after finding my information at the *rectorat* in her area. A *rectorat* is a regional, governmental bureau overseeing schools for a given area in France. Claire and I had similar goals for what we hoped to achieve with this exchange, so collaboration between the two of us went relatively smoothly. The only areas that we ran into some tension over were related to differences in expectations or requirements between the two schools. For example, the French school system at the secondary level expects less involvement

from teachers or staff in the personal lives of students. By contrast, in the United States, teachers are often expected to get to know their students and support them socially and emotionally throughout their education. This is a general cultural difference in assumptions that resulted in Claire not understanding how much I needed to remain on call during the hosting portions or how much emotional support the American students needed throughout the process. To her, the Alaskan students seemed fairly needy, whereas to me, I saw the French students as being notably more independent. I believe this difference to have been a surprise to her, in part, because she had not spent extensive time with American high school students.

Lastly, I am the final participant who is directly involved in this experience. I am a white female and 2018 marked eight years of living in Alaska. The year of the exchange was my third year at Alyeska High School and this was my fifth international trip with secondary students. In creating this experience for my students, my goal was to establish something that could become a lasting tradition for my program, both to build enrollment and to create a real-world application for students to utilize their French language skills. As a world language teacher, I tend to be orientated toward valuing international experiences as rich learning opportunities for my students. I would not have spent as much time, effort, or money to create these opportunities for students if I did not believe in their potential value. My own experiences factor into my perspective, as I chose to study in France in two separate instances during my university coursework. Within the classroom, I cannot replicate the types of interactions that students might have when navigating the target culture. This includes both social interactions and the unknown realm of impromptu language-based interactions. My hope is that school-supported student travel has a positive impact on students' perspectives of the world and their role as part of an international community.

## Overview of Findings

There are functionally two separate threads of analysis to discuss in order to address the research questions guiding this study. The first thread relates to identity navigation throughout the exchange and the second is the impact of this experience on the development of participants' intercultural competence. The research questions are as follows:

1. *In what ways do a group of high school students present and/or position their self-defined social identities during the navigation of cultural differences before, during, and after the exchange?*
2. *How do these American high school students develop their intercultural competence within shared physical and digital academic spaces before, during, and after a cross-cultural exchange?*

I first explore the four main identity-related themes as they pertain to the two focal cases, Reggy and Beatrice. Next, I discuss and contrast the two cases within these four themes, making related connections from other participant students in the group as they apply. After this discussion, I move on to explore the impact on intercultural competence for the students involved in this study.

A case-focused approach has been selected in order to gain depth, detail, and understanding on two focal individuals. The first case follows the experiences of Reggy, a Junior in high school and student in French III. The second individual is Beatrice, also a Junior in high school but a student in French II. All of the names used throughout this study are pseudonyms. The American students chose their own names, while I assigned the French students and teacher

names that are different from their own and are based on popular French names from the past three decades.

## **Reggy**

I first met Reggy near the end of his final year of middle school because he was friends with some of my then Freshmen students, who were about a year older than him. He attended an after-school French-focused movie night as an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student and chose to join French, which he remained in for the duration of high school. Reggy described himself as being “funny” and enjoying “philosophical rampages”. He is a white, male, atheist individual who also tends toward social awareness with issues related to privilege and racism. Granted, he has a limited scope of external influences, having grown up in a fairly insular, homogeneous community. Sometimes taking on the role of class clown, his classroom contributions have ranged from striving to encourage discussions on social justice to seeming to be deeply perplexed by the difference in tipping customs in France versus the United States. He’s a generally positive individual who, prior to the exchange, I’d never seen to be at a loss for something to say to anyone. Reggy’s family has military ties, but they have lived in Alaska for as long as he can remember. He attended school with most of the same people from elementary through high school. He lived with his mother and father; he also has an older sister who lives with her husband, though still in the general geographic area.

Reggy’s French partner, Alexandre, is a far more quiet and reserved individual. His passions are in arts, music, and math. Where Reggy tends toward being louder and the class clown, Alexandre leans toward calm and contemplation. This partnership is an example of health

issues factoring into why these two students were matched together, rather than being exclusively based on individual interests or personality. Outside of required assignments, the two students did not actively communicate until Alexandre arrived in Alaska. While the two boys got along throughout the exchange process, they did not develop a close or lasting friendship, unlike some of the other partnerships within our exchange.

Reggy was one of the last students to turn in their application. When I asked him about why he was hesitating, because he'd been talking about wanting to travel through the school for the previous year. He expressed uncertainty; he was concerned about his French skills and this would also take him outside of his normal comfortable bubble. I remembered being surprised because this uncertainty seemed in such a stark contrast from the typically extroverted, curious, and bubbly personality that I had gotten to know for the previous several years. Throughout the exchange process, I came to understand that while Reggy is very confident and self-assured in his home contexts, he has had such limited experiences outside of his typical sphere that he seemed to struggle to adapt. My assumptions about him, based on my experiences with him within his school context, needed to be questioned so that I could better equip him effectively with the tools he'd need for this experience.

### *Practical challenges*

In his post-travel interview, Reggy talked extensively about a few things that impacted his day-to-day comfort. Specifically, he struggled with the lack of sleep that he got both while hosting and while in France. Reggy was one of the students who routinely had the most sleep at home, so shifting to match another student's lifestyle pushed his limits in this area. He also

struggled to find vegetarian options for food that also worked within his food allergy limitations, and maintained a degree of concern about accessing food throughout our time in France.

Reggy also focused on some specific physical or practical differences in home items between countries, namely differences in the toilets and light switches. During the post-travel interview, months after our return, Reggy spoke extensively about these two things noting that light switches, for example, “were bonkers.” The degree to which he dwelled on them seemed as though he could be referring to these concrete items to exemplify the general differences he found, but couldn’t quite put into words. The overall changes to Reggy’s normal routine seemed a source of stress. He went from highly predictable situations to experiences where he could not know what to anticipate. This tension led to him focusing on finding ways to meet his basic needs in ways that were the most familiar to him, over intentionally trying new things.

Reggy was aware of this tendency, and shared about an instance where he pushed himself to be uncomfortable for a little while in order to go to an event with his host partner. In an interview he shared: “even I was so tired one day and it was like Alexandre’s performance night and I was like, you know what? I’m gonna go. I’m gonna go. Even if I’m tired, it doesn’t matter. I’m gonna go. And I was glad I went, cause it was like the *Odyssey* and it was fun. And like it was worth it and like just to do those things.” This event was near the end of the two-week window where we were with our hosts in France, meaning that the two boys had already spent a fair amount of time together between the two weeks in Alaska and about a week and a half in France. It took Reggy until around this point to begin to express willingness to push himself outside of his normal routine.

The other instances where he began to slowly branch out, developing more comfort in the unknown included exploring our host town without the main group, something he described as “it was kind of scary, but it was also more fun than scary”. Considering that he has grown up in a community where he has always known where things are and what is expected of him, going off to find a new place for lunch with another American student was enough of an adventure to describe it as being “again nerve wracking, but in a good way”.

### *Connections and common ground*

Compared to other students in the exchange group, Reggy seemed to keep his partner at arm’s length. Prior to the French students’ arrival, Reggy and Alexandre had barely communicated. From Reggy’s perspective, he seemed unsure on how to approach his partner from a distance. When talking about meeting Alexandre for the first time, Reggy said in the post travel interview “I was horrified of meeting new people, just cuz I don’t like to show people how I’m feeling and my self-anxiety”. Reggy and Alexandre’s communication was limited to what was required through the exchange (introduction letters, Facebook posts, application paperwork) before travel and in the time between Alaska and France hosting. The biggest barrier for them, from Reggy’s perspective, “it was the language barrier! It wasn’t that he was like a new person. It was the language thing. I didn’t know how to talk to him”. Neither Reggy nor Alexandre were the strongest of language students, so adding the challenge of understanding each other to an individual’s social anxiety or the quiet overall demeanor from the other seemed to slow down their bonding more than it might otherwise have been.



From the outside, Reggy and Alexandre seemed to function reasonably. There was no obvious animosity and the two did have some hobbies in common that they could share. Namely, they did spend time playing instruments together (primarily guitar) and participating in the school theater or band groups. When talking about shared interests, Reggy said he learned that “Even if you get someone with like limited amount of shared interests, there are things that you can still bond over, like me and Alexandre [changed for anonymity]. Even if we didn't have a lot in common, we still had music in common”. In the post-travel interview, Reggy described the dynamic between Alexandre and himself as not being “close” and, in reference to their relationship, that “it was enough for me, it was enough for him”. In addition to the language challenge, Reggy seemed to keep the impermanence of the exchange in mind as a reason to guard some emotional distance from his partner. Considering the volume of military impact on the community where the American students have grown up, this inclination to refrain from developing deep friendships when there is an obvious expiration date, is something that I have seen before when individuals meet someone tied to the military and who will be leaving soon. A military tour in Alaska is generally either three or four years long. Military members can be granted an extension of another three or four years, but this is in no way guaranteed and does effectively put an expiration date on friendships for many people. Granted, I have not typically noticed students within the larger school community approaching exchange students at AHS with the intentional distance I’ve observed when the military is setting the expiration date, but it is a similarity worth noting.

Reggy referred to day-to-day activities while in France as being part of “mundane things”. There is one particular memory that he shared where he and his host family went for a picnic in the mountains. The immediate family was joined by his partner’s grandfather, described

by Reggy as “a kind man who was missing a finger”. What struck Reggy was the normality of this experience, that it was just a “normal day” that blended what the family routinely did with what preconceptions that Reggy had in his mind about what being in the French Alps would be like. Another time where Reggy noted a similar moment of peace and routine was when he and his partner met up with another pair of students (an American and French pairing through our exchange) for a picnic during a day when they didn’t have classes. Reggy continued to return to this idea of what he called “mundane” moments as points where he felt that he was experiencing life like it would be if that were home. Not to say that he glamorized the experience completely, rather he seemed to stress the normality or mundaneness as a way of underscoring the simplicity of life along with the similarity between his home environment and what he experienced in France.

### *Lessons learned*

Going into the exchange process, Reggy has never described himself as a strong French student. He enjoys contemplation and mulling over big-picture type problems, but doesn’t tend to enjoy the minutiae of detail-focused efforts. He’s talked about enjoying French class more because of the community and the cultural learnings, rather than due to linguistic structures or vocabulary. As an example in Reggy’s overall description of his learning and growth, he started with sharing that :

*Over the course of the year. I, again, it was just like picking up those little things. It was like my view on death changed. As far as, like, understanding language more, you learn just, just from being here. You're like, wait, that doesn't translate over. That doesn't make any sense. Words are dumb. It doesn't work. There's, it's flawed, but it's flawed and it's the best system and that's why it's beautiful. And just like language in general it's just one*

*of these crazy like, it really, it is all in translation and like different things mean far different things, depending on the language and like, wow. Bonkers. It was cool.*

Throughout this experience, Reggy noted personal growth related to two primary areas, that of his French skills and those that fit into the realm of intercultural competence.

Reggy described greater comfort with his French skills. Further, during the time traveling in France he started referring to *his* French skills, rather than through more distancing vocabulary. Some examples of distancing vocabulary include referring to ‘the French class’, talking about ‘using French’ or using grades as a singular measure of success. This shift is also echoed in what Benson et al. (2013) described as students in a SA experience seeing themselves as shifting from language ‘learners’ into language ‘users’ (p. 3). Reggy described his listening and speaking skills as improving, though he did not notice marked changes in his reading or writing. This matches what has been noted by other research into language acquisition and study abroad (Allen & Dupuy, 2013) that tends to see growth with listening and speaking skills over those that are more text-bound. Reggy shared that “even if you’re not running around a lot, the language thing is exhausting” in relation to the mental load that using another language can bring to the experience. Granted, without any externally, measurable way of gauging students’ language skill growth, his impression of his own growth may or may not be reflective of reality. I noted more apparent comfort with using spoken French in class, but generalized impressions are limited in their utility in evaluation.

The other areas where Reggy noticed growth tend to align more within the arena of intercultural competence. He noticed greater confidence in navigating unknown travel situations, most notably when he had to travel from Iceland to Alaska on his own due to a few itinerary and flight changes. Or, in his own words “ you gotta, you gotta, like, suspend your fear for a moment

and just go for it". Reggy was supposed to meet some of his own family in France and then continue traveling after the rest of the group had returned. Unfortunately, his family member had to cancel their tickets at the last minute, resulting in an abrupt adjustment to Reggy's flights. This meant that he went from France to Iceland with the rest of our group, but then had to head off on his own to the lower 48 American states before making his way home. While on that leg of his adventure, Reggy shared about the different people he met and the panic he felt while navigating the customs and passport control process.

Reggy said he felt more willing to talk to people along the way, even when they weren't in the same demographic groups that he is in. He talked to an older woman about travel, a middle-aged man about video gaming, and a couple of other individuals about Alaska summer tourism. This would seem to indicate a transference of intercultural competence-based skills as Reggy said he was more willing to talk to new people in a novel, and uncertain, situation. At the start of the exchange process, Reggy was unwilling to communicate with Alexandre without the requirements from classwork driving the interactions. This anxiety- or fear-based perspective is explored by Campbell and Walta (2015) as an element sometimes seen in the cultural adjustment period between ends of the DMIS spectrum. Upon his return flights to the United States, Reggy was willing to reach out and communicate with people who did not fit within his home bubble, seeming to indicate a shift toward a more intercultural mindset, as he humanized others that he might have previously ignored. This open-mindedness toward individuals from other backgrounds may indicate a shift toward an intercultural mindset. Even though these individuals are from backgrounds that share some similarities with Reggy, it seems a worthwhile trend to consider.

Reggy describes the importance of making wise decisions or prioritizing important experiences by saying that “travel is hard, scary, and difficult”. He sees the value in taking advantage of what you can, while not making the process more difficult on yourself. Beyond the travel aspect, Reggy struggled with not getting enough sleep and down time compared to his normal routine. When asked to give a bit of advice to share with a future exchange group he encouraged students to sleep when they can because “when Madame Ayers says you’ll be running all day, she means it”. Rooming with other students while we were traveling as an American group, after we left the host town, was also a point of adjustment for him, again in relation to down time. Other students did things like watch “videos without headphones” when he wanted to sleep or to enjoy a moment of quiet, sharing

*It happened over a long course of time though. So, so, so when we were in France, Patrick (American student) was on his phone without headphones. At night when we were in the first hostel, I just, I wasn't having it. So I just wanted to go to bed. But especially that first hostel, when we were so close together it was hard to do that. So I was up cuz he kept me up cuz they don't know how headphones work, neither him or Shaggy (American student). They learned by the time we got to the second hostel, but they didn't know how to use headphones properly.*

When I asked about that later, he described the frustration he felt and how it made him want to be more aware of how he was impacting others. The example he gave later was how he realized that he was being one of the loudest people on the train in France and changed his behavior to be more quiet, matching the people in the surrounding area. This awareness may indicate what Campbell and Walta (2015) describe as a recognition of other cultures and the behaviors that are tied to them. This would be an indication of shifting toward an intercultural mindset on the DMIS spectrum, which will be developed later in this chapter.

### *Establishing oneself / Identity claims*

In his initial letter, Reggy described himself saying “*j’aime parler avec philosophie*” [I like to talk with philosophy]. Reggy considers himself to be a thinker, this is a core aspect to how he sees himself within his world. He enjoys contemplation and is comfortable with talking through his thought process. My post-travel interview with Reggy was easily the longest out of all of my student interviews, lasting almost an hour and a half.

Reggy described the feelings of being overwhelmed, uncertain, and exhausted as being prohibitive to him being able to fully and immediately embrace the experience. He also noted in the interview that “my whole goal in life is to put smiles on people's faces, make people happy, give them laughs. But if I'm freaking out, I don't want them to feel bad about me”. He felt that he needed to be loud and make people laugh because that’s what people expect from him, that this is just part of his role within the group. This would tend to indicate that the superficial levels of high energy goofiness mask more personal navigation of change. Compared to other students, I see a bigger gap in how he presented himself in a group context when compared to how he wrote in his travel journal or what he shared during the interview. This difference is described by Benson et al. (2013) as the difference between the reflexive identity, or what people see as their ‘inner’ self, and the projected identity, or what they present to the world as their ‘outer’ self (p. 21).

Throughout the exchange process, Reggy focused outwardly on the American students he was friends with and comfort-based needs. Inwardly, he describes himself as learning a lot about French culture and coming to terms with how ‘normal’ he sees life compared to American life. Despite the gap between behavior in the large group setting compared to writing or individual conversations, Reggy did demonstrate a growing level of confidence in himself as someone who

can interact with different people or situations in different ways. He shared a growing sense of independence and of valuing the freedom to explore outside of the boundaries of his own comfort zone.

## **Beatrice**

Beatrice joined the French program in her Sophomore year of high school, transferring to Alyeska High School when her family moved to the area. She is the youngest of two children, with her older sister only two years older. I was able to have both students in my class, giving me a larger history with the family than through just one student. Beatrice moved frequently throughout her childhood; her father's job necessitated mobility. Her mother is German and Beatrice grew up learning bits of the language from her. Prior to her arrival at AHS, Beatrice had taken Spanish classes but not explored other languages academically. When she joined our school, she chose to continue with her Spanish classes and started French. During her Junior year, she also decided to start taking German classes. Beatrice graduated from high school with the Seal of Biliteracy in all three languages offered at the school: French, German, and Spanish.

Beatrice is quiet in large groups of people but outgoing and goofy within her own close friend group. She is very aware of what it is like to be the new person in the room, and actively goes out of her way to include new students. She describes herself as being "average" or "normal". She wanted to participate in the exchange program because she, and her family, wanted to welcome a partner student into their home. Where some students were focused on the travel portion as their primary interest, Beatrice was more focused on the relational aspect. This

approach was also reflected in her family's engagement with the process and the ways that they planned to intentionally include their host student.

Beatrice and her partner, Camille, were matched based on personality and interests. The two girls began communicating immediately after being matched in November and were easily one of the closest pairs of students by the end of the experience. They still continue to message each other via social media, albeit less frequently than they did during the exchange year. Beatrice's family also connected with Camille's throughout the process, so the families also gained a relationship with each other.

### *Practical challenges*

Generally, Beatrice didn't voice the same degree of noticeable points of uncertainty or tension that some of the other students mentioned. One of the initial big concerns that Beatrice had before Camille arrived was related to feeding her. While the students and families were actively communicating before travel, Camille tended to say that she didn't have any particular preferences for food options. During the two weeks of Camille's visit, Beatrice described the experience stating that the hard part "was feeding her [referring to Camille]. Wasn't hard, but finding out what she liked was hard. Like discovering that. 'Cause she wasn't really open to tell us exactly what she liked" This resulted in an awkward dance of guessing what Camille will eat before finding something. Beatrice ultimately found some things that would work for Camille saying "yogurt, we bought yogurt and she started eating it. So we bought more yogurt." For Beatrice, she said this process with Camille made her feel more comfortable telling her host



family what foods she liked because she didn't want them to feel the same uncertainty and she understood where they were coming from in their perspective.

The biggest points of practical difference that Beatrice noted were the activity levels and healthfulness of their foods. As she said, multiple times, the French students “walk *everywhere*” [italics added to highlight student's inflection]. She also expressed surprise about the amount of bread and whole or high carbohydrate foods she consumed while there, yet she still felt like she lost weight. Without fail, every student that I interviewed mentioned or highlighted how impressive the school lunches were compared to what is served in the school cafeteria at AHS. However, Beatrice went into further detail talking about how things didn't taste as sweet, but they still tasted good. She talked about going to the weekend market and getting strawberries, finding that “the strawberries taste like strawberries!”. In Alaska, produce quality can be a little questionable and the quality of the strawberries that she tried in France made her feel less satisfied with those found in the Alaskan stores. Similarly, she said that she hadn't consumed much bread since returning home because it doesn't taste “good”.

Another instance where Beatrice navigated some practical needs was when she needed medical care. Beatrice went to the lake with her host family and, when trying to get back into the paddleboat after swimming, she cut her finger. Her host family didn't think it was too bad and took her to the pharmacy for bandaging. The pharmacist said the cut was severe enough that it'd be better to go to the hospital for a couple of stitches. While Beatrice was a stronger French student compared to the others in the group, she was still not an advanced speaker. When navigating the process with her host family, she shared “when I cut my finger, there was a lot of words that I didn't understand. Um being in a hospital with not understanding any other things.

Pretty. Yeah. Interesting. Cause I was going solely off the facial expressions [of medical professionals and host family]”.

Beatrice’s dad is a nurse and she said that everything was familiar enough that she wasn’t scared, but that it was still a strange experience. She compared the hospital experience as “you just wait like regardless. And they [American hospitals] usually prioritize people who are worse, so we probably would’ve taken a lot longer in the hospital, whereas we were in and out in like an hour.” The part she was the most surprised at was how much the pharmacist tried to help because she doesn’t see that kind of involvement from a pharmacist in the United States over something like a cut finger. Considering the array of differences in job parameters between pharmacists in the United States compared to France, it would make sense that the French pharmacist was more involved in patient care than one would find in stateside. Her experiences with the medical system in France is something that most students have no reason to have experienced, so it is interesting to see the French system through the eyes of an individual who is visiting for a short period of time and whose assumptions on French medical care are measured in comparison to what is accessible for someone in the United States who has access to health insurance.

### *Connections and common ground*

Beatrice and Camille connected early on and still remain in contact. They are easily one of the closest pairings in the group. The two girls were excited about making connections with the other students; they seemed to have similar goals for what they would gain from the exchange partnership. While some students, Reggy for example, seemed to see the relationship

as having an expiration date, Beatrice and Camille seemed to meet each other without a countdown timer ticking in their minds.

Throughout the exchange process, Beatrice consistently mentioned Camille in making her plans. She and Camille clearly and intentionally made sure the other's needs were being met while hosting. This routine was so established and clear that if a French or American student was separated from their own partners during the school day or during an after school activity, they knew that these two would help to reconnect partners because they were in constant contact with each other and were connected to the students in their local community.

Beatrice mentioned that she and Camille had pre-travel conversations about topics ranging from what the other would like to do while visiting to daily routine expectations. The relationship element was consistently a priority for Beatrice and it was apparent in the care that she took with including her partner throughout the process. The girls' families also actively communicated with each other. Contrasting the commentary and outwardly perceived closeness between pairings, it would appear that embracing the relationship side of the exchange has a fairly notable impact on each student's experience. From Beatrice's perspective, one of the best parts of the exchange process was "Getting to know people like doing activities with other people". Throughout the experience, Beatrice consistently mentioned the relationship aspects as being the most important to her and this appeared to have also been the case for her partner, Camille. Bennett suggests that "intercultural communication is *difference-based* (2013, p.5) and awareness of cultural differences can allow people to shift in their responses to these differences in a way that allows for clear communication and understanding between groups. Beatrice and Camille worked toward understanding each other's perspectives along the way of figuring out

how to cohabitate. These efforts encouraged depth of interactions that may support both individuals in developing intercultural competence skills.

### *Lessons learned*

Beatrice noted a greater degree of comfort in French after the exchange. She said that her speaking and listening skills improved the most, but that she also noticed growth in writing and reading skills. Considering the amount of both oral- and text-based communication between her and her partner, this isn't a particularly large surprise. While the pair communicated more in English than in French, they did use both languages throughout the process. Both students were striving to improve their language skills; they would sometimes intentionally choose one language to practice during specific interactions. Beatrice tested for and earned the Seal of Biliteracy the spring after the exchange; she said that Camille helped her with her French practice beforehand so she was more confident going into the test. The Alaskan Seal of Biliteracy requires that students demonstrate an intermediate-mid level of proficiency on the ACFTL proficiency scale in a second language and is most often assessed using a standardized language assessment. Students English proficiency is measured in a few ways, options for meeting that requirement can be grades in English classes or scores on English language assessments.

The other part of the personal growth picture for Beatrice includes the confidence she sees as being impacted by the exchange process. At the end of the trip with the group, Beatrice continued on into Germany to meet family. The following fall, Beatrice and her family welcomed a student from Spain for the school year. Both of these are things that she said she

would not have been likely to elect to do before the exchange. That doesn't mean she wouldn't have been capable or willing, but she explained that they are things that wouldn't have otherwise been within her scope of realistic options. Bringing in another exchange student was directly because the two-week hosting portion of our exchange went well; Beatrice and her Alaskan family felt that the two-week hosting was too short a time so they wanted to open their home to another student. Beatrice and her own mom began actively seeking out a student to host for the following school year as soon as Camille left in May.

### *Establishing oneself / Identity claims*

Beatrice is someone that I would describe as being kind and steady. I have seen her go out of her way to help others more times than I can count. However, what she presents to the world differs a bit from how she sees herself. Granted, this is not a rare occurrence as there are many people who see themselves a bit differently than how the world sees them, it just seemed more of a pronounced difference than with some of the other students in the group. She and Reggy expressed the highest degrees of difference between how others see them and how they see themselves, again echoing ideas of the contrast between reflexive and projected identities, as described by Benson et al. (2013).

In her initial application to join the exchange, Beatrice described her self-identity using terms like “hardworking”, “friendly” and “shy at first”. Her introductory letter also was full of different things she wanted to share including likes, details about her background, family, and routine. Hers was one of the longer and more detailed of all of the student introductory letters. She described herself to her partner as being “timide au debut” [shy at first] and “je ne suis pas

très difficile” [I’m not very difficult]. She signed that first letter as “ton nouveau amie” [your new friend]. She did say she was nervous about meeting Camille, though in our final interview she said “I think it was irrational for me to think that I wouldn't get along with someone.”

Beatrice approached this SA experience with a clear social orientation around the relationships she hoped to develop. This orientation was sustained through with how she described her experiences; stories or memories generally involving at least one other person and often referred to small groups. Similarly to Reggy and many of the other students in the post-trip interviews, Beatrice expressed a higher degree of confidence when navigating unfamiliar situations in the time following the exchange, indicating that the exchange process aided her in developing more comfort in this skill set.

### **Remaining comparisons**

Some similar challenges seemed to echo throughout the remaining group members, all of the students mentioned feeling tired and most expressed some degree of feeling overwhelmed. While each student walked away from the experience with their own stories and impressions of the experience, the themes of practical challenges, finding common ground, lessons learned, and positioning oneself in the experience resonate through all of the participants’ perspectives. The biggest difference was connected to the relationship they developed with their host partner. We had some partnerships that went well, some that went badly, and some that weren’t really one or the other. For continuity, I list the American student and then their French partner below as I discuss these groupings.

Our least successful pairings were those between Beth (American) and Marie (French) and Emma (American) and Juliette (French). Luna (American) and Gabrielle (French) were also a less-than-ideal pairing, but they were somewhat less obvious in their separation from each other. In each of these pairings, a consistent theme was a lack of connection between students in developing a relationship with the other person. This could be indicative of a general lack of willingness to engage socially or from more broad personality conflicts, the reasoning is less clear.

Beth seemed to struggle the most with the host partner dynamic. She and her host partner were a good fit on paper, but in practice the two girls were like oil and water. They didn't actively argue throughout the exchange, but Beth is a quiet, somewhat nervous person and was struggling with the unknown. Her partner, Marie, spent more time with her own friends than with Beth, leaving Beth feeling alone and isolated. We had another student pairing that had a similar dynamic, but it was the American student, Emma, who largely did not interact with her French partner, Juliette.

It is not reasonable to expect students to immediately and automatically become the best of friends, but these two partnerships demonstrate pretty clearly the way a disconnect between pairs can impact the experience negatively. This lack of connection could be from a range of things, anything from a gap in expectations for the exchange, to prejudice based on stereotypes, to simply a difference in personality. The lack of involvement from one of the members in the partnership resulted in severely limiting the experiences of their counterparts. This is something that is hard to control during the exchange but is also worth exploring beforehand with students when selecting participants who are willing to be open and involved in the process. In particular, Beth's reaction to Marie's disinterest in developing a connection was to stay as close to the

American students as she could, essentially closing the window for interacting with the rest of the French student community. This seems to mirror what Santoro and Major (2012) said in relation to individuals who are pushed too far within a SA process and have a resulting opposite reaction that pushes them away from developing intercultural competence as this experience can hinder a “transformative experience” (p. 319) from being developed.

The other less than ideal pairing was between Luna and Gabrielle. Luna was unable to host her partner student in her home due to some constraints in the living situation of her family. As a result, while Gabrielle was in Alaska, she stayed with another student’s family. Gabrielle and this other student connected really well, but not as much with Luna. As a result of Luna being far less involved in the American hosting portion, there was a lot less familiarity for the students going into the French hosting portion. The two never quite clicked together as a partnership, but I really am unsure as to whether it was because of the distance that Luna had from the experience due to not hosting or if it was also because of a difference in personality. There was also a lot less willingness on the part of Luna’s family to be involved in this experience, this could be a factor additionally impacting the experience. This, again, underscores the high degree of impact that families can have on the experience for students, whether intended or not.

In the middle ground, Reggy (American) and Alexandre (French), John (American) and Hugo (French), and Sarah (American) and Chloé (French). For all of these groupings there seemed to be a solid degree of amiability between students. They seemed to enjoy each other’s company and appeared to be content in their interactions. Most of these students have remained friends on social media, but do not consistently interact beyond the surface level of digital communication. I would speculate that this type of grouping is likely to be a frequent finding



when grouping students and that most pairings will be in this area of middle ground, with a few pairs being more or less connected than this middle realm of relationship development.

The partnerships that seemed to have the biggest impact on the students with the most genuine and positive interactions are Beatrice (American) and Camille (French), Patrick (American) and Antoine (French), and Shaggy (American) and Louis (French). We have discussed the positive bonding of Beatrice and Camille previously (see Beatrice's case). The other two pairs will be highlighted below in relation to their partner dynamics.

Patrick and Antoine matched each other in temperament quite well, though not in specific interests. They had very different hobbies, but both enjoyed being physically active. They spent a lot of their time together, just the two of them, biking or hiking. Neither student appeared to feel a need to remain highly connected to the larger group, both seeming completely content with the other's company. By the end of the American visit in France, the two boys were mimicking each other even down to clothing. Part of what was interesting with this was that it wasn't a case of one student mimicking the other, they both wore things that the other tended to wear as a blending of styles. They weren't completely separate in fashion sense to start with, but it was noticeably more coordinated by the end of the exchange. I do not think they were aware of the degree to which they had started mirroring each other, but it is fairly striking in some of the group photos.

Shaggy and Louis are the last pair that seemed to mesh together really well. Shaggy's mom was particularly excited about the opportunity to host because she had a positive and memorable study abroad experience when she was a teenager. Early into the experience Shaggy positioned himself as being a central person for knowing all of the French students. He, like

Beatrice, became a contact person if anyone ever lost track of their partner, either while at the school or between group activities. Both Shaggy and Louis prioritized getting to know each other, investing the time before, during, and after the exchange to get to know each other. On paper, they were a reasonable match, though not outstanding, the differentiating factor appears to be how much they were both willing to invest in getting to know each other and establishing a solid friendship throughout the process. This appeared evident when, in the parent interview, Shaggy's mom described trying to coordinate plane tickets so they could bring Louis to the United States for Shaggy's boot camp graduation ceremony, something that occurred well over a year and a half after the exchange between the schools was completed.

### **Parental Investment**

One element that seems to have possibly made a marked difference in the success of this experience for the Alaskan students was how involved and supportive their parents were throughout the entire process. It is impossible to account for the influence that other students walk in with, but the three closest partnerships all had the most vocally welcoming families. These are families who took the time to talk to the visiting student's families and strived for a whole family connection throughout the experience. The bigger impact may be more apparent when looking at the opposite end of the family involvement spectrum where families, or perhaps more specifically parents, did not give an impression of wanting to be involved in this process at all. None of the pairings who had the least connection had families who were vocally and actively involved in welcoming the visiting students. It is important to factor in the family side of the experience, even though that is something that is incredibly difficult to actually impact from

the teacher's perspective. The parental role was not a primary point of focus when analyzing the context of this study, it only became apparent when analyzing the data afterwards.

### **Intercultural competence**

Examining the data while looking for indicators of where students are navigating on the DMIS spectrum provides the means for understanding for this experience and answering the research questions. Both of our focal students, Reggy and Beatrice, appeared to make some changes throughout the exchange process, though in somewhat different areas. On the DMIS spectrum (see Figure 7), Reggy seems to have been situated in the realm of *defense/reversal*, the last stage indicative of a monocultural mindset, at the start. By the end of the exchange, in the post-travel interview, he was showing signs of being in the *minimization* stage, the transitional mid-point of the DMIS spectrum, with possible indicators of *acceptance*. Beatrice appeared to start in the transitional point of the *minimization* stage and ended in the *acceptance* stage, a stage where individuals begin to accept cultural differences without a moral judgment attached, this is the earliest stage within an intercultural mindset. I analyze the stages in relation to participant's commentary below.

#### ***Reggy***

Early in the process, Reggy seemed to focus on the negative elements behind cultural differences in our pre-travel group meetings and in his pre-travel journal entries. This would indicate that Reggy began his journey for the exchange at a point where he was aware of some cultural differences, but that he tended to view his own cultural norms as superior. When we talked about things like daily routines, he called the later dinner time of many French families

“weird” and indicated concern saying he “couldn’t do that” because he’d be hungry earlier. This self-described impression of cultural superiority matches Campbell and Walta’s (2015) explanation of indicators of an ethnocentric or monocultural mindset. He positioned his normal life as fitting into what he described as “mundane things”, or what he tended to consider typical life. This intentional value evaluation of his normal being better than someone else’s normal is indicative of being in the *defense* (i.e., initial) stage of a Monocultural mindset (Bennett, 2004). The term ‘mundane things’ showed up several times in Reggy’s descriptions of things. Hammer et al. describe a tendency to see interactions as being “organized into “us”” and “them”, where one’s own culture is superior and other cultures are inferior” (2003, p. 424). Reggy tended to use that to describe normal life, though he did shift from referring to himself with that term into using it to include his host family later on, which may indicate early stages of acceptance as he began to accept that other people’s normal routines can also fall within his view of acceptable day-to-day behaviors.

When we initially arrived at the French school, Reggy wrote a blog post in the group travel blog where he said “in the classes you can’t even eat FREAKING FOOD AAH,” highlighting some of his struggle with adjusting to a different routine. In referencing his connection with his host student, he consistently referred to Alexandre as “my exchange partner,” which resulted in both maintaining distance between the two as well as keeping the focus more on himself. Over the course of the experience, I noticed more generalized awareness of others within our group (French and Americans) but the shift was fairly subtle. Reggy focused on things like the difference between light switches, rather than deeper cultural differences, but the tone was more in line with observing a difference that isn’t threatening him. Hammer et al. (2003) sees this as the type of shift where individuals are beginning to accept differences, while

minimizing gaps in similarity between oneself and others. As *minimization* is a transitional stage (see Figure 7), it holds elements of the Monocultural and Intercultural mindset markers. Hammer (2009) describes the importance of this transitional stage for individuals to shift away from a value-added view, or one that sees elements of one culture as being ‘better’ than another, while acknowledging the differences between the groups.

By the end of the time with the host families, Reggy had begun to refer to Alexandre by name more, while also referencing things they had in common, namely that they both mentioned being surprised by light switches in the other country, playing guitar together, and sharing knowledge of the play the *Odyssey*. This shift into greater humanization of his partner seems to indicate a degree of empathy development that would indicate early stages of the Intercultural mindset stage of *acceptance*. Other indicators of this shift toward *acceptance* is the way that Reggy detailed the normality of a picnic in the mountains with his host family or wandering around the host town with Alexandre. In the post-travel interview, Reggy described his impression of time and interactions with his partner, saying that “just different types of people enjoy different types of things” indicating that his acceptance of Alexandre’s differences and the two still enjoyed “mundane things” together.

### *Beatrice*

Beatrice was harder to pinpoint for her mindset for a couple of reasons. Firstly, she is more reserved by nature and far less likely to ramble about her experiences than some of the other students, like Reggy. Additionally, she walked into the experience with some of the broadest range of experiences because of the amount her family has moved with her dad’s job. Beatrice’s mom described her as someone “who has always been accepting of others.” Compared

to other students who have only really interacted with people within their own bubble, Beatrice has a comfort zone that appears to be built on a lot of adaptability. McGregor (2016) suggests that the internal mindset of a SA participant may be a strong indicator to their openness related to embracing the potentially transformative elements of an exchange. Beatrice seemed to walk into the process with a high degree of anticipation of a lasting connection with her partner and a desire to learn more about cultural differences. Before the start of the exchange, Beatrice seemed to be in the transitional *minimization* stage, though showing some elements of the *acceptance* stage.

The biggest concerns that Beatrice voiced before hosting was worrying about meeting her partner's needs and hoping that the two would get along. She seemed to make the assumptions that there would be cultural differences but didn't have specific ideas other than the topical range of food, routine, and media choices. When explaining her own personal goals, she said that she wanted "to learn more about the culture and improve my speaking." Overall, she gave the sense that she accepted the existence of cultural differences, but minimized the impact they would have on her or Camille. This leads me to the conclusion that she was showing indicators of the *minimization* stage. This seems to support Hammer et al. (2003) in the argument that in looking for commonalities, individuals "obscure deep cultural differences" (p. 425).

In the final interview, Beatrice described how this experience has impacted her own views and choices. The initial element that she mentioned was the value placed on quality foods and taking the time to appreciate meals. She said that she's tried to slow down the speed at which she eats meals and has started choosing foods that are more of what she describes as "high quality," typically foods that are lower in sugar or preservatives and higher in whole food ingredients. She noted that French people have "better food than Americans," however, this

statement was accompanied by the explanation that this value translates into many different areas, from smaller refrigerators to spending more time with preparing food. Beatrice said that while the French food quality was better, that it was the result of the cultural value put on fresh food, or quality over quantity, and that Americans value things like “fast and convenient” food options. This demonstrates a deeper understanding of some of the reasons for which people see food differently on a cultural level. While Beatrice did state that she found French food to be of high quality, her view on the underpinnings of this cultural value indicate a depth of understanding that is more in line with the *acceptance* stage of intercultural competence. Bennett (2017) notes that “*acceptance of cultural differences* does not mean agreement - cultural differences may be judged negatively - but the judgment is not ethnocentric” in that this determination “is not automatically based on a deviation from one’s own cultural position” (np).

Compared to other group members, Beatrice appeared to have had the smallest shifts but she also appeared to end the most solidly in the *acceptance* stage within the intercultural mindset end of the spectrum. The general leanings of the group demonstrated a trend toward the development of empathy toward their partners and, by extension, other students also navigating the language and cultural differences of the groups. It is very difficult to determine if this empathetic leaning would transfer into other situations. Were students empathetic to their partners because they had humanized each other as a by-product of this experience or would they have similar understanding toward others struggling to adapt to a new language or culture? Considering that Beatrice and her family promptly sought out another opportunity to host a student from another country in their home, I would be inclined to think that these shifts are transferable in Beatrice’s case. However, automatically assumed transference seems an unwise stance to take.

Empathy is an important component of the *adaptation* stage of an Intercultural mindset (Hammer, 2009). If this empathy is able to translate into a broader version of what Wang et al. (2003) called “ethnocultural empathy,” then students who undergo this sort of experience will be supported in making shifts into an increasingly Intercultural mindset as they move forward in their lives.



## Chapter 5 - Implications and discussion

### Discussion of the findings

My goal for this study was to increase understanding on how a short-term reciprocal exchange impacted secondary students. There is a gap in the literature, particularly in relation to secondary students, leaving room for this study to add to the academic understanding related to reciprocal exchange. As a teacher, my motivation sits a little closer to home as I would like to have as clear of an idea as possible of the potential impacts on my students so that I can set my students up for success during a reciprocal exchange in the future. Guiding my exploration of this experience are the following two research questions.

1. *In what ways do a group of high school students present and/or position their self-defined social identities during the navigation of cultural differences before, during, and after the exchange?*
2. *How do these American high school students develop their intercultural competence within shared physical and digital academic spaces before, during, and after a cross-cultural exchange?*

I gathered data from the fall of 2018 through the spring of 2020. This data took the form of student work, researcher observations, as well as student and parent interviews. I analyzed the qualitative data for this multiple case study in a variety of ways in order to best explore and address the research questions.

Out of the nine American students participating in this study, Reggy and Beatrice were selected for closer examination as focal students. These two focal students served as cases for

comparison. Data was gathered from each participant to include their work, interviews with students, interviews with parents, and researcher notes from group interactions. This reciprocal exchange lasted an academic year. During this time, American high school students were each paired with a French high school student and encouraged to interact throughout the fall of 2018 and winter of 2019. The American students hosted their French counterparts for two weeks in April and May of 2019. In May to June of 2019 the French students hosted their American partners for two weeks. The American students separated from the French partner students after this point and continued to travel in France for another week as a group.

Analysis for the first question, *In what ways do a group of high school students present and/or position their self-defined social identities during the navigation of cultural differences before, during, and after the exchange?*, followed an approach focused primarily on understanding how students chose to describe themselves throughout the process. By prioritizing *in vivo* coding, I was able to preserve students' voices in the initial round of coding before refining into four main categories within which the focal students tended to situate themselves and their experiences. Those four categories are *practical challenges, connections and common ground, lessons learned, and establishing oneself*.

While the two focal students, Reggy and Beatrice, were the central cases for analysis, the categories developed through their analysis were also used when analyzing the remaining seven participants. While data from the remaining participants were not analyzed as closely, it was apparent that these four categories still represented major trends within data across the group. Exploration throughout these categories helps with understanding the different ways in which students were impacted by this experience. Students voiced their general reactions to these

experiences as well as sharing about additional aspects that they felt were impacted by this process.

The navigation between reflexive identity and projected identity (Benson et al., 2013, p.17) is not always a visible process and can often present a gap between them, as individuals choose what to share in specific situations based on assumptions on expected behaviors. Some degree of this will have been impacted by my role as both their teacher and the researcher; I have known these students for several years but am also an authority figure in their lives, while also asking to understand their experiences beyond the normal student/teacher interactions with which they are accustomed. Benson et al. (2013) continue to suggest that, in relation to reflexive and projected identities, while there is “often a gap between, however, projected identity must be tied to reflexive” (p. 21). This indicates that while internal mechanics may differ from outward expression, projected identity can still be understood as being related to the inner workings of an individual. This is important to consider when leaning on how students describe themselves throughout this process as a means for making sense of their experiences. In a study with post-secondary students, Kishino (2019) likens SA to an “incubation period” while students grapple with identities tied to global citizenship, however, upon their return they appear to incorporate their experiences into becoming more globally aware individuals. The process may not be linear and clearly defined for each person, but internal negotiation may result in outward expressions of a view of themselves as situated in a global context and with increased cultural awareness.

While all participants experienced a range of emotions and shifts in perspectives, some smaller than others, there are some key elements that are worth discussing. Our two focal students, Reggy and Beatrice, had seemingly different expectations from the exchange experience. Reggy seemed to be curious about travel, but less invested in the host-partner

relationship element. While Beatrice very clearly prioritized this aspect from the start. This seems to have impacted their degree of openness toward the experience as well as influencing the areas where they found conflict. This would indicate that the assumptions and expectations that students bring with them are important in the way that students will experience SA. McGregor (2016) highlights the value that desire and imagination have on SA participants' experiences, particularly as they impact students' development of intercultural competences.

### *Practical challenges*

All of the participating students had some degree of practical challenges they experienced. For many, like Reggy, the struggles were related to basic needs or comforts that were missing by being away from home. I often have students join trips for whom this is their first international travel opportunity, so remembering the basic needs for sufficient sleep or some degree of familiarity with expectations is valuable. These elements sometimes seemed to be used to communicate bigger ideas that he couldn't quite put into words, as if the cultural differences he was grappling with could be summarized by talking about differences in light switches in the United States versus France. This us versus them dichotomy does appear to be an indication of Reggy's early placement on Bennett's (2017) DMIS spectrum within the *defense* stage as he tended to place value on his way being the 'right' way. Throughout the process, Reggy did continue to push himself to experience things that took him outside of the main American travel group, experiences he said were "kind of scary, but it was also more fun than scary".

Beatrice's practical challenges were more focused on taking care of her host partner, Camille, and making sure those needs were being met. From the start, the relationship element of

the SA exchange was an important focus for her. Later, when Beatrice needed to seek out medical care at a French hospital, she made comparisons that seemed to indicate awareness of difference rather than one culture doing things 'better'. Even though she did have a preference for which version she liked, she refrained from cultural judgments along the lines of one group being superior to the other.

Contrasting to Reggy and Beatrice's experiences is Beth, one of the other American participants. Beth struggled with her host partner, the discomfort she felt within that relationship pushed her away from a willingness to develop as many cultural connections within the local community. Beth functionally shifted to remain with the American group and distanced herself from the French students, supporting what Santoro and Major (2012) described as experiences that push individuals too far and lessen "transformative experiences" (p. 319) from taking place. This separation from her French partner was inadvertently supported by the American students' willingness to invite her along when they were engaging in extracurricular or family-based activities with their partners and she chose to stick with more familiarity when possible.

### *Connections and common ground*

For Reggy, the process toward developing a connection with his host partner was very slow. The two students did not communicate before hosting outside of the required interactions within the program. In discussions with the American group, Reggy continued to refer to Alexandre as his "French student" or "host partner" rather than using his name. It wasn't until the latter part of our time in France with the host families that Reggy began using Alexandre's name within the group. The two students also struggled with the language barrier, as neither was

the strongest with the other's language. By the end of the experience, Reggy shifted to include Alexandre in his descriptions of "mundane things", a term he used to describe routine, or normal, life indicating acceptance and "normality."

As Beatrice walked into the process with a clear idea of connecting with her host partner, she actively sought out communication from the start. Camille was similarly receptive to this goal, otherwise, the experience may have been very different. The two students, and their families, invested time in developing a connection between each other. Beatrice described the host-student relationship as being the best part of the experience.

### *Lessons learned*

Reggy and Beatrice both highlighted perceived growth related to their French language skills. Reggy shifted into referring to *his* French skills, indicating a degree of ownership he was developing in regard to the language. This shift is also echoed in what Benson et al. (2013) described as students in a SA experience seeing themselves as shifting from language 'learners' into language 'users' (p. 3).

Beatrice also indicated perceived language skill growth, but the bigger impact on her seems to have been a shift in her horizons. She described that she saw traveling alone as possible because of the confidence and skills she'd developed through our SA. More specifically, she said that she would have likely been capable of traveling alone, but she wouldn't have considered it a viable option without our group travel experiences. Additionally, Beatrice's family was impacted by the hosting process and sought out another hosting opportunity for the following school year

so that they could host for a longer period of time, something that Beatrice's mother said was a direct result of their experience hosting Camille for two weeks.

### *Establishing oneself / Identity claims*

Throughout the exchange process, Reggy focused outwardly on the American students he was friends with and comfort-based needs. Inwardly, he describes himself as learning a lot about French culture and coming to terms with how 'normal' he sees life compared to American life. Despite the gap between behavior in the large group setting compared to writing or individual conversations, Reggy did demonstrate a growing level of confidence in himself as someone who can interact with different people or situations in different ways. He shared a growing sense of independence and of valuing the freedom to explore outside of the boundaries of his own comfort zone.

Beatrice went into this experience with a clear orientation around valuing the relationships she hoped to develop. This carried through with how she described her experiences; most of the stories or memories she shared involved at least one other person and often referred to small groups. Similarly to Reggy and many of the other students, Beatrice expressed a higher degree of confidence when navigating unfamiliar situations in the time following the exchange, indicating that the exchange process aided her in developing more comfort in this skill set.

## Intercultural competence

In exploring the impact of the development of intercultural competence, the data analysis process was somewhat more focused as the analysis was centered was on the categories established through both Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and Hammer's (2009) Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Following Campbell and Walta's (2015) example of reconfiguring the IC models, I propose that for studies on incipient intercultural growth among adolescents on their first intercultural experience, that they also reconfigure the elements that emerge as most relevant while anchored in DCMI and IDI factors. Ultimately, a blended model of intercultural competence was utilized for understanding students' experiences, as seen in Figure 7.



**Figure 7**  
*Model of Intercultural Competence; a blend of the DMIS (Bennett, 1986) and IDI (Hammer, 2009)*

The five stages along the blended DMIS and IDI continuum are *denial*, *polarization / defense / reversal*, *minimization*, *acceptance*, and *adaptation* (Bennett, 2017 and Hammer, 2009). Within the *denial* stage, people tend to ignore the possibility of other cultures and have an unwillingness to consider outside of one's own reality. The *polarization / defense / reversal* stage is marked by marking one's own culture as being automatically superior than another, indicating there is a higher degree of value for one culture or another. The *reversal* stage has the same generalized concept, but is marked by seeing another culture as superior than one's own. The



*minimization* stage is very important as it has the role of being a point of transition between the ends of the spectrum. In this stage, individuals admit to differences, but minimize or ignore the impact that these differences may have on interactions. In the *acceptance* stage, individuals accept differences without the need to note which one is ‘better’, that element of superiority is no longer present. Finally, the *adaptation* stage brings shifts in behavior as individuals are aware of the impacts of their own behavior and modify their actions to better facilitate cross-cultural interactions. Important for consideration is that while many of the participants in this current study did indicate shifts toward more intercultural mindsets, that does not mean that they are completely at that point on the continuum. Bennett (2017) argues that if there appears to be shifting back and forth between ends of the continuum, it is an indication that the individual in question was not fully in the more intercultural end, he suggests that generally people in the stages of *acceptance* or *adaptation* do not shift over to the areas on the opposite end.

Ultimately, the data from the two focal students generally indicates a shift toward greater intercultural competence. Individuals seem to have reacted differently; it is arguable that the degree of change may be directly impacted by the degree of social bonding between students and their exchange partners. Considering the emphasis that this experience places on relationships between partners and their families, this seems important for consideration. Additionally, due to the nature of the connections between American and French students, whether they were individual pairings or interfamilies, it is hard to say with confidence that the empathy that I saw from some of the American students would truly be transferable to other groups or contexts.

## *Reggy*

Initially, Reggy's focus was more on his negative reactions related to areas of difference, such as a later time to have dinner, as "weird", with a strong indication that 'different' was an indication of being lesser. This sense of superiority matches Campbell and Walta's (2015) explanation of indicators of an ethnocentric or monocultural mindset. Reggy positioned his normal life as fitting into what he described as "mundane things," or what he tended to consider typical life. This intentional value evaluation of his 'normal' being better than someone else's 'normal' is indicative of being in the *defense* stage of a Monocultural mindset (Bennett, 2004). Hammer et al. describe the *defense* stage as having a tendency to see interactions as being "organized into "us"" and "them", where one's own culture is superior and other cultures are inferior" (2003, p. 424). Throughout the process, Reggy shifted from terminology to refer to himself or his life as 'normal', to become more inclusive of his host partner, which may indicate early stages of acceptance as he begins to include other people's normal routines to fall within his view of acceptable day-to-day behaviors.

Another notable element for Reggy was his focus on things like the difference between light switches, rather than deeper cultural differences. However, his tone in doing so was more in line with observing a difference rather than judging it. Hammer et al. (2003) sees this as the type of shift where individuals are moving toward accepting differences, while minimizing gaps between. As *minimization* is a transitional stage, it holds elements of the Monocultural and Intercultural mindset markers. Hammer (2009) describes the importance of this transitional stage for individuals to shift away from a purely value-added view, or one that sees elements of one culture as being 'better' than another, while also acknowledging the differences between the groups.

Toward the end of the hosting portion, Reggy had begun to refer to Alexandre by name more, while also highlighting things they had in common. This shift into greater humanization of his partner seems to indicate a degree of empathy development that would indicate early stages of the Intercultural mindset stage of *acceptance*. Another indicator of this shift toward *acceptance* is Reggy's description of a picnic with his host family. Reggy described his impression of time and interactions with his partner, saying that he noticed "just different types of people enjoy different types of things" indicating that his acceptance of Alexandre's differences and the two still enjoyed "mundane things" together.

### *Beatrice*

Beatrice entered into the experience with some of the broadest range of experiences due to her dad's job. Beatrice's mom described her as someone "who has always been accepting of others." McGregor (2016) suggests that the internal mindset of a SA participant may be a strong indicator to their openness related to embracing the potentially transformative elements of an exchange. Beatrice seemed to walk into the process with a high degree of anticipation of a lasting connection with her partner and a desire to learn more about cultural differences. Before the start of the exchange, Beatrice seemed to be in the transitional *minimization* stage, though showing some elements of the *acceptance* stage.

Beatrice's biggest initial concern before hosting related to meeting her partner's needs and hoping to become friends. She seemed to make the assumptions that there would be cultural differences but didn't have specific ideas other than the topical range of food, routine, and media choices. Early on, Beatrice said that she wanted "to learn more about the culture and improve my

speaking”. She gave the sense that she accepted the existence of cultural differences, but minimized the impact they would have on her or Camille. This leads me to the conclusion that she was showing indicators of the *minimization* stage. This seems to support Hammer et al. (2003) in the argument that in looking for commonalities, individuals “obscure deep cultural differences” (p. 425).

Beatrice described how this experience impacted her own views and choices. The initial element that she mentioned was the value placed on quality foods and taking the time to appreciate meals. She noted that French people have “better food than Americans”, however, this statement was accompanied by the explanation that this value translates into a lot of different areas, from smaller refrigerators to spending more time with preparing food. Beatrice said that while the French food quality was better, that it was the result of a cultural value and that Americans value things like “fast and convenient” food options. Her thoughts related to the underpinnings of this cultural value indicate a depth of understanding that is more in line with the *acceptance* stage of intercultural competence. Bennet (2017) notes that “*acceptance of cultural differences* does not mean agreement - cultural differences may be judged negatively - but the judgment is not ethnocentric” in that this determination “is not automatically based on a deviation from one’s own cultural position” (np).

Compared to Reggy, Beatrice appeared to be the more solidly in the *acceptance* stage within the Intercultural mindset end of the spectrum. The general leanings of the group demonstrated a trend toward the development of empathy toward their partners and, by extension, other students also navigating the language and cultural differences of the groups. Empathy is an important component of the *adaptation* stage of an Intercultural mindset (Hammer, 2009). If this empathy is able to translate into a broader version of what Wang et al.

(2003) called “ethnocultural empathy”, then students who undergo this sort of experience will be supported in making shifts into an increasingly Intercultural mindset so they can move into the next stages of their lives better equipped to be global citizens (Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin, 2017).

Bennett (2019) has faced criticism about the DMIS having insufficient nuance to truly make sense of individual’s navigation of the process, or rather that a spectrum that is generally thought to be relatively linear is inadequate for explaining responses to diverse contexts. His argument is that if people appear to go backward on the spectrum, that they weren’t truly in the stage that they were identified as being in (Bennett, 2019). Within this current study, I do not have confidence about the transferability of the intercultural competence that students demonstrated because I do not know to what degree their relationship with their host partners either impacted their mindset, carrying a transformative effect, or if they created an exception due to the humanizing of another person from another background. Additionally, that these students chose to participate in this exchange and that their families allowed them to join is also a potential indicator of the students general mindset or openness toward this type of experience. Ultimately, Reggy’s willingness to communicate with people while traveling, when he said he doesn’t typically do this, or Beatrice’s desire to host another exchange student seem to indicate that the changes they indicated might have a good carry enough weight to achieve transferability. However, these are both individual experiences and further research would be needed for more certainty.

### **Implications of the findings for stakeholders**

Teachers and administrators should take care in how they structure travel opportunities for students. These experiences are expensive, time consuming, and are often something to

which students have limited access. In addition to the more obvious travel-related costs such as airline tickets, food, or lodging, there are a number of additional resources which are needed but can be overlooked. Resources must be allocated for teachers to plan and orchestrate the trip.

What supports are needed can range and may involve substitute teacher coverage while teachers are working as a chaperone on the trip and any additional adults who are working to care for students who may also need additional coverage from substitutes. The school or district accounting office will likely need to be involved with the financial side, as international trips are not a routine occurrence in most districts. School or district level administrators will likely need to be involved with approving any trips, often with input from the school insurance provider. All of these people need to remain apprised of any local events or political concerns that may impact the safety of travelers. Fundraising impacts the overall school community too, along with accounting, administration, and teachers.

Some communities may need differing amounts of fundraising support in order for students to participate in travel opportunities. This is of particular concern when considering issues of equity. Students who come from low-income families are going to have less access to international travel opportunities than their middle or high-income peers. It's not practical for fundraising alone to be able to offset this disparity, and it is still arguably better to provide an impactful experience to some students rather than none. This, however, underscores the importance of integrating a bigger group of students into the experience when possible. The structure of the reciprocal exchange described in this current study shows a way that this can be done, as a large array of students were impacted by this experience through small-group presentations and hosting within each school. While this exchange certainly only highlights a

single approach, it does demonstrate a possible means for allowing students in the whole school to interact with the visiting students.

Teachers who hope to begin this type of exchange would be benefitted by reaching out to teachers who have already traveled internationally with students, if only to talk through practical issues they might face with someone they can ask questions of. This can be a colleague within a school district or through one of the many digital groups on social media. It is a daunting process to undertake, but one that I do believe has the potential to positively impact the whole school community. Worth also keeping in mind is that there are things that individual teachers will not be able to control. We cannot directly impact school district policies for student travel, the belief systems of all of the people involved, what administrators choose to require, or what internal motivations students start the process with. We can work toward developing empathy by normalizing “different” as simply being different, rather than lesser. We can educate students and families during informational meetings in order to mitigate fears on basic needs so that people can focus on relationship building and language learning. More than anything, we can create the opportunity so that adolescents have the opportunity to be impacted by this experience when they are at such a pivotal point in their development.

### **Reflective journals for student travel**

The prompts that I provided the students in this study were functionally those that I had established throughout the previous several international trips that I had led with students. Considering the impacts on intercultural competence growth throughout the trip, the ways in which students described their experiences, represent some shifts that would support future exploration into reflection and intercultural competence development during secondary student

travel. Whether due to the academic context of the exchange, or an adolescent trend toward expressing themselves through tangible examples in their reflections, some additional steps would be beneficial.

In the initial pre-travel reflections (see Appendix B), I prompted students to consider what they had been discussing with their partners and look for commonalities or differences. Otherwise, the pre-travel reflections that students completed on their own were very open-ended. This was beneficial as it allowed for them to have ample space to reflect without externally impacting their thinking too much. However, this also led to a more broad array of topics that did not capture ways that aspects of IC growth might have been address. The topics were more difficult to evaluate along the DMIS or IDI continuum. Thus, I would suggest adding an element whereby students are discussing their own lives with more detail. Encouraging them to reflect on their own habits, to better understand why their own culture does the things that it does, may aid students in making deeper comparisons when they reach the point of face-to-face interactions with their host partner. Considering the areas that appeared to be points of tension or concern for participants in this study, I suggest in-depth reflections on students' own cultural norms around the topics of food (types and mealtimes), personal free-time or hobby choices, family interactions or engagement with family, and classroom norms or expectations related to student engagement and behavior. These are fairly large categories for discussion; reflecting on the reasoning behind the way people within one's own culture accept or normalize certain elements, can lead to understanding the assumptions within these areas, thus supporting students in establishing a base from which to compare and understand another culture.

The questions related to student travel embedded in the travel booklet that students completed while traveling in France could be improved by more focused reflection questions that



explore the reasons behind the cultural observations students are making. This will likely lead to some degree of speculation thereby opening students' minds to possible ways they might value differences, even when students do not have the background to understand why people from another culture do the things they do. However, encouraging students to look for reasons behind the differences they observe seems likely to support the development of intercultural competence as they will need to be actively noticing and engaged in exploring behaviors or communicating with others about these areas. Ideally, it would be beneficial to spread out reflections throughout the travel timeline as this would not only aid in understanding the shifts in students' views, but also would help students to continually return to the idea of cultural interactions throughout the process. One difficulty of a booklet that students keep with them while traveling is that often students will complete their homework at a time that is convenient to them, but that does not actually space out the points of reflection. Beth serves as an example of a student who completed most of her booklet on the return flight, making the in-the-moment observations a little more hazy. That doesn't invalidate her reflections, but does limit the understanding of the types of experiences that caused the most concerns or questions for her. To combat this issue, it may be wise for travel leaders to gather some of these reflections throughout the process as this will encourage students to reflect in a more timely fashion.

### **Limitations**

The biggest single limitation for this study relates to the expanse of its reach, as it is only composed of a single group from Alaska and their partnership with a singular school in France. Furthermore, in choosing two focal students for deeper exploration, the scope is additionally narrowed to highlight the experiences of a couple of individuals. The participants in this

exchange noted personal growth, but our study does not allow for understanding the long-term impacts on students or their families. The value in the data is in gaining understanding of a small group of participants, something that would not be feasible with a larger group.

Overall, students in this exchange indicated they had largely positive experiences and mostly favorable things to share. This does not mean that this will be true for every participant nor for every pairing of students. It was certainly not true of all participants in this exchange. There are a wealth of variables that impact the experience of each individual and those include cultural differences, assumptions, language competency levels, family dynamics (and each member's assumptions), individual belief systems, or even socio-economic factors that impact what might be viable options for participants to do as activities with their host families. With adolescent students, the role of the family and community really cannot be overlooked as this influence is likely to have a greater impact than on students who have moved away from home and are no longer reliant upon their parents for basic needs. All of these variables make it unlikely that the perspectives of a singular student, or even a single group of students, would be identically experienced on a larger scale. That is not to say that they would be entirely dissimilar, but it does put into perspective how a shift in factors that are outside of the teacher or schools' control might impact how an exchange impacts students development of intercultural competence.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Student-focused travel exists at a variety of levels in education with a broad variety of options to include different areas of focus, geographic locations, and amounts of time. Short-term travel opportunities remain popular choices with secondary and post-secondary students within

the United States (Institute of International Education, 2019, np). While most research focuses on the post-secondary experience, further research is still needed for better understanding related to the impacts of travel on secondary students.

Considering the high degree of influence that families play on how an exchange is undertaken, it would be valuable for future research to explore this impact. This could result in improving how students are supported by parents during an exchange, both at home and at school, as this is an opportunity so rife with novelty and room for socioemotional growth along with the development of intercultural competences. Understanding dynamics between how the cultural spaces of family, community, and school impact one another is likely to aid teachers in planning the exchange and in preparing their students for success in this type of experience. In this current study, the family impact was initially intended to be merely a supplement to understanding students' experiences. However, when considering the types of experiences that students described within this current study and when comparing the familial influence on those experiences, it seems there is a good deal of room for research that explores this impact, particularly as this is an area that appears not to have been developed in previous studies on SA.

In addition to the impact of community influences, further research could be conducted into the different types of experiences and how those impact secondary students. This group is under explored and it is difficult to parse out the types of student travel opportunities for their specific impacts. Easily the most commonly found format for secondary students who travel is through a travel company rather than those led by secondary educators who intimately know their students and make most of the arrangements themselves. Travel company trips blend tourism with cultural exploration, though some companies lean heavily on topical experiences over deeper cultural understanding. Simply popping a child into another country for a week of

sightseeing and food consumption is unlikely to have the same impact that staying with a host family might have. Other factors, such as pre-travel meetings to prepare students or being partnered with a host student also are likely to carry some degree of influence on how students react to the process. This is another area that could be better explored in the future.

There appears to be far more generally accepted norms or beliefs related to student travel than research-supported decisions. In preparing my students, I leaned heavily on my earlier experiences traveling internationally with students, seeing pre-travel meetings as a way to both build a travel community and to walk students through reflections that aid in the development of intercultural competence. In these meetings, we cover areas that I have seen to be points of concern for students and tend to include differences in culture that touch closely to the personal contact zone, for example, meal times, school schedules, bathrooms, laundry, grocery shopping, or even assumptions around greetings and affection. These aspects are generally not addressed in commercial group travel, as their target audiences come from a wide array of backgrounds to include ages, types of content areas, different personally-held travel goals, or even different countries since the largest international student travel companies operate out of several countries. There are also general safety guidelines that we cover which include avoiding pickpockets and navigating public transit. The cultural differences we cover within these meetings are where I strive to develop reflection for comparison. Benson et al. (2013) suggests that knowing one's own culture is a starting point for understanding others, which means that students need some kind of foundation for understanding typical norms in another culture compared to their own. This is supported in research related to the value of reflection in regard to supporting transformation (Mezirow, 1997), but how reflection looks in practice can vary wildly depending on the individual structuring the efforts along with the responses of the group with whom they

are working. Additionally, this does not mean that reflection related to student travel is a broadly accepted or even an expected step in the process. Better understanding could be developed for teachers looking to make judicious decisions for where they place emphasis when preparing students for travel.

As a world language teacher, one of the important elements in my mind will always be the impact on students' skills in the target language. This study was a starting point for understanding short-term SA, but I was not able to effectively evaluate students' changes in target language capabilities due to how I designed the study. This is an area that could be reasonably explored in the future. There is research into SA and second language learning, though, again, the focus on secondary students is somewhat lacking. Future research could develop this area for closer study in order to better understand the impact that this experience has on students.

## **Conclusion**

Research into short-term study abroad programs for secondary school students is limited. As a teacher, I often need to prioritize where I expend energy in favor of the most efficient uses of time. When I began the process of creating this exchange, I anticipated positive outcomes from my students and the impacts of this experience on their world views. To some degree, that's what I found. However, there are some exceptions that I wasn't anticipating related to the impact of the unspoken expectations that students and their families have for this experience. The lack of development between some partnerships' relationships and the less-involved families are both areas that had a marked impact on students' outcomes. This indicates potential for future

research, though these are variables that may or may not be able to be directly impacted by someone organizing an exchange with secondary students.

Planning a trip can already be an overwhelming task that requires notable effort and resources from all who are involved in the process. Research that supports being able to structure a trip, where time and energy are effectively expended, in ways that best support student growth would be incredibly valuable for myself and the numerous other teachers who are also looking to establish opportunities for their own students. This study was narrow in scope, but aided in understanding the impact of some of the elements that teachers can influence related to students' experiences. This study also highlighted several limitations where future research could be developed. Some of those limitations indicated the boundaries of where teachers have the ability to impact the experience and where community expectations drive the process. This last element was not one I had anticipated when starting this process, but it became clear while talking to parents and students that it is an area that should be accounted for when planning an exchange for secondary students, as adolescents are likely to still be highly impacted by their immediate community.

The participants in this study noted shifts in their outlook and perceived growth in their target language skills. As a teacher, this is a good thing to hear. However, perceived growth does not automatically translate to realized achievement. Without language skill assessments, specifically to compare the traveling participants with the averages from students who did not travel, it is not possible for me to make any real claims about the impact on students' second language skill development.

This study also indicates that the reciprocal dynamic of this exchange allows for students to develop connections with others in a way that may support the development of empathy. This

seems to highlight the overall value in these types of opportunities for students during their high school years. Additionally, understanding of these changes can offer insight for administrators and teachers who are considering whether a student travel option might be beneficial to the community and whether the potential benefit of this opportunity matches the cost in both school personal resources.

There are a wealth of aspects to consider when planning a student travel opportunity. Teachers are often left to their own devices when trying to make the best use of limited resources, both tangible and intangible. This study provides some insight into elements that merit further consideration when planning a trip. It is easy to claim that student travel is universally beneficial, and many student-travel companies seem to operate under that assumption. Research is not sufficiently developed to support that particular assumed belief at this point in time. However, Reggy and Beatrice's experiences seem to support the possibility that a reciprocal exchange, one where students are supported in making connections with others in the target culture and where they are encouraged to reflect along the process, may lead to students making growth in their intercultural competence. Their experiences offer insight into the diverse ways in which a highly involved travel process can impact students. While further research is often needed to speculate on future endeavors, this study offers insight into how a reciprocal exchange could impact students' intercultural growth as guided by two models of intercultural competence and allows members of a school community a starting point in approaching the establishment of an exchange along with a degree of understanding in how this experience may impact students as they navigate the process.

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## Appendices

### **Appendix A:** Sample questions for semi-structured interview

1. What were the most exciting things that you saw/experienced on the exchange?
  - a. While the students were visiting?
  - b. While you were in France?
2. What was the most difficult part of the exchange for you?
  - a. In the US...
  - b. While living with the host family...
  - c. While traveling afterward...
3. How do you feel about the relationship you started with your French partner?
  - a. How do you think they would describe you?
  - b. How would you describe them?
4. What were the biggest cultural differences or similarities that you noticed?
  - a. How was reality different or the same from what you imagined?
5. How do you feel you changed over the year?
  - a. What did you expect when you signed up?
  - b. How does that compare to the actual experience?

6. What advice would you give to students in future groups?

**Sample questions for the semi-structured parent interview**

1. In the time leading up to the exchange, what did you notice about your son/daughter's attitude toward travel?

a. While they were gone?

b. Once they were home?

2. What concerns or excitement was in your mind before the exchange?

a. During?

b. After?

3. How has your son/daughter's understanding of culture changed?

4. What did you expect to see change in your son/daughter's confidence?

a. How did this compare to reality?

5. What surprised you about the experience?

a. Before

b. During

c. After

**Appendix B:** Sample reflective journal prompt

These were completed monthly prior to traveling to France

What have you and your partner discussed over the past month?

What were the areas of commonality or difference between your perspectives on the topic?

Pick something that you've noticed that you think is a cultural difference between you and your partner (habit, reaction, preference, etc). Why do you think this difference exists? How do you think it will impact your visit? Cultural differences may not be good or bad, try to explore the differences without judging them. You can treat this as a free-write or you can respond directly to the topic. However, plan to write a couple of paragraphs.

What are the questions about the exchange (the French visit or your own trip) that have been in your mind lately?

What are you feeling most excited for with the trip?

What is one goal you are working on for the exchange? How are you working on that?

**Appendix C:** Sample Discussion Prompt for digital discussion

What do meals look like in your family? Do you share meals together or eat alone? What times do you normally have your meals?

Respond in English or French and compare your habits with your partner.

Comment sont les repas en famille ? Est-ce que vous les prenez ensemble ou tout seul ? A quelle heure est-ce que vous prenez vos repas normalement ?

Répondez en français ou anglais et comparez vos habitudes avec votre partenaire.

## **Appendix D:** Study explanation given to American families

Dear Parents, Guardians, and Students,

During the exchange between **Alyeska High School (edit for anonymity)** and the **French high school (edit for anonymity)** I hope to conduct research into how this process impacts students. There's an explanation below of what all this will involve for students and their families but first I want to stress that this is entirely optional. No one is required to participate and I will not know who is even involved until after the exchange is completed. As I mentioned during the initial informational night, I hope to follow the exchange as data-gathering for my doctoral dissertation as well as so that I can bring what I learn back to my classroom for both future students and for students who are unable to travel.

Before getting to the details, I have a couple of things I would like you to keep in mind:

- This study is voluntary;
- This study has been approved by the ethics board of my university (Indiana University);
- All student data will be stored under password protection;
- All students' names and identifiable information will be replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity; and
- You are always welcome to ask questions or voice concerns.

After reading through and discussing the explanation below, I will give you a consent form. Parents/Guardians AND Students need to sign in order to be part of the study. After this point, please turn in the forms to \_\_\_\_\_ **(one of our principals)** *even if you have decided not to sign*. This way, I can know if we're missing forms from someone and will follow up with the family to clarify if needed. \_\_\_\_\_ **(one of our principals)** will hold onto all consent (both signed and blank) until after the end of the exchange.

### ***Explanation of the study***

#### **The guiding research questions for this study are:**

- How do students position their identities within a shared space before, during, and after an exchange?
- What literacies are highlighted between students through their interactions?
- In what ways do identities and chosen literacies affect the navigation of cultural differences?

#### **Data-gathering**

This study takes place over the course of the 2018-19 school year. French and American students will be given discussion topics every 2-3 weeks to discuss online in a password

protected website or through a password protected app. No one outside of our group (French/American students and their teachers) will have access to these discussions. American students will also complete monthly reflection journals from the time they are paired until we leave. During the trip, American students will have daily reflective journal prompts. All of these requirements are exactly the same for the study and for those who are not part of the study. The only difference for students who are participating is that they will be asked to do an interview with me at the very end of the exchange, after everything is turned in and the grade has been turned in for their Credit by Choice. The interview will be so that I can gain their perspective at the end of how the process worked for them. I'll also use that time to check in on things that I noticed, so that misunderstandings can be clarified by the student.

The points of data are:

- Student chats on the assigned topics;
- Classwork from before and during travel;
- My notes and observations; and
- A final interview with each participating student and parents.

### **Goals for Research**

I hope to better understand how this experience (travel and working with a partner student) impacts students. Additionally, I hope to be able to bring back what I learn following



students' experiences to my classroom, for both future students and those who aren't able to travel. That said, it is very important to me that I do not make students or families feel uncomfortable or unsure of the process so I ask you to be frank with voicing your questions or concerns.

Thank you for your time,

Nicole Ayers

## CURRICULUM VITAE

**J. Nicole Ayers**

### Education

- 2024** **Indiana University, Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction**
- Major in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education
  - Minor in Instructional Systems Technology
  - Dissertation: *Developing intercultural competence: A case-study of secondary students' study abroad experiences*
- 2013** **University of Alaska, M.A. in Teaching**
- 2012** **University of Alaska, B.A. in French Language**

### Key Experience

- 2022-Current** Bartlett H.S., World Language Department Chair
- 2021-Current** Bartlett H.S., French and English Teacher
- 2015-2021** Chugiak H.S., French and English Teacher Cyber Center Coordinator
- 2014-2017** University of Alaska, Adjunct French Instructor
- 2013-2015** Goldenview M.S., French Teacher

### Publications

- 2019** Ayers, N., Fields, A., and Koehler, M. (2019). Narrative analysis. In B. L. Samuelson, J. M. Frye, S. Hare & M. Covington (Eds.), *Short guides in education research methodologies* (pp. 81-90). Retrieved from <https://iu.pressbooks.pub/lcle700resguides/chapter/narrative-analysis/>

### Awards

- 2020** **Teacher of Excellence**  
Eagle River and Chugiak Chamber of Commerce

### Conference presentations

- 2020** **Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages**  
Spring conference (conference impacted by COVID-19)  
*Short-term high school exchanges and the impact on student identity*
- 2019** **Alaskans for Language Acquisition**  
Fall conference  
*Taking the leap with student travel*
- 2018** **Alaskans for Language Acquisition**  
Fall conference  
*Manie Musicale: A World Language song competition*