

Supportive Immersion: The Use of Transformative Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning to Address Social Trends in the 21st Century

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Abstract

In an era of globalization and rapidly evolving cultural changes, traditional support structures are struggling to equip our youth with the necessary competencies for a successful transition into adulthood. A thematic analysis was performed on interviews of participants of a therapeutic gap program providing what is known as “Supportive Immersion,” an approach to experiential transformative learning where facilitators and learners co-create experiences of learning. Findings show two main points: 1) participants’ articulation of their perceived personal growth and skill development supported the positive impact of their cross-cultural supportive gap experience, and 2) the five themes identified (PROPS) described characteristics and skill sets of an “integrative learner,” which directly relate to preparing young adults for recent changes in societal trends. This study demonstrated the outcomes and effectiveness of guided, supported cross-cultural immersion experiences.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural, Emerging Adults, Supportive Immersion, Gap-Year, Transitions

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Introduction

Social structures around the world are changing rapidly toward networked societies (Castells, 2004) and globalized cultures (Pieterse, 2015). This has numerous implications for youth development. Parents (Lythcott-Haims, 2015) and schools (Azzam, 2009) are struggling to keep up with the shifts of the new millennium and to equip youth with the necessary competencies for a successful transition into the world of 21st-century adulthood.

Recio and Tracy (2017) compiled different social scientists' analyses of the changing characteristics of industrialized (they use the term "hyper-connected") societies in the 21st-century. The result of the synthesis yielded five interrelated trends, which fundamentally stem from the influence of technological advances (internet and other information technologies) into the very fabric of societal makeup (Castells, 2004; Harari, 2014; Siemens, 2006). The five trends are decentralized power, comfort bias, diffuse identities, self-programmable labor, and agency disparity.

Decentralized Power. Prior to the spread of the use of the internet, societies functioned in hierarchical systems where knowledge and power accumulated at the top and flowed down in a somewhat orderly linear fashion (Castells, 2004). In the 21st-century, systems are rapidly switching to self-organize from the bottom up (Meadows, 2008). Because of this, youth nowadays are less interested in adopting historically established boundaries of nationality, gender, values, power, and equality differentials, and they are less reliant and trusting of those in positions of authority, such as politicians and institutions (Lampert & Çeta, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2017). Access to unfiltered sources of information through technology, as well as increasing access to education, appear to have dismantled the need to rely on hierarchical authorities or experts; therefore, this is deeply transforming the way people relate to power (Nichols, 2017). Decentralized power is perhaps the trend out of which the others originate.

Comfort Bias. Like any other living organism, humans seek homeostasis and safety (Christakis, 2019; Porges, 2004). Human evolution is reaching a moment where the ease of satisfying certain comfort-based needs might be paradoxically producing negative side effects. During recent decades, two unprecedented events in the history of our species took place: 1) most of the world's population live in countries where overweight and obesity kills more people than underweight (World Health Organization, 2018), and 2) for the past 10 years, more people in the world live in urban settings than in rural ones (United Nations, 2009). In theory, it is highly beneficial to satisfy caloric intake and access

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the advantages that urban life confers, but death from obesity and the well-known problems of inequality in urban settings reveal the negative side effects suggested above. The sudden rise in the research of topics exposing youth's difficulties with delay of gratification, resilience, agency and meaningful transitions to adulthood (Boin, Comfort, & Demchak, 2010) could be explained by these same societal trends. Trends in parenting styles, such as "helicopter" parenting or "snow-plow" parenting, are meant to protect children from danger and discomfort, but the side effect is that this additional safety and direction prevents the development of resilience and agency, resulting in issues of mental health (Lythcott-Haims, 2015).

Diffuse Identities. The increase in valuing freedom and equality and the decrease in the trust of hierarchical authorities to provide such rights may together lead to a less linear path in identity development. Defining who you are is no longer predetermined by traditional authorities such as family, religion, school, and geography. Jeffrey Arnett (1998) researched these and other social trends that he asserted have led to the rise of a new stage of development in the life span he called "emerging adulthood." One of the characteristics of this life stage is an extended process of identity exploration, which entails "trying out various possibilities for what kind of person to be and what kind of life to live, specifically in the areas of love relationships, work, and ideology" (Arnett et al., 2014, p. 570). The sudden and recent changing landscape in gender identity is a good example of this trend (Burn, 2014). Arnett and coauthors (2014) explained the double-edged sword of the identity exploration process:

Identity explorations can be exciting but are often daunting and confusing to the person, especially for emerging adults who find themselves unable to make choices about which paths to explore, or who feel the choices they would like to make in love relationships and work are unattainable (p.570).

Arnett (2014) explained that the struggles that come with this process might account for the prevalence of anxiety and depression during emerging adulthood.

Self-Programmable Labor. Both sociologist Manuel Castells (2004) and historian Yuval Noah Harari (2014) have warned of the threat of a new class of irrelevant workers. They contended that developments in artificial intelligence and the globalization of the market may lead to the replacement of people who perform generic jobs, either by machines or by cheaper labor in other latitudes. Castells (2004) highlighted the importance of people learning to become self-programmable, which he defined in the following manner:

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Self-programmable labor has the autonomous capacity to focus on the goal assigned to it in the process of production, find the relevant information, recombine it into knowledge, using the available knowledge stock, and apply it in the form of tasks oriented toward the goals of the process (p.26).

Similarly, Harari (2018) believes the most important qualities to develop in the 21st -century are emotional flexibility and self-knowledge in order to be able to constantly reinvent oneself in the face of rapid changes in society.

Agency Disparity. As a summary, Recio and Tracy (2017) added this trend to encompass the consequences of the other four. They reasoned that because of decentralized power, comfort bias, and diffuse identities, there appears to be a gap between the level of agency expected of young adults to become self-programmable labor and the guidance and opportunities to attain it. The expectations of becoming “self-programmable” without a centralized power to follow contrasts with the low resilience of comfort bias and the potential confusion that stems from diffuse identities.

It is important to reiterate that there is data that shows that these trends are less prominent in non-Western cultures and have significantly more impact on people growing up in the 21st-century than on older generations (Lampert & Çeta, 2014). Hence, the question that follows is: how can young people influenced by these trends be supported toward a satisfactory transition to adult life?

In 2016, Recio and Tracy developed an approach to facilitate youth development that responds to the challenges and opportunities provoked by the five societal and cultural trends presented above. This approach is called Supportive Immersion.

Supportive Immersion

Supportive Immersion is an approach to experiential transformative learning where facilitators and learners co-create spaces and experiences of exploration and learning to develop skills in proactivity, resilience, openness, creativity, and self-governance. The learning that Supportive Immersion seeks is integrative, which means that the transformation it intends is systemic, adaptable, and metacognitive in ways that such learning propels further learning. It thus blends approaches that share the goal of integration (Hart, 2014; Siegel, 2007; Perls, Hefferline, & Hoffman, 1951; Maslow, 2013; Wilber, 2000) with approaches that share the method of constructivism, experiential learning, and systemic living (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2017;

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Senge, 2006; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Freire, 1996; James, 1984; Dewey, 1986; Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1980; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2015; Capra, 1996). Integrative learning—learning that propels further learning—has three fundamental dimensions: systemic, metacognitive, and adaptive.

Systemic. Systemic learning includes and depends on reciprocal relationships with the immediate environment. The African philosophy of *ubuntu* describes this dimension with interconnectedness as its basis and the understanding that one’s humanity depends on the quality of interactions with others (Naidoo, Shabalala, & Bawa, 2003; Nussbaum, 2003). This dimension of integrative learning is active when “my learning propels further learning and growth in others and vice versa” (Supportive Immersion Institute, n.d.). Furthermore, systemic learning can be present at any level of a system, such as recognizing that growth in one part of me propels growth in other parts of me, or growth in one part of a community propels growth in other parts of a community.

Metacognitive. Metacognitive learning involves reflecting and developing awareness about the process of one’s learning. In order to be intentional about what we learn, understand why we learn, and be able to replicate it, we need to engage in metacognitive processes. Metacognition is the reflection on knowledge, experience, goals, and strategies in the process of learning (Flavell, 1979, as cited in Kolb, 2009, p.5). This dimension of integrative learning is active when “my understanding of how I learn propels me further my own learning” (Supportive Immersion Institute, n.d.).

Adaptive. Adaptive learning is based on the idea that life’s demands are forever changing, and a person must meet new challenges with openness and creativity. Dabrowski (1976) asserted that “the course of development passes through the loosening of rigid structures” (p.135). To remain in a “fixed mindset,” as coined by Dweck (2008), lowers our ability to learn, grow, and succeed. Integrative learning permits the person to not only use a variety of responses, but to apply those responses, or variations of them, in future situations. This dimension of integrative learning is active when “my learning now with this task propels further learning later and in other tasks” (Supportive Immersion Institute, n.d.).

Supportive Immersion thus co-creates transformative experiential learning spaces where learning propels further learning. These learning spaces are not reduced to classrooms focused on absorbing academic content. Social, experiential, situated, and embodied learning spaces are essential for Supportive Immersion. These include, but are not limited to, cross-cultural encounters,

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adventure and nature-connected experiences, psychotherapy, life skills acquisition, and social-emotional learning. Consequently, the integrative learner is someone who embodies the creative energy of an empowered individual and is not only free to act on their own volition or perform tasks without the support of others but is also motivated to invest in finding novel solutions to life problems. Additionally the integrative learner seeks goals and challenges, is a contributor to their surroundings, and is an active participant in perpetuating harmony and congruence in their immediate world.

Cross-cultural Immersion for Integrative Learning

Evidence is building to demonstrate that cross-cultural immersions are providing opportunities for growth and helping people achieve their goals beyond their initial imaginings (Berry, 2005). Studies demonstrated that international immersions can provide participants with numerous benefits, such as increased creativity and integrative complexity (Fee et al., 2013; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009).

Based on this evidence, Recio (2018) proposed that using the Supportive Immersion approach during guided cross-cultural experiences could be an effective avenue to activate integrative learning. Recio (2018) explained that cross-cultural encounters provoke accommodative learning, which means that the stimuli from these experiences is salient or dissonant enough from existing cognitive schemas to require reshaping or the development of entirely new cognitive schemas. Because of this, Recio (2018) hypothesized that such accommodative learning, in conjunction with the empathic connecting, collaborative empowerment, and process-based scaffolding techniques of Supportive Immersion, could effectively elicit learning that propels further learning.

In an evolving global landscape, an integrative learner is needed to best adapt to their ever-changing surroundings. This is vital for the developmental period of the emerging adult, who is trying to find their way in the world. More important is the recognition of agency disparity, where there exists a gap in the level of agency expected of young adults and the appropriate amount of support given to individuals to achieve that agency. Educators, program directors, and mental health specialists need to equip themselves to best support our youth in this transition. To help understand the most effective methods, we must evaluate existing models that are currently trying to achieve this goal. This research study aims to do this by examining the effectiveness of a therapeutic gap-year program that provides supportive cross-cultural immersion.

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Method

Participants

There were 10 participants in this study who were males between the ages of 18 and 22. Each participant was a student of the gap-year program, “The Bridge ~ Costa Rica.” The Bridge is a therapeutic program blending cultural immersion and therapeutic support for young adult males with mental health needs. Participants were United States citizens that elected to enroll in The Bridge program. The length of stay for each participant ranged from six to nine months. Throughout their stay, participants were culturally immersed through the program’s location in Costa Rica, as well as the program’s activities emphasizing more in-depth cultural immersion through Spanish learning, homestays, community service, internships, attending the local university and ecological adventures.

Procedure

By the end of the gap year, participants were asked to create a video that summarized their experience. The creation of these videos had two goals: 1) To facilitate the chance for the student to reflect on their experience and narrate what was meaningful and impactful to them; 2) To summarize the experience which would be shared with the student’s parents, family and program staff at the program’s graduation ceremony. The videos were created with the help of program staff who (as interviewers) used open-ended questions and prompts to explore what experiences of the gap program were most impactful to the participants and how it related to their personal growth. An open-ended approach was used to avoid leading participants to comment directly on the philosophical basis of the experiential immersion gap program itself, which could impact the research’s reliability and validity of the data.

After the graduation ceremonies, the videos were archived by the program. Participants gave permission to the program to share the videos as testimonials for marketing and educational research purposes. The videos would become the data for this research study after being shown at a colloquium led by the program director. A third-party member of the colloquium saw this video and felt it contained rich and important data about the impact of cross-cultural immersion on the personal growth of young adults. They approached the program director afterward to discuss this research study using the archived videos.

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Therefore, the research question (RQ) that would guide this study was formulated: “What impacts do students perceive in themselves after going through experiential immersion in an international supportive gap experience?”

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clark (2006), was used to analyze 10 video testimonials recorded by participants of a young adult, therapeutically supportive gap program. A bottom-up approach was selected by the third-party primary researcher (PR), which would allow for the study to be taken up as an exploratory approach. Thematic analysis was selected as the methodological framework for this study due to the PR’s interest in identifying themes related to personal growth through cultural immersion and how the participants narrated this growth in their video testimonials.

The PR’s first step was to become familiar with the data by watching the videos and taking note of any impressions that arose. Contrary to the belief that thematic analysis is a “passive” process of allowing data to just “emerge,” Braun & Clark (2006) explained that the process is much more of an “active” engagement with the data, where the researcher takes up a self-reflexive position with and through the data.

The second step of the study was to transcribe the videos through which the data could then be combed, which also allowed the PR to become more intimately engaged with the data. With the research question in mind, the PR then began the coding process. Statements of the participants were highlighted and codes labeled based on the statement as it related to the RQ. The codes were then compiled into tables so that they could be viewed together. By placing the codes together, it allowed the PR to see more holistically, an important step prior to thematization.

The third step was to identify the themes across the data sets. At this point of the study, it is important to note how the PR named the themes. The administrators of the gap-year program of this study had been developing the aforementioned theory, Supportive Immersion, which theorizes what elements help facilitate growth while individuals are being supported in cross-cultural immersion and experiential learning settings (Recio, 2018). Going into the study, the PR had no knowledge of SI’s theory; but due to dialogue with the administrators after the coding process, the PR ended up becoming more familiarized with the components of SI. It was learned that SI had created terms associated to personal growth, describing the qualities of an individual that is interdependent, self-motivated, goal-driven and resilient. After reviewing these

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terms and reviewing the codes, it became very clear that SI's terms could be used as the themes for the codes. Therefore, the PR, who had started the study from a bottom-up inductive method, ended up integrating a top-down deductive thematic analysis to help understand the data that emerged based on the SI theory.

Results

The five themes that both emerged from the coding process and sourced from Supportive Immersion theory are: 1) proactive purposefulness, 2) resilience, 3) open collaboration, 4) problem-solving creativity, and 5) self-governance (hereinafter referred as PROPS when referenced collectively). Supportive Immersion theorizes that PROPS development activates the propelling function (previously called the self-generating function), which “suggests that the energy for problem-solving and learning intentionally initiates within the individual,” as well as through the supportive relationships around them (Recio, 2018, p. 178). Recio (2018) cited this to be a necessary activation process for emerging adults to feel a sense of empowerment and agency in driving their own life toward their own goals. This energizing propelling function is also a key characteristic of an integrative learner, who is defined by a motivation to continue to learn and grow through generating personal goals while simultaneously interacting with, adapting to, and contributing to the relational support systems around them. These five themes are foundational to SI theory because PROPS is the desired outcome of characteristics, strategies and skill sets to be developed through supportive immersion learning experiences.

One important dimension of these themes and how they will be discussed in this study is the fact that each theme, while specific and separate from the other themes, are also at the same time integrative meaning that as one theme emerges, it is often correlated to other themes. This will be discussed further in the study.

Theme one: Proactive Purposefulness

Proactive Purposefulness is defined as the ability to intentionally seek out and pursue meaningful goals. Some examples of the codes that were extracted from the data that support this theme are: “feeling awakened,” “presence,” “living with intention,” “create meaning through experience,” and “development of values.” These all helped define how participants found a sense of purposefulness through their gap-year experience.

In reference to their experience in the program, one participant was quoted: “it makes you think about how to be intentional with the way you live your life ... forces you to be present with your decision-making, planning, and the

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relationships around you and back at home, and so it's an experience that you come out feeling kind of awakened in a way." Here the participant described a sense of purposefulness through learning to live with intention, being present in relationships and decision-making. Their feeling of being "awakened" was a powerful statement that indicated a prior unconscious living, one that does not facilitate living intentionally or with presence.

This same participant continued to describe what this feeling of being awake and present did for them: "it pushes the idea of 'now is the time' over and over and over and the only way you can fail is when you push that idea away." Here the participant is proposing their new-found motto of "now is the time," which identifies being proactive in their new way of living and that forgetting that will ultimately lead to a possible failure.

Another participant stated that the program and experience in Costa Rica helped "find a way to identify who I am and not who everyone else thinks I am." For this participant, learning to differentiate oneself from what others project onto them was important. This statement identified that this individual cared about discovering their own values and motivations. Discovering one's own driving motivation is a central component to proactive purposefulness.

Theme Two: Resilience

Resilience, as described earlier, is sustaining effort and taking accountability despite adversity and lack of immediate results. Examples of codes in this theme were: "tolerating mistakes," "seeking discomfort for growth," "accountability for actions," "confidence in facing challenges," and "comfort in ambivalence." Through their experiences in the program and cultural immersion, the participants faced many situations that created opportunities for being out of comfort zones. The descriptions of the participants as they relate to resilience showed this to be a fundamental aspect of their experience.

A participant talked about how being out of their comfort zone helped them in "having to deal with some really uncomfortable, not necessarily physically, but emotionally uncomfortable situations really gave me a new perspective on how I need to focus on my priorities and how much the short-term discomforts are worth it in the long term." Similarly, another participant is quoted as saying, "I know it's not going to be easy, or a smooth ride going forward, in the next month, in the next year, [or] in the rest of my entire life. It's never going to be easy, smooth sailing, but I've made it this far and I've done some things I'm very proud of, and I don't see any reason why I can't continue to do so." These were powerfully inspiring quotes. They spoke of resilience as being a mindset of

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recognizing that one is going to surely encounter difficulties but that pushing through those difficulties can be a rewarding process.

In addition to learning to feel confident in one's self through resilience, one participant described how resilience created opportunities for more self-awareness, which promoted growth in a different, yet similar, way. They reported:

I really learned how much being out of my comfort zone made me realize about myself, because once you don't have everything you're used to, you realize how much you depend on certain aspects of your daily life. Being out of my comfort zone has really helped me realize a lot about my personality, like flaws or weaknesses in my behavior, because those are the first things that really appear when I get really uncomfortable.

For this participant, their experience of being in a new environment created a contrasting perspective, which helped them have more insight into themselves and the fact that, prior to their experience, they reverted to maladaptive behaviors to cope with the distress of being out of one's comfort zone. Resilience created an opportunity to grow through the self-reflexivity gained from their experience.

As mentioned prior, these themes are integrative through their interdependence with each other. One theme may not necessarily exist without the correlation to another theme. What stands out in this theme is the fact that resilience was found to be connected to the participants recognizing their own long-term goals and pushing towards those goals for some intentional reason. This highlighted the need for proactive purposefulness to be present in order for resilience to be activated. It would seem that proactive purposefulness, through living with intention and moving towards meaningful goals, helped create the motivation to endure through the difficulties encountered in the participants' lives.

Theme Three: Open Collaboration

Open collaboration identifies the traits of an individual maintaining openness through curiosity and taking in other perspectives, seeking learning and growth across cultures and languages, and engaging in reciprocal relationships and experiences. Through the data, it became clear how much the participants identified their relationships to other peers, staff, members of the community, and the culture as being very integral to their personal growth. Examples of the codes that emerged through the engagement with the data are: "learning a new

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language,” “open to new people,” “sense of family,” “impact of homestays,” “cooperation,” and “supported by others.”

First and foremost, it needs to be identified that “learning a new language” was the most identified code and emerged across almost all data sets. Not only was the frequent appearance of this code noteworthy, but the communication of its relevance to their personal growth was significant. For example, one participant stated:

I didn't learn to speak understandable Spanish for a very long time and I still tried. I was able to go and make more friends than I can say I have in the States. I was able to become a part of a homestay family, and I was able to make some really great relationships in my internships. And it was because I was out of my comfort zone; I was pushing myself to be uncomfortable and learn and adapt.

In this quote, it is identified that learning Spanish not only created a bridge to communicate to others, but that it helped facilitate a successful and meaningful homestay experience and internship opportunity. Additionally, learning a new language was connected to learning to adapt to being out of a comfort zone. Here the theme of resilience is described and shows its correlation to open collaboration. This participant found that resilience created opportunities to be with others that ended up being very meaningful and impactful to them.

Participants were impacted by their experiences of “Aventuras,” the program's name for its ecological, cultural, and service orientated excursions into rural Costa Rican villages. Those that referenced these “Aventuras” in the interviews spoke very highly of their experience. One participant described it in the following manner: “the biggest turning point was through my first Aventura. I kind of developed more of a sense of family and the importance of family and the importance of living in the moment.” Another participant also described their experience as:

Every place here is special to me. Everyone I've met is special in different ways. Being able to realize that I can connect with people and places is really cool and I found happiness in every place I've been, from Aventuras to school. Being able to connect like that is really cool ... all the places I've been hold a very special place in my heart because they all have taught me something about myself.

Learning a new language created opportunities for personal growth by getting out of one's comfort zone to communicate with others, which then

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facilitated deep, long-lasting connections and then, lastly, helped the participants learn more about themselves in the process. These all contribute to open collaboration as an important aspect of SI's integrative learning.

Theme Four: Problem-Solving Creativity

The theme of Problem-Solving Creativity highlights the trait of an individual that seeks solutions to problems through considering multiple perspectives, uses critical thinking, and is actively looking for alternative solutions with intentional goals in mind. The data showed these characteristics were cultivated through the participants' exposure to naturally occurring problems during their program stay. Examples of codes that were identified in the data are as follows: "expand awareness," "paradigm shift," "perspective taking," "skill acquisition," "confidence in future problem solving."

One participant related their experience in the program and learning to manage problems by saying:

This place has shown me I can do whatever the heck I want to do because I have the tools, I have the skills, I put it into practice ... Sure, I've messed up, everyone does. It's not about not making mistakes; it's about learning from those mistakes and not making the same mistake.

This participant described a sense of confidence in approaching life's difficulties through a few different factors, one being the acquisition of skills and the sense of being able to use those skills to overcome barriers to intentional goals. Additionally, they showed a flexibility and openness to allow mistakes, to give space for mistakes as an inevitable part of life, and to learn from those mistakes.

This participant's statement also showed the correlation to the other themes of resilience and proactive purposefulness. Resilience is shown by the toleration of making mistakes, which is also a form of growth mindset (Dweck, 2008). Proactive purposefulness was seen in the sentence "I can do whatever the heck I want to do," not to be mistaken for a brazen self-focused individual, but instead as the confident statement of someone who knows their goals and is motivated to attain said goals.

Theme Five: Self-Governance

Self-governance describes traits of an individual who sets goals with a sense of empowerment, while monitoring, evaluating, and self-regulating their pursuits. It also shows the flexibility to shift gears and change paths if necessary.

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Some of the codes that emerged through the data were: “sense of independence,” “shift in life direction,” “present-oriented,” “sense of power and control” and “personal responsibility.”

The data clearly showed the relevance of this theme through the amount of codes that were categorized. Overwhelmingly, this theme contained the most codes. This indicated that their experience had a positive impact on their personal growth through cultivating confidence in managing and directing their own lives. This is an important step for the emerging adult and integrative learner. One participant stated:

Coming here changed my life. Before I came here, I was in a weird sort of limbo state and when I chose to come here, it was my first step in choosing to take hold of my process and my first step into adulthood.

Similarly, another participant stated succinctly: “I’ve come to a place where I feel I have control over my future, my actions, towards my goals.” As the emerging adult begins the process of identity formation that was once contingent on family origins and values, these types of statements show an empowerment of taking control of one’s life, an important position the emerging adult needs to have for a successful transition into adulthood.

Discussion

According to this study, participants articulated areas of growth that are crucial for 21st-century skillsets for emerging adults. Participants (who were previously struggling and therefore enrolled in a supportive gap program) validated their growth; they were able to articulate how these supportive cross-cultural immersion experiences had impacted their perspective and confidence in taking on new challenges that would be presented in the adult world. This gives validation to the growth value and 21st-century skill development that is possible in supportive, international or cross-cultural gap experiences for young adults who need to become integrative learners.

The coded reflections were easily allocated to the five PROPS skill areas promoted by Supportive Immersion theory: proactive purposefulness, resilience, open collaboration, problem-solving creativity, and self-governance. In relation to previous psychological research, these five qualities correspond to the five factors of personality, also known as the five-factor model, or Big Five (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). Proactive purposefulness corresponds with extraversion because they are about motivation and reward-seeking toward goal completion (DeYoung, 2015) and learning tasks. Resilience corresponds to

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neuroticism because they are linked to how people deal with uncertainty and threat (DeYoung, 2015). Open collaboration corresponds to agreeableness because they are connected to how people coordinate and cooperate with others (DeYoung, 2015). Problem-solving creativity corresponds to openness/intellect because they both focus on the ability to generate multiple and unusual solutions to problems (DeYoung, 2015). Finally, self-governance corresponds to conscientiousness as they both are about being able to prioritize, plan, and govern behavior across long time spans (DeYoung, 2015). The value of using PROPS, as opposed to the Big Five, is found in that PROPS are purposefully articulated in their strengths-based form (no matter what one's natural personality tendencies) to show the path toward integrative learning, in contrast with the Big Five, which includes a dimension in its negative pole, such as neuroticism. Furthermore, the five PROPS are terms that are more easily understood outside of psychology and academia.

Given the current societal desire for strengths-based and positive approaches to mental health, PROPS skill development offers an alternative to previous theories such as the Big Five. Rather than focusing on what might be lacking in our youth, PROPS offers an alternative that highlights which skill sets will be beneficial to thrive in the 21st-century. As noted previously, the five PROPS skills directly relate to five interrelated trends that are changing the way that youth engage with and interact with the world today thanks to the influence of information-age developments in 21st-century society. PROPS skills effectively articulate an answer to the question of how youth can navigate the world of decentralized power, comfort bias, diffuse identities, self-programmable labor, and agency disparity.

The degree to which any, or all, of the five PROPS skills are activated will determine the level of integrative learning occurring in a person at any given moment. These five skills, separately or together, appear in the literature for which integration is an important goal (Hart, 2014; Siegel, 2007; Perls, Hefferline, & Hoffman, 1951; Maslow, 2013; Wilber, 2000). Becoming an "integrated learner"—a learner that knows how to propel further learning, or perhaps in colloquial terms, a life-long learner—is the over-arching goal of a 21st-century adult. In other words, an integrated learner is one that can take on the quickly changing dynamics of a globalized information-age that requires a self-programmable adult with agency to implement PROPS skills in order to resiliently solve problems in a collaborative and purposeful way.

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Conclusion

The participants' articulation of the perceived impact of their gap program experience supported the assertion that supportive cross-cultural immersion experiences help equip emerging adults with the attitudes, habits, and skills to productively engage in 21st-century adulthood. Data from this initial research confirmed SI's theory in regard to PROPS as a useful framework for skill development for emerging adults in the 21st century. The desired outcome of the PROPS skillset integrates characteristics that foster personal development and growth as an integrative learner who can generate opportunities to propel further learning. As a developing integrative learner with PROPS skills, these young adults perceived themselves as more confident in and capable of engaging with, adapting to, and problem-solving within their emerging adult environments.

Further research is warranted to continue to tease out the specific beneficial elements of and methods to facilitate immersive growth opportunities for emerging young adults, as well as the driving factors that promote integrative learning most effectively and efficiently. Future research will continue to enrich this data and will also focus on participants' perceptions of the support they receive from peers, staff, community members, and environments through experiential activities. Through these enrichments, research will explore the effectiveness of the three pillars of the Supportive Immersion theory: empathic connection, collaborative empowerment, and process-based scaffolding hypothesized to support the development of the five themes identified in this study.

Limitations

The origins of the datasets themselves present some possible limitations to the study. As mentioned, the data comes from videos created by participants of the gap-year, with the help of staff prompts for the purpose of sharing at a graduation ceremony. This presents two considerations related to bias: 1) the videos were created with the help of staff, which requires consideration of how the language used in the videos could have some bias that speaks to a possible allegiance to the program, specifically in how the language could represent the program philosophy and culture, and 2) the data was in part to be presented at a graduation ceremony, so it could indicate a one-sidedness that may be reflective of the participants trying to express their experiences in a positive light for family members, as well as program staff. These potential forms of bias were considered by the PR during the analysis of the data but are still worthy of note.

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Lastly, two of the authors are developers of The Bridge program, as well as the Supportive Immersion theory; therefore, there is some inherent potential for bias in the articulation of this article. Nevertheless, the self-perceived areas of growth are articulated in the words of the participants themselves at a point where the program staff had no power over any future decisions directly related to the participants' lives, and the video interviews were coded by a third-party researcher. Therefore, there is value in validating how the participants perceived their own growth in experience thanks to a supportive, cross-cultural, gap program experience.

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