

Bridging Borders in Educational Leadership: Reflections on a Study Abroad Program in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This reflection provides an overview of a study abroad program in South Korea designed for American students enrolled in a Doctor of Education program in educational leadership. The study abroad program involved visits to four major locations in South Korea including the demilitarized zone, Seoul, Busan, and Gyeongju. They participated in a wide range of cultural activities and immersed themselves in the educational culture through a visit to a major public university in Seoul; they joined classroom activities, interacted with local students, and took part in a university festival. Students completed seven major assignments reflecting on their educational and cultural experiences.

Keywords: study abroad, intercultural communication, South Korea, Doctor of Education, cultural immersion

Study abroad programs offer students opportunities to engage in semester, year-long, or short-term programs. Short-term programs are becoming increasingly popular and can provide significant educational and cultural benefits when designed with intentional learning opportunities (Nguyen, 2017). This paper highlights the development and key takeaways from a 2-week study abroad program in South Korea in May 2025. The study abroad program centered on

educational leadership development. Participants in the study abroad program included five American Doctor of Education (EdD) students and one undergraduate student majoring in psychology. A major goal of the EdD program is to expand students' global perspectives by incorporating international experiences. Three of the EdD faculty previously worked in South Korea and thought it would be a logical choice for the inaugural study abroad program due to their knowledge of South Korean culture and the education system. The leader of this study abroad trip had lived in South Korea for 11 years and had extensive experience working in South Korean universities and schools.

This study abroad course explored the connection among education, culture, and leadership through engagement with the South Korean education system and South Korean society; additionally, it emphasized cross-cultural reflection, policy analysis, and comparative education. Through observations, reflective writing, multimedia projects, and policy research, students critically examined South Korean educational practices, cultural values, and institutional norms.

Key Activities and Sites

During the study abroad program, the students visited four primary locations in South Korea including Seoul (the primary base of the program), the demilitarized zone or DMZ, Busan, and Gyeongju. On the students' first full day of program activities, they visited the DMZ and participated in a Q&A session with a North Korean defector. They also went to the Freedom Bridge and Dora Observatory. This experience was particularly impactful; it provided students with a firsthand glimpse into the historical and ongoing division between North and South Korea. During the bus ride to the DMZ, the tour guide provided many invaluable historical and contemporary insights into both North and South Korea.

In Seoul, the students visited famous historical and cultural sites including Dongdaemun Market, Dongdaemun Design Plaza, Namdaemun Market, the National Museum of Korea, Seoul Tower, Gyeongbokgung Palace, and Insadong. They also got to engage in different cultural experiences including a baseball game and traditional tea time. Additionally, they split up into two teams on an education excursion day where students were tasked with visiting a university, public school, hospital, and private academy. They brought back many stories of their experiences, and one group even got to participate in a university festival and see what a lecture at a private academy entailed. In addition, the students spent two full days at a well-known South Korean university where they toured the campus, met with international office staff, and attended several classes. In Busan, they visited the United Nations Cemetery and Gamcheon Village, while in Gyeongju, they visited famous temples and historical sites.

Class Assignments

Students were required to complete assignments for the course including a photo essay, a study abroad reflection letter or newspaper article, a comparative education chart, vlogs or reflection journals, a South Korean education policy or issue snapshot, a cultural etiquette and school norms guide, and a group cultural and educational takeaways video. Course assignments were adapted for the psychology student. In addition, the five EdD students had different areas of expertise (e.g., university staff and administrators, university faculty, and a nurse educator). The instructor sometimes gave students flexibility in how they approached the assignments to better match their professional interests. An overview of each assignment is provided:

- 1) **Photo Essay:** The purpose of the photo essay was to develop observational skills and reflect critically on cross-cultural educational experiences. This assignment encouraged students to view education in everyday moments and connect photographs to educational or cultural themes. Students were asked to capture six original photographs during their time in South Korea that reflect elements of South Korean education and/or culture. For each photo, they had to write a 50–100-word caption that connects it to one or more of the following concepts: teaching, the role of the educator, student experiences, educational spaces, educational values and norms, and general cultural experiences.
- 2) **Study Abroad Reflection Letter or Newspaper Article:** The purpose of the study abroad reflection letter or newspaper article was to support personal and professional reflection. The students could write a letter (1–2 pages) to a future student sharing their own learning experience in South Korea or a newspaper article (1–2 pages) for publication. Two students chose to write a study abroad reflection letter, while four contributed to a group newspaper article on their experiences and reflections of the study abroad experience. Example prompts were provided to help students brainstorm ideas.
- 3) **Comparative Education Chart:** The purpose of the comparative education chart was for students to encourage comparative analysis and deepen understanding of how educational systems reflect broader cultural, political, and policy differences. Students created a 1–2-page visual comparison (e.g., chart, infographic, or table) of at least six elements of the South Korean and U.S. education systems. Topics could include higher education or K–12 (elementary, middle, or high school). The assignment was based on classroom and school observations conducted in South Korea and supplemented with a minimum of five scholarly sources. Students were instructed to include in-text APA

citations for each scholarly source. A suggested table template and list of category prompts were provided.

- 4) **Vlogs or Reflection Journals:** The purpose of the vlogs/daily reflection journal was to promote daily reflection, mindfulness, and synthesis of lived experience throughout the study abroad program. Students completed three reflective entries, either as vlogs (minimum 2 minutes each) or written journal entries (minimum 200 words each). A combination of formats was allowed (e.g., one vlog and two journals). Vlogs could be submitted as individual files or hosted links (e.g., YouTube, unlisted or private). Prompts and example topics were shared to encourage thoughtful reflection.
- 5) **South Korean Education Policy or Issue Snapshot:** The purpose of the South Korean education policy or issue snapshot was to develop research and policy analysis skills through an in-depth examination of a South Korean education policy or issue. Students selected one policy or issue related to South Korean education and submitted a 2–3 page analysis with at least seven scholarly sources in APA format. Students were given a choice of topics including the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), private tutoring, curriculum reforms, inclusion, school violence prevention, and more. Students were also given the option to propose their own topic with instructor approval. This was a key assessment for the program. APA citations and references were required.
- 6) **Cultural Etiquette and School Norms Guide:** The purpose of the cultural etiquette and school norms guide was to synthesize cultural knowledge and create a practical resource for U.S. educators preparing for travel or teaching experiences in South Korea. Students created a 1–2 page “quick guide” on South Korean etiquette and school norms. The guide was tailored for U.S. public school teachers or university faculty and included key customs, do’s and don’ts, classroom dynamics, and communication styles. The guide was supported by at least seven scholarly sources cited in APA format. Sections included: key etiquette rules, cultural expectations, do’s and don’ts, classroom dynamics, and communication styles, with optional additional content.
- 7) **Group Cultural and Educational “Takeaways” Video:** The purpose of the group cultural and educational takeaways video was to collectively reflect on and share personal insights gained from the study abroad experience. At the end of the program, each student recorded a 2–3 minute spoken reflection about their major cultural and educational takeaways from the trip. These individual contributions were compiled into a group video that was shared with all of the EdD students.

Reflection and Future Directions

The participating students in this program were primarily in a doctoral program centered on educational leadership. Cross-cultural leadership knowledge and skills are vital in an increasingly globalized world. Educational leaders can benefit immensely from participation in study abroad programs, cross-cultural exchanges, and collaborative work with individuals in other contexts. Even though short-term study abroad programs may have some limitations in comparison to full semester or year-long programs, they still can be beneficial for building intercultural fluency (Jackson, 2007; Nguyen, 2017; Richards & Doorenbos, 2016).

Students' study abroad reflection letters, newspaper article assignments, vlogs, reflection journals, provided valuable insights into their experiences. They were particularly intrigued by their visit to a South Korean visit and their immersion in the educational culture through classroom visits, interactions with local students, and participation in university festivals. They also shared their experiences with current students in hopes of encouraging them to participate in future study abroad programs and become involved in other international initiatives.

Although this program was quite beneficial as the students gained many insights into the Korean education system, culture, and history, there are certainly areas that can be improved on. The instructor started providing resources to the students months before the trip; however, providing more structured lessons and assignments (e.g., learning modules centered on thematic aspects of Korean culture, history, or the education system) before the program commenced would have been beneficial. Deardorff (2011) recommends ample preparation for student to learn about intercultural communication prior to departing for their study abroad programs. Furthermore, engaging in more post-trip reflections and structured activities would have been insightful, especially in considering the longer impacts of the experience. Programs that are a longer duration could be more impactful, but most of the students in the EdD program would not be able to commit to a study abroad program that is longer than a few weeks.

Even though the instructor in charge of this trip had lived in South Korea for many years, she tried to emphasize that there is always something new to learn about culture. Hopefully, the study abroad students will continue to reflect on this experience, share their insights with peers and colleagues, and pursue other methods for engaging in meaningful cross-cultural work. By sharing these experiences with peers, hopefully more will be committed to joining future study abroad programs or other initiatives centered on internationalization.

The EdD program is planning to offer the study abroad program in South Korea every 2 years and Croatia and Montenegro in the alternate years. The objective is to alternate locations to expose students to varied education systems. Additionally, although the study abroad program in South Korea was quite impactful and engaging, it was also very costly and travel time was lengthy.

These factors need to be taken into consideration for future study abroad programs.

The EdD program faculty recognize that not every student has the time, money, and resources to be able to travel for study abroad. The EdD program is considering other ways to internationalize through global learning microcredentials and more opportunities for virtual cross-border collaborations. Furthermore, the faculty are interested in virtual exchange or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects which could entail partnering with other universities for joint coursework, group projects, or discussion forums. The EdD program would also like to invite more international experts to join classes or seminars virtually on educational leadership, research, and other relevant educational topics.

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”

— Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869)

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Authors Bios

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