

PROMOTING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL EXCHANGES: YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE MARRAKESH-SCOTTSDALE CULTURAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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Abstract

Although cultural and educational exchange programs have been widely studied in the past decades, Sister Cities programs in particular and their perceived impact on participants have not been examined to a similar extent. The present study explores the perceptions of a group of Moroccan students about the impact that an international Youth Ambassador program (the Marrakesh-Scottsdale Cultural Exchange Program) had on empowering them, promoting global understanding, and fostering their sense of citizen diplomacy. The study uses mixed methods to explore the participants' perceived impact of the exchange experience on three individual-level constructs: empowerment, cultural competency, and citizen diplomacy. The results, which align with the literature, show mostly positive effects on the variables examined. Limitations and implications of the study are discussed.

Key words: empowerment; action research; exchange programs; citizen diplomacy; cultural competence; international education.

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Introduction

Empowering youth through educational and cultural exchange programs has a fairly long history as nations devised strategies to promote peace, knowledge sharing, tolerance, and global understanding. The Marrakesh-Scottsdale Cultural Exchange Program (MSCEP) was created with the aim of building ties between the cities of Marrakesh, Morocco and Scottsdale, Arizona, as well as to contribute to the personal empowerment of their youth through a Youth Ambassadors cross-cultural homestay exchange. Through the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study explores program participants' perceptions of the impact of the exchange experience in three individual-level variables: empowerment, citizen diplomacy, and cultural competence.

Overview of MSCEP

The MSCEP started in September 2012, when the first group of Moroccan students and their teacher visited Scottsdale, Arizona in order to benefit from a cultural, recreational, and social experience. In 2014, the mayors of both officially approved the exchange program, which has been sustained bi-annually and annually between 2014 and 2017.

During the exchange experience, students spend ten days with a local family and engage in different cultural and educational activities including delivering English presentations in high schools, visiting universities, and participating in community service events. The selection procedure for the program is mainly based on online applications and in-person interviews that inquire about students' English proficiency, motivation, personal development, sense of leadership, and personal values.

Youth Empowerment

In psychology, the concept of empowerment refers to an approach through which individuals facing difficult situations or environmental conditions actively engage in finding solutions to the issues they face (Peterson, 2014). Peterson (2014)—based on conceptualizations by Maton (2008) and Rappaport (1981)—defines empowerment as “an active, participatory process through which individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives, acquire rights, and reduce marginalization” (p#).

When it comes to its application to youth, a documentary analysis conducted by Ucar-Martinez et al. (2017) concluded that the three concepts most frequently linked to empowerment in the literature are: power, participation, and education. According to the study, there is consensus among authors that “the general term refers to the efficient growth of young people by means of overcoming specific situations through the acquisition of competences” (Ucar-Martinez et al., 2017, p#).

Cultural Competence

While many models have been developed to conceptualize cultural competence, there is still a lack of consensus regarding how to define the term. According to a systematic literature review conducted on conceptualizations of cultural competence, the three major dimensions that most models include are: cultural awareness (an individual's awareness of her/his own views

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toward other cultures) and understanding, cultural knowledge (continued acquisition of information about other cultures), and cultural tolerance (Alizadeh and Chavan, 2016).

Citizen diplomacy

The conceptualization of citizen diplomacy as well as its practical implications have sparked debate among academics. Despite its controversial nature, there is general consensus that citizen diplomacy involves a key element: citizens' participation in foreign affairs (Odoh & Nwogbaga, 2014). Citizen diplomacy has been at the center of exchange programs as cultural and educational exchange programs were primarily initiated and funded with the objective of fostering international connections and building cross-cultural relationships between individuals. (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011; Akli, 2012). For instance, exercising "ambassadorship" is an element that is prominent in most study-abroad scholarship programs today.

Exchange Programs

Although Sister Cities Cultural Programs have not been the subject of much research, educational and cultural exchange programs and their effects on participants have been widely studied. Most studies point out the positive effects on those who partake in the exchanges, including enhanced knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of other countries; improved communication skills; and ripple effects on indirect participants such as family members and friends (Williams, 2000; Bachner & Zeuschel, 2009; Olberding & Olberding, 2010).

Methods

The study participants were Moroccan students ages 14-25 that had participated in the cultural exchange program as either guests or hosts between 2012 and 2018 (See Table 1). The data collection process comprised two phases. In phase one (P1), the whole population was evaluated (N=32). The 2019 cohort was excluded from P1 because they had not partaken in the experience by the time data collection took place. For the first phase, an online survey was emailed to all participants. Out of a total of 32, 18 participants responded to the online survey, representing 56.25% of the population. This number was the final sample for data collection P1 (n=18). In data collection phase two (P2), a qualitative questionnaire was used to collect in-depth information about the variables measured in the online survey. The questionnaire was used for structured interviews and was emailed to participants who, due to location and time constraints, were not able to take part in in-person interview sessions. In this second phase, the 2019 cohort (11 students) was included as they had already participated in the experience and were able to partake in interviews. Sixteen students participated in the interviews and 16 responded to the questionnaire electronically, for a total of 32 participants (n=32) in P2 (See Table 1).

Data Collection Tools

The study employed two data collection tools: an online survey and a qualitative questionnaire. The online survey consisted of five sets of Likert-scale type statements for a total

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of 24 items; there were 5 response options ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” with a “not sure” option. The survey explored participants’ perceptions of the impact of the program in three individual-level constructs: empowerment, cultural competence & citizen diplomacy, as well as other variables related to their personal development. The survey also included a section to explore aspects related to religious dialogue and understanding of religious diversity.

The statements used in each section of the survey were constructed after consulting the literature on conceptualizations of the constructs, as well as a set of tools exploring the same variables and dimensions examined in the study (Drane, Paxton, & Valois, 2005; Hansen & Larson, 2005; National Association of Social Workers, 2015; World Vision, 2011).

The qualitative questionnaire was created to collect more in-depth information about the dimensions measured in the survey, as well as to triangulate findings. The researchers determined that employing a qualitative tool would allow participants to freely articulate their thoughts and reflections on their experiences in the cultural exchange program. The tool would also reveal to the researchers nuances in participants’ perceptions that the survey would not be able to set forth.

A Facebook group was also created as a platform for participants to connect, network, and share their thoughts on the program freely, as well as to track participants’ whereabouts and occupations.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data resulting from the online survey were analyzed mainly through the utilization of tabulations and cross-tabulations. The data analysis was mainly descriptive, given the purpose of the study. Qualitative data collected through the questionnaire were first categorized into the variables that the study examined and then interpreted by identifying recurring themes and/or attitudes in participants’ responses.

Results

Empowerment

Building self-confidence and communication skills:

According to quantitative and qualitative data, the exchange positively impacted the youth ambassadors’ self-confidence and sense of control over their own lives. The majority of participants reported experiencing an increase in their motivation, their decision-making control, and their self-confidence after the experience (See Table 1). One of the most important impacts that the participants experienced was that the fact of being hosted by native English speakers, increased their communication abilities in English and motivated them towards continuing to improve their command of the language.

When asked about how participating in the cultural exchange impacted his life, Anir responded:

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Back to those days, no one of the students knew what being confident is, nor how being a leader feels like, what speaking in front of public is, what soft skills are and how to apply them in real life. But thanks to the association and cultural exchange, we got the chance to learn all these things and practice them, by many games we played together to improve our team work skills and leadership, and many presentations that were improving week after another, our teachers always start their comments after our performance by: “That was better than last week, but...” They always had something to teach us in order to go forward.

Aicha also reinforced her peer’s thought relating to building self-confidence. She replied:

As teenager I have always been shy and avoided any social interactions, but with the exchange program I acquired enough courage to start walking up to people and engaging in conversations and found myself enjoying it, being a Marrakech ambassador taught me that my words and actions matter, and that they can have a serious impact on people.

Fatima thought that this experience some participants felt that the experienced helped them made her break out of their shell. Fatima, a 15-years-old participant, expressed:

I do not regret participating in this cultural exchange because I had fun and benefited from it at the same time. I used to be quite shy, but now I’m a little bit more open and brave enough to stand up for myself. Also, I used to get really nervous when I am speaking in front of other people, but thanks to this experience, I managed to overcome my fear of public speaking, or at least, I am much less nervous than before. Also, I never imagined myself traveling to a whole other country without my parents. Even though I am independent and all, but I still can’t believe that I had the guts to travel alone, which is amazing.

Cultural Competence & Tolerance

Awareness, knowledge, and understanding of cultural diversity, and respect of different backgrounds and opinions:

Most respondents reported that the experience sparked their interest in and motivation toward learning more about other cultural backgrounds and interacting with diverse populations. They also thought that the experience helped them understand and respect others’ cultures (See Table 3).

Youth ambassadors also expressed feeling respected by their hosts, which made them feel more at ease when sharing aspects of their cultural identity and their views on life. Anir expressed:

The key to respect, acceptance, and appreciation of our forms of expression, our ways of being human, and of our rich diversity within cultures is tolerance. To foster a spirit of tolerance, it is important to engage in a diverse outlook of knowledge, openness, and communication, freedom of thought, conscience, and belief. And as our exchange was based on all the things mentioned above, this helped me develop a sense of cultural tolerance and local understanding.

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By welcoming a youth ambassador from the U.S., those participants who stayed at home were also able to benefit from the exchange experience and report similar outcomes. Hanane expressed:

[The experience] has helped me shape a more tolerant and empathetic vision towards people I interact with. I am now a better listener intrigued to learn more about the diverse social, educational, and moral backgrounds one can have. After the program, I became more willing to engage in thoughtful conversations with people from different backgrounds. It has helped me learn that despite our differences, we can all learn from each other.

Students also expressed becoming more empathetic after participating in the exchange, Aicha said:

This experience has made me aware of the huge cultural difference between our countries, but I have learned the importance of being tolerant and open minded to change. It has rewired my brain in a way; I started—in my social interactions—to try and comprehend, see things from the other party's perspective before deciding on an answer or an action. I've learned to be more accepting of others and less judgmental, and that by allowing ourselves to do things differently than we usually do, we end up learning a lot more.

Citizen Diplomacy

Building bridges for global connectedness and dialogue:

The majority of students reported that, after participating in the program, they felt more motivated to share their cultural identity with others and that the program helped them learn ways to engage in relationships and dialogue with others in a respectful manner. Many participants expressed that participating in the program offered them the opportunity to become a “Citizen Diplomat” of their country (See Table 4).

When asked about how this experience helped him become a global citizen, Jalila, a 24-year-old participant reported:

I really feel that my definition of identity has changed. After the experience, I started to see myself as a citizen of the world and started to see our differences as power that can lead us to global tolerance.

Malak added:

I made plenty of friends in Scottsdale including my host brother's friends on his school and the American exchange students as well . . . made me realize that we are all the same on this world and we should all unite and understand each other in order to build an amazing and tolerant relationship between nations.

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Lamia also points out the potential that the experience has to promote citizen diplomacy and relationship-building between people of different nations. She says:

The American students make new friends in Morocco and stay in touch all the time, and also the Moroccan students will do the same thing. And this is going to create kind of network between the people of the two countries and its expansion will lead to the brotherhood of people.

Practitioner's reflection & implications for theory and practice

The study findings demonstrate, to some extent, that the MSCEA and the Marrakesh Scottsdale Cultural exchange program have fulfilled part of their mission, which is to empower participants and help them develop self-confidence, cultural competence, and citizen diplomacy. The results are in line with the findings of other studies of cultural and educational exchanges that mostly show positive impacts on program participants.

This study contributes to the literature by adding new information on the perceived effects on youth of a specific Sister Cities program. By giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions and attitudes, they were able to express how the experience made them feel, what impact it had on their mindsets and beliefs about themselves and other cultures, and what skills (if any) they gained. Their responses highlight how participants from both countries were able to build respectful relationships, deconstruct stereotypes, gain independence and cultural awareness/knowledge, and develop collaboration and communication skills.

As an English Language Teacher (EFL) practitioner, the primary author of the present study has always been concerned with the implications of the policies and reforms that shape decision-making and educational improvement at the school level, particularly Moroccan school life. Thus, this research study has been a way for her to scrutinize the role of MSCEA cultural exchanges as complementary to the unfailing efforts of the Moroccan Ministry of national education at different levels. The latter has constantly launched different reforms, which put the role of the Moroccan school, the learner's autonomy, and growth at the center of its priorities. For example, some of the reforms aim at producing autonomous learners and impacting both teachers and learners in Moroccan schools through exposure to other cultures.

Empowering youth through sister cities cultural exchanges is a promising paradigm of growth and sustainable development that could be endorsed and supported in the realm of education. It is an immersing concept whose philosophy is to equip participants with life-long soft-skills and necessary long-term competences to contribute to the enlightenment of nations, communicative skills enhancement, self-confidence, and citizen diplomacy. It is a whole strategy from people-to-people to foster mutual global understanding of nations where motivated youth play a pivotal role and become citizen diplomats of their country and nations. It is indeed a powerful tool, which hopefully will promote mutual global understanding and youth leadership and participation in national and international matters.

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Limitations

This study has a few limitations that are worth discussing. To begin with, the study was conducted on the basis of action research methodology, which makes it less rigorous than other types of studies. In addition, the online survey presented 19%-31% item nonresponse, mainly in the last two sections, which points to a potential problem of survey fatigue and/or time constraints. Finally, given that the program's application process involves processes of selection based on participants' sense of motivation, leadership, and English proficiency, there is a strong possibility that students who participate in the exchange already possess relatively healthier levels of motivation and cultural open-mindedness than their peers.

Next steps and suggestions for future research

As the literature sets forth, many effects of cultural and educational exchanges remain unstudied, including their effects on indirect participants. Future research should attempt to answer the following questions: What changes do program participants bring to the classroom after the experience? How do classmates, teachers, and parents perceive them?

It is also important to develop standardized tools to measure the variables in this study and use them pre- and post-exchange experience. Having a counterfactual in future studies would also allow for more valid conclusions of the program's impact on students.

Our next steps for continuing to study and improve this program include embedding data collection into the exchange program to ensure more data and better data are available for every cohort, as well as ensuring that longitudinal data are collected to facilitate the study of far-reaching effects of the exchange experience. Additionally, we suggest that teachers and program coordinators of other Sister Cities Youth Ambassador exchanges should conduct similar research in order to have comparable data to better assess the impact and effectiveness of the model.

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Tables

Table 1: Demographics of study sample

	PHASE 1	PHASE 2
Total Sample (n)	18	32
Gender		
% Male	50	
% Female	50	
Age		
% 14-17	20	47
% 18-21	40	31
% 22-25	40	22
Program Year		
% 2012	22	6
% 2014	11	6
% 2015	28	22
% 2016	6	0
% 2017	33	19
% 2019	n/a	34
Occupation		
% Student	94	87.5
% Working Full-Time	6	12.5

Table 2: Respondents' perceptions of the program's impact on their self-confidence.

“After participating in the program, I feel more confident expressing my ideas.”

	PERCENTAGE
Strongly Agree	50%
Agree	38%
Not Sure	13%
Disagree	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%
GRAND TOTAL	100%

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Table 3: Respondents' perceptions of the program's impact on their ability to understand other cultural backgrounds.

“The program helped me understand people of other cultural backgrounds better.”

	PERCENTAGE
Strongly Agree	59%
Agree	29%
Not Sure	12%
Disagree	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%
GRAND TOTAL	100%

Table 4: Respondents' perceptions of the program's impact on their sense of “Global Citizenship”

“Participating in the program helped me become a global citizen.” (Note: definition of “global citizen” was provided in the survey.)

	PERCENTAGE
Strongly Agree	53%
Agree	35%
Not Sure	6%
Disagree	6%
Strongly Disagree	0%
GRAND TOTAL	100%