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# Building Resilience Through Strengths-Based Learning During Graduate Study Abroad: An Exploratory Study

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Resilience has been identified as an essential skill for leaders (Basso, Gruendel, Key, MacBlaine, & Reynolds, 2015) and as crucial for navigating both school and life challenges (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Research indicates that there are a variety of ways to build resilience, including in educational settings (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Higher education institutions utilize pedagogical practices to maximize student learning and growth opportunities (Rennick, 2015). One pedagogical frame often employed is experiential education. College and university faculty have embedded experiential learning pedagogy in the curriculum to facilitate learning outside the classroom (Liang, Caton, & Hill, 2015; Jordan, Gagnon, Anderson, & Pilcher, 2018; Towers & Loyness, 2018). Additionally, experiential education principles have been integrated with study abroad curriculum to support student learning (Harper, 2018; Pipitone and Raghaven, 2017; Pipitone, 2018).

Educators are interested in learning more about the potential effect of strengths-based initiatives in higher education (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). While scholars have reported on the benefits of utilizing a strengths-based curriculum for personal development (Passerilli, Hall, & Anderson, 2010), much work is still needed to explore the potential outcomes of strengths-based education on resilience development. This research sought to address the gap in the literature using a short-term graduate study abroad program embedded with experiential education practices to examine how the pedagogy design contributed to students' perceived growth in resilience. The strengths-based curricular design included approximately sixty hours of strengths-based instruction prior to the trip and fourteen days of applying the common strengths language to enhance learning experiences and mitigate challenges.

**Review of Literature**

**Short-Term Study Abroad**

During the 2017/2018 school year, 332,727 U.S. students studied abroad for academic

credit, which is an increase of 2.3% from the previous year (Institute of International Education,

2018). Short-term study abroad experiences, defined as eight weeks or less, prevail in popularity

with U.S. college students over longer-term study abroad programs (Institute of International

Education, 2018). The short-term programs appeal to working adult students because of

affordability, less time commitment, and the ability to participate without falling behind in

degree programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009).

Research indicates that graduate students experience significant learning and growth

during short-term study abroad courses (Fine & McNamara, 2011). Graduate study abroad

programs increase levels of cultural awareness and sensitivity (Jung & Caffarella, 2010; Peppas,

2005) and the immersive experience promotes transformative changes with intercultural

understandings (Orndorff, 1998). Peppas (2005) suggests graduate, short-term study abroad

programs give non-traditional students the opportunity to experience the benefits of international

academic travel. Fine & McNamara (2011) argue students who participate in a short-term study

abroad program develop reflection and critical thinking skills, confidence in meeting challenges,

and the ability to question previously held beliefs.

**Experiential Education**

Witkowski and Mendez (2018) found that graduate students benefit academically and

professionally from short-term study abroad experiences grounded in experiential education. The

widespread development and use of experiential learning theory led to experiential education

practice, which is a philosophy delineated by the Association for Experiential Education (n.d.) as a process "in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities" (para. 2). Widely accepted principles of experiential learning used in experiential education practices typically include opportunities for learners to take initiative, learn from mistakes and successes, and engage in reflection, critical analysis, questioning, and experimentation (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.). Seaman, Brown, and Quay (2017) argue that experiential learning has evolved into two different traditions, psychometric and sociohistorical. While the two traditions are contrasting, they both "share a concern with the psychological and social dimensions of learning in/from experience" (p. 13). Experiential education can manifest in a variety of ways, including study abroad (Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018), internships, and community service, and has been linked to increased academic performance and development of transferrable skills, including communication and social skills (Fede, Gorman, & Cimini, 2018).

**Resilience**

Northouse (2016) explains the term resilience as a leader's ability to manage, adjust, and overcome challenges. Seery (2011) suggests that resilience in the face of adversity is necessary for navigating life events. Researchers also recognize the need for resilience in the business enterprise (Böggemann & Both, 2014), within adolescent development (Park & Peterson, 2006), in education (Berg & Pietrasz, 2017), and in leadership (Jackson & Daly, 2011; Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007; Ovans, 2015). Resilience is a necessary trait of leaders (Jackson & Daly, 2011) developed from emotional intelligence (Schneider, Lyons, & Khazon, 2013), a component

of leadership development (Sadri, 2012). Le et al. (2018) explain that resilience is an essential

construct in knowledge sharing and transformational leadership.

Leaders need to be resilient to navigate the challenges facing their organizations (Basso

et al., 2015). Resilient leaders model positive, reflexive, and altruistic behaviors to help

organizations adapt and respond to continuous change (Jackson & Daly, 2011). There are

multiple approaches to help individuals build resiliency which include engaging in physical

activity (Vatan, Noorbakhsh, Nourbakhsh, & Nejad, 2017; Haglund, Nestadt, Cooper,

Southwick, & Charney, 2007; Overholt & Ewert, 2014), practicing effective communication

(Brooks & Goldstein, 2002), promoting high-involvement practices, modeling proactive

behaviors, and fostering continuous learning (Kuntz, Malinen, & Näswall, 2017).

**Strengths-Based Education**

Passerilli et al. (2010) report that a strengths-based curriculum increases strength

awareness which leads to personal growth. Soria and Stubblefield (2015a) found that a curricular

program centered on strengths enhanced collegiate students' ability to attain personal goals. A

program that educates students on their individual strengths can lead to moral competence and a

feeling of fulfillment (Park & Peterson, 2006). Soria and Stubblefield (2015b) suggest students

who understand their strengths share a common language that provides meaning for their

different experiences and backgrounds. Strengths language, based on positivity psychology

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), provides a framework for students to focus on the positive

traits of others.

<p align="center">**Program Design**</p>

The experiential curricular design for this exploratory study included 60 hours of pre-work and education before the fourteen-day travel experience in New Zealand commenced. The strengths-based education portion of the curriculum was derived from Clifton Strengths.

**Clifton Strengths**

The StrengthsFinder Assessment, a product of the Clifton Strengths curriculum, has 34 talent themes or "recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior" (Linley & Joseph, 2004, p. 57), which help to explain an individual's actions. These themes were extracted from an extensive statistical analysis conducted at the Gallup organization. Studies by the University of Massachusetts and the University of Kansas confirm the theme findings (Asplund, Agrawal, Hodges, Harter, & Lopez, 2014). Individual strengths were derived from the themes. Themes and strengths language are interchangeable.

Clifton Strengths themes are categorized into four domains and characterize how individuals and groups use their strengths (Asplund et al., 2014; Rath & Conchie, 2008). The domains include strategic thinking, executing, relationship building, and influencing (Rath & Conchie, 2008), as shown in Table 1.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

**Pre-Departure Activities**

Students were required to take the Clifton Strengths assessment as well as complete readings about their own and others' strengths from *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* (Rath & Conchie, 2008). After completing the readings, students wrote reflective assignments in which they contemplated their own strengths and how they could use them during the travel portion of the program. The assignments culminated to individual leadership development plans for the travel experience in New Zealand and for their own

personal lives. Before departure, students were also required to take charge of their own learning

experience by planning six different individual organization visits to complete while in country.

**In-Country Activities**

Once in country, students were expected to participate in all activities. This included a

variety of student-organized activities and faculty-organized activities. All activities gave

students numerous opportunities to practice exercising the strength areas promoted during the

pre-trip curriculum and were designed to give students opportunities to react to, manage, and

recover from setbacks, which assists in the development of resilience (Berg & Pietrasz, 2017).

Table 2 displays the five activities, classification of either a faculty-organized activity or student-

organized activity, and a short description of each.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

The intensive nature of the pre-work led to a common language used by the students

(Soria & Stubblefield, 2015b) which, as described by Murphy, Gregory, and Jeffs (2018),

allowed for productive conversations regarding individual strengths and differences. The

program design, which included the strengths-based curriculum and time spent abroad,

encompassed challenges, experiences, and reflection opportunities, all core tenets of experiential

education (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.).

## Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used in this exploratory study to investigate how an

experiential, strengths-based curriculum during a graduate study abroad contributed to the

development of resiliency. The following research question guided this study: How does

strengths-based education contribute to the development of resiliency during a graduate study

abroad?

Eleven students participated in this off-campus study program. While two faculty members designed and implemented the educational and experiential components of the study abroad, only one of them participated in the off-campus experience. The faculty member who led the study abroad program is a certified Strengths Coach and created an environment in which students reflected on how their tendencies contributed to modeling proactive behaviors when facing challenges.

The sample for this study was comprised of only the eleven graduate students who participated in the study abroad program. Participants were recruited by convenience sampling. Females comprised ten of the eleven participants, and the participants' ages ranged from 23 – 61 years old. Participants represented two academic disciplines, nursing and leadership education, and a variety of career fields, including healthcare, nonprofit management, education, and human resource management.

After approval from the Winona State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), data were collected for this research study. A qualitative research design is emergent, interpretive, and used to gather rich responses from participants based on personal experiences (Creswell, 2014). Participant responses were gathered using online surveys containing open-ended questions on the Google Forms platform. Before answering any questions about the research study, all participants signed informed consent forms. The survey contained questions referencing the five categories of major activities that occurred during the travel study program. For each of the five major activities, participants were asked to describe a challenging or uncomfortable situation experienced during the specific activity. Participants then discussed the strengths used to manage the situation, the contribution of their strengths, and if they perceived resiliency growth. For those who indicated growth in resiliency, the participants described their experience.

The process of data analysis in qualitative research seeks to combine all data collected and identify consistent themes or patterns that address the area of inquiry (Green et al., 2007). Using the participant responses indicating resilience growth, the data were analyzed to determine the emergent themes related to resiliency development. Northouse's (2016) explanation of resilience, which is a leader's ability to manage, adjust, and overcome challenges, guided the coding process. Inductive coding was used to code the open-ended survey data, identify common themes related to resilience development, and organize the data into categories related to strengths used during student and faculty organized activities.

### Results and Discussion

This exploratory study investigated how an experiential, strengths-based curriculum contributed to the growth of resiliency during a graduate study abroad program. Results from the surveys were categorized by faculty-organized and student-organized activities to analyze and identify which contributed more to the perceived growth in resiliency. The three student-organized activities were individual organization visits, social interactions and hostel life, and physical activities. With the student-organized activities, students had the primary responsibility for planning and carrying out their own learning experiences. The two faculty-organized activities were group organization visits and nightly debriefing sessions. The faculty organized these activities and students carried no responsibility in the planning process; however, participation was mandatory for both activities. Based on the survey responses, the researchers identified which activities contributed most to resilience development during the graduate study abroad. Table 3 reports each faculty-organized and student-organized activity along with the corresponding number of participants who stated that the activity contributed to their resilience development.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Table 3 shows that all participants indicated that individual organization visits contributed to resilience development. Ten participants, each, indicated that social interactions and hostel life and also physical activities contributed to resilience development during the study abroad program. Fewer participants indicated that the faculty-organized activities, which were group organization visits and nightly debriefing sessions, contributed to resilience development.

**Student-Organized Activities**

**Individual organization visits.** Before the study abroad commenced, each student was required to arrange interviews with self-selected organizations germane to his or her respective professional field. Students could organize visits with others or attend the visits independently. Visits required students to arrange transportation to and from the organizations, pre-plan interview questions related to leadership and the functioning of the organizations, and provide tokens of appreciation for the interviewees.

All participants in this study indicated that individual organization visits contributed to resilience development during the travel study abroad. Challenges included struggles with navigating transportation in an unfamiliar, international city and adjusting to various interviewee personalities. Participants noted the use of strengths, especially from the strategic and executing domains, helped with adjusting to challenging situations, and thereby contributing to growth in resilience. Participant A said:

> My fellow students and I got lost on the way to one of our organization visits and did not know how to get there. We were running out of time and in danger of being late. One of my top strengths is Focus. This strength took over, and I asked a local how to get there, rather than wandering around for longer.

**Social interaction and hostel life.** Social interactions and hostel life provided students with opportunities to further resilience development. The social elements of the travel study offered participants opportunities to engage in daily interactions with one another both formally and informally throughout the day. Hostel life included meal preparation and living arrangements. The faculty pre-selected teams and assigned them to rotate responsibility for planning and preparing group meals. Meal preparation required identifying food allergies and food preferences, purchasing groceries, and preparing the meals in a shared kitchen. Roommates were also pre-assigned by the faculty. Roommate assignments created stressful situations since the participants had limited personal interaction with one another before meeting at the airport on the day of departure. Scheduled free time offered opportunities for excursions to local landmarks, sharing a meal, or enjoying the nightlife. Others used this time to decompress and engage in personal reflection.

Ten of the eleven participants reported that social interactions and hostel life contributed to the development of resiliency. Participants described adjusting to the challenges of close living quarters, meal planning, clean-up responsibilities, and understanding and responding to diverse communication styles. One student's reaction to a difficult social situation indicates use of emotional intelligence, a component of resilience (Schneider et al., 2013). Participant J said, "While I was on the floating hostel, I overheard people talking about me. It was hurtful." She highlighted her Relator strength as contributing to the development of resiliency, "I had a choice. I could respond with hurt or work on forgiving. I did not hurt others in my hurt, so I can look back on things and be happy I didn't."

**Physical activities.** The study abroad program included two hikes and other optional physical activities. A small group of students organized a fifteen-mile bicycle tour in Wellington,

and several students participated in a two-hour kayaking experience. All students participated in the two hikes: a two-mile, round-trip excursion to a local lookout and a longer hike through Abel Tasman National Park.

Ten participants indicated the hike through Abel Tasman had a positive impact on resiliency development, similar to the findings of Vatan et al. (2017) who reported a link between physical activity and resiliency. The night before the two-day hike in Able Tasman National Park, the students and faculty discovered the thirteen-mile hike was, in fact, twenty-one miles due to a miscalculation and unanticipated high tides. The coastline proved more strenuous than anticipated due to elevations ranging from sea level to 660 feet. The steep terrain created frustration for most of the students. Indicating use of the Connectedness strength, Participant E reported, "I have never hiked that far or that strenuously, ever. It wasn't just me feeling like I was reaching the end of my reserves. If I could complete that hike without injury, then I can do anything!"

**Faculty-Organized Activities**

**Group organization visits.** Group organization visits were pre-arranged by faculty to engage the group on a topic of leadership. Visits included the Ministry of Health, New Zealand's Parliament, Zealandia (an urban ecosanctuary), and The Center for Innovation at the University of Auckland. Group visits explored how the leadership of healthcare, government, non-profit, and educational institutions were organized.

Nine respondents reported that group organization visits contributed to building resilience. During unfamiliar content-area discussions, participants indicated exercising resilience by staying positive and responsive (Jackson et al., 2007). Participant A commented, "I used my Learner strength and was able to tie some of the concepts to my own career field. By

doing this, I came up with relevant questions to stay engaged." Additionally, Participant C stated that she did not understand the discussion, but tapped into her Adaptability strength to "just roll with it and pick up what I could."

**Nightly debriefing sessions.** In the evenings, mandatory debriefing sessions included narratives of the day's events with discussions related to how each participant utilized their strengths to manage, adapt, and overcome challenges faced. Brooks & Goldstein (2002) report that active listening and effective communication contribute to resilience. The discussion format was structured to allow students to listen, share, and reflect on experiences from the study abroad.

Seven participants indicated that the sessions contributed to resiliency development. Participants indicated they adjusted their communications during the discussion. Participant F indicated:

> Having Harmony [as a top strength] helps me to let things go when not everyone
>
> is in agreement. Making my point is important but if there is further discussion
>
> maybe it won't get to the point of argument [due to] my Harmony.

The nightly debriefing sessions encouraged students to reflect on the day's activities but were not as beneficial to the development of resiliency as the other major activities.

### Conclusions, Implications, and Future Recommendations

A strengths-based curriculum contributed to the perceived growth of resiliency during this study abroad by providing opportunities to manage, adjust, and overcome challenges. The activities conducted during the study-abroad provided opportunities for students to practice with the strength areas promoted during the pre-trip curriculum, and the development of a curriculum

using a strengths-based approach allowed students to develop a common language in which to discuss challenges and reflect on their experiences in terms of resilience growth.

All eleven respondents used terms derived from the strengths curriculum to articulate growth in resilience when planning and implementing the student-organized activities, whereas nine of the eleven students reported resiliency growth within the faculty-organized activities. Participants reported that student-organized activities created an environment conducive for building resiliency by participating in high-involvement practices, continuous learning (Kuntz et al., 2017), and effective communication (Brooks & Goldstein, 2002). Educators interested in resilience development may benefit from incorporating experiential education principles coupled with student-organized activities outside of the classroom where graduate students can manage, adjust, and overcome challenges.

More research is needed to understand the impact that using a strengths-based education, in this case, Clifton Strengths, has on perceived resiliency development in graduate study abroad programs or other experiential learning settings. Future research could include a variety of other strengths-based education tools and resources to substantiate the claims made in this paper about the use of a particular strengths-based curriculum (Clifton Strengths). Future research could also include undergraduate students and greater gender diversity. Including quantitative or mixed-method instruments to measure the resiliency of students before and after the study abroad program may yield results that did not appear in this exploratory study. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be done to determine how students carry strengths-based concepts and resilience skills throughout their daily lives after study abroad programs.

In conclusion, strengths-based education can be a potentially powerful tool in higher education and remains of great interest in higher education (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). This

exploratory study examined strengths-based language in a study abroad setting with graduate students and perceived resilience growth. The researchers found that activities, particularly student-led activities, provided opportunities to practice with the pre-identified strength areas. The strengths-based curriculum provided students with the ability to later articulate resilience growth using the common strength-based language. Further research on resilience growth and experiential, strengths-based learning could be transformative for students and educators.

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Table 1

*Domains and Strengths (Themes)*

| Strategic Thinking | Executing | Relationship Building | Influencing |
|---|---|---|---|
| Analytical | Achiever | Adaptability | Activator |
| Context | Arranger | Connectedness | Command |
| Futuristic | Belief | Developer | Communication |
| Ideation | Consistency | Empathy | Competition |
| Input | Deliberative | Harmony | Maximizer |
| Intellection | Discipline | Includer | Self-Assurance |
| Learner | Focus | Individualization | Significance |
| Strategic | Responsibility | Positivity | Woo |
| | Restorative | Relator | |

Table 2

*Study Abroad Activities*

| Major Activity | Faculty-Organized or Student-Organized | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Individual Organization Visits | Student-Organized | The students independently researched multiple organizations, found contact information, scheduled the visits, and conducted interviews. This activity also required students to identify the modes of public transportation needed to get to the organization visits. This required understanding of bus and train maps to discern the best transportation mode from lodging locations to organizations. |
| Social Interaction and Hostel Life | Student-Organized | Students were immersed in hostel life, which included communal facilities (kitchen, bathroom, social area), and double-room occupancy. Students in pre-appointed groups prepared most meals. Students were tasked with menu planning, shopping, preparing, serving, and clean up. |

| Physical Activities | Student-Organized | Students participated in various physical activities during the experience including hiking, biking, and kayaking. Participation was voluntary for all activities; however, all students participated in some capacity. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Group Organization Visits | Faculty-Organized | The faculty researched organizations, found contact information, scheduled the visits, organized public transportation, and provided the organization with questions and topics to discuss. The students were required to attend the visits and actively participate in the discussions. |
| Nightly Debriefing Sessions | Faculty-Organized | Faculty scheduled the debriefing sessions every evening as an opportunity for students to share what they had done and learned throughout the previous day. Groups of students were pre-selected to lead the sessions and encourage the participation of all students. |

Table 3

*Resilience Development in Participants during Major Activities*

| Major Activity | **Faculty-Organized or Student-Organized** | Number of Participants Indicating Resilience Development |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Individual Organization Visits | Student-Organized | 11 |
| Social Interactions and Hostel Life | Student-Organized | 10 |
| Physical Activities | Student-Organized | 10 |
| Group Organization Visits | Faculty-Organized | 9 |
| Nightly Debriefing Sessions | Faculty-Organized | 7 |