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**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' IDENTITIES AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL AND  
SOCIAL TRAJECTORIES**

by

**SUHA MOHAMMED HAMDAN**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2019

MAJOR: Curriculum & Instruction

Approved by:

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Advisor

Date

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Co-Advisor

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## DEDICATION

To my mom and dad, who I would never have done this without.

To the little girl inside of me, who thought she will never make it in this world!

You did it!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

During this difficult journey with all its ups and downs, I would never have gained the strength to carry on without praying Allah to give me strength and patience, “*For you, I worship, and for you, I ask for guidance.*”

I express my deepest gratitude to my parents for their endless support and patience. Mom, your prayers and believe in me gave me the courage to go on. Dad, you have always believed in my potentials at times it was hard for me to believe in myself. Your endless support, emotionally and financially, is the reason that I am here today. I aspire to be half the person you are in your kindness, patience and sense of giving.

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As for my six siblings, being abroad for eight years, I have missed your wedding days, your first baby born, achievements, divorces, and many important events in your lives. All while I am still a student abroad in grad school. I know that life has shaken some of you real hard, but I am proud of how fine successful individuals you have turned out to be.

As for my nieces and nephews, I know some of you are too young to even recognize me as a member of the family, but for the ones who do; I know I have missed many birthdays, graduations, and some of you have reached national achievements. I am proud to be your auntie, and I hope I can make up the times that I have been away.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore international students' identities and identity formation within social, educational, imagined futures, and their study abroad journeys. Qualitative analytic autoethnography and semi-structured interviews are the methodologies utilized. In the course of this dissertation, I explore my own experiences around identity and education as an international graduate student, as well as other participants' experiences.

Analytic autoethnography is a subgenre of autoethnography. Autoethnography is a method of inquiry in which the inner dialogue of the researcher is considered valid, which encourages reflection (Duncan, 2004, p.3). It critiques the self and others in a social context (Spry, 2001). Autoethnography offers hermeneutical understanding of the societal context and a sociocultural meaning of self. It also links between the personal (the self) and contextual (the social) (Chang, 2008). Semi-structured interview allows reciprocity between the participants and the researcher. This reciprocity produces space for the researcher to probe participants' responses for interpretation, and critical reflection (Galletta, 2012).

People can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positioning (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). That is, family experiences and previous experiences with institutions such as schools, as well as the larger social frameworks in which they operate, contribute in shaping identity formation through interaction. Who we are, what others think about us, what we are able to do, and what we will become (at least in part based on educational experience) are constant questions that come up for most people in a variety of different situations. Learning is not only a cognitive and social experience, but also an identity experience (Ligorio, 2010). Learning implies becoming a different person (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

An identity is not the whole self, it is part of the self that is revealed in various places (Marginson. 2014). Some identities within the self are more primary than others, such as those linked to family, culture, or mother tongue (Marginson, 2014). Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad (2014) define identity as the way we understand and view ourselves in relation to the world, other people, time and space. They state that identity has both personal and social dimensions. On a personal dimension, humans are considered as agents, and agents are able to think, decide and make choices. Agency is a self-conscious process which is required while our contradictory multiple selves negotiate simultaneously in order to make a choice on which self should be activated depending on the context, place, and time. On the social dimension, identity reflects individuals' relationships with the outside environment, which is reconstructed through interaction with society (Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

This paper highlights social and educational factors that may contribute to the shaping of learners' identities. This type of research is important and necessary, because we need to know the complex social and educational contexts that may affect students' identities. For example, if the context encourages conformity and constricts self-formation of identity, that can cause disengagement from interaction with the context. When students disengage from participation, there are serious consequences, such as resistance to learn or withdrawal from learning (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Providing a welcoming space for students to explore and embrace their various identities in the educational context can encourage them to participate with the surroundings, develop questioning skills, and attend to their inner voices, as well as promote their agency (Flum & Kaplan, 2006).

### **Research Process and Questions**

I mainly focus on the role of social and educational contexts that may impact the formation of international graduate students' identities, past and present. I also look into their future aspirations and imagined communities (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Regarding experiences in school contexts, I primarily view identity formation through Kaplan and Flum's (2012) theorization of identity formation in educational settings, which places an emphasis on the notion that relating school work to students' lives, development of their personal goals, and their social roles can play an integral role in shaping students' identities and levels of engagement with learning (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Education must focus on the adaptive formation of students' identities, promoting students' confidence, agency, and skills in questioning, in addition to the focus on attaining skills and knowledge (Flum & Kaplan, 2006), because in the absence of this, students can lose interest and disengage from the learning process.

Furthermore, Rich and Schachter (2012) emphasize the necessity of a nurturing environment in order for students to develop healthy identities. They assert that three characteristics are critical for fostering students' confidence and identity development: teachers' care, teachers as role models, and cultivating students as whole beings. Holistic education places value on the development of the whole person at both cognitive and affective levels, with the intent of enabling a person to develop and reach their highest potential (Forbes, 2003). So, in a holistic perspective, the student is positioned as an active, participatory, and critical learner who perceives, understands, and analyzes her or himself in different contexts, be it locally or globally (Hare, 2006).

Next, through Norton's concept of investment and imagined communities, I look into language learning and identity. Norton believes that language is understood in relation to its social

meaning (1995, 2001). She stresses that, as students position themselves in different social worlds, it causes them to organize and reorganize their identities, sometimes investing in learning a second language if the social world warrants. As such, Norton considers second language learning as investment in identities. To look into how future aspiration affects the identity of the learners in this study, I utilize the concept of imagined community, which gives a sense of direction, when students imagine an alternative world they aspire to live in or acquire their characteristics, and then act in the present to achieve their desired identity (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Finally, I attend to international students' study abroad journey and identity by utilizing Marginson's theory of international education as self-formation (2014). The journey, or experience of identity change as related to self-formation during the study abroad trip, is under recognized in the research. Often, international students' issues are framed within issues of adjusting to the norms of the host country (e.g., Barry, 2001; Berry, 1997; Brender, 2006; Dolby, 2004; Hopkins, 1999; Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936 ), and little attention is given to understanding international students within the self-formation framework. Specifically, in this study, I seek to address the following questions:

- In what ways, if any, do social and education contexts, either past or present, play a role in shaping international students' identities?
- In what ways, if any, do international students' imagined communities play a role in forming their identities?
- In what ways, if any, does the study abroad journey shape or alter learners' identities?

### **Importance of the Study**

Attending to learners' identity issues through giving learners space to engage in their own lived experience, giving them voice, and attending to their interests and goals will encourage them

to participate in the educational context (Flum & Kaplan, 2012), and in constructing a strong sense of agency (Marginson, 2014). This study gives further insight into the complex process of how students' identities are shaped in different social and educational contexts through analysis and interpretation of the social factors that lead to the rise of multiple identities.

### **Scope of the Study**

In this study, I am only looking at graduate international students studying in Midwest institutions for whom English is not their first language. That includes six participants from a variety of countries and fields of study. It is a qualitative study, and as such is not meant to be generalizable to the larger population, but rather to give insight into the different social contexts—past, present and future—that may have influenced the rise of international students' identities, and the possible role of the study abroad journey in changing their identities.

### **Definition of Terms**

Most of the terms used in this area of research have several definitions by multiple authors. In the following section, I define key terms as they are used in this study.

**Identity and agency.** Identity is how one understands her or his own relationship to the social world, and how the relationship is constructed through time and space (Peirce, 1995). Identities are multiple, complex, and can be subjected to the desires and discourses of power (Peirce, 1995). If identity is what individuals understand themselves to be, agency is the person's capacity to act on her or his own behalf. It is the ability to resist power or overcome invisible limitations (Ramanathan, Pennycook, & Norton, 2010). A strong personal agent is someone whose actions and achievements are estimated according to his or her own values and objectives, and who does not put high value on external criteria and assessment (Sen, 2000, p.19). Identity and agency are inextricably linked because we can be agents in the creation of our own identity, or we

can be denied agency by being positioned by others (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Moreover, a person's identity might be labeled or imposed by social institutions, while person's agency is mostly self-driven (Sen, 2000).

**Imagined identity and community.** Imagined communities are defined as, "groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect with the power of the imagination" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). For many learners the target community is a community of imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities. Imagining communities gives a sense of direction as it provides hope to imagine an alternative human world in a way that enables learners to act in the present as if what they imagined had already begun to emerge. The benefit of imagined communities is that they expand the range of possible selves, which helps learners invite an imagined identity (Norton, 2001). For example, many graduate students aspire to join what are currently imagined communities of engineers, educators, or medical professionals, though they are not currently part of those groups.

**Sojourners and international students.** Sojourners are individuals who travel abroad to attain a particular goal within a specified period of time. The expectation is that these sojourners will return to their countries of origin after completing their assignment. The sojourner group includes tourists, international students, and expatriate workers. Bochner, Furnham, and Ward, (2001) defined international students as sojourners whose aim is to gain professional qualifications abroad and return home. Although most of the international students in this study are students who decided to travel abroad to get a higher education with the intent of eventually returning to their home country, most are currently debating the decision. I alternate between the terms international education and study abroad journey; both refer to the time the international students stayed during their formal higher education.

## Conclusion

Many factors play a role in shaping international students' identities, such as family, school, and social surroundings. Depending on the experiences with the social context, the individual takes certain roles or forms distinct identities. Examining the experiences of international students within the frame of identity formation or self-formation in different social contexts is underrecognized in the literature (Koehne, 2005; Marginson, 2013). This study gives insight into the important role different social contexts play in forming international students' identities. In the next chapter, I present the theoretical frameworks that address the issues of identities within different social contexts as well as the relevant, extant research.

## Chapter 2- Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter includes the theoretical framework and a review of the literature in several areas. First, I will discuss the theoretical framework of identity formation that is utilized in this study. I will then review literature and research conceptualizing identity from multiple fields and identity in social contexts. After that, I will review literature on identity in educational contexts, then I will review literature on investment and imagined communities, and how that may affect learners' identities. Finally, I will examine the literature on international students and identity.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the idea that identity is contextualized and inherently social. Both learning, and identity construction is embodied in a social context (Wenger,1998). In the section that follows, I will discuss how identity is conceptualized from different fields, then examine identity within the social context.

**Conceptualization of identity.** Contemporary insight regarding identity emphasizes its situated, negotiated nature. Identity is not context-free; it is shaped by, and shapes in response, the contexts in which it is formed (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Generally, individuals find themselves in multiple contexts throughout their lives. These contexts, which include home, country, family, peer groups, school, community, culture, and history, among others, each have an influence on identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The importance of context in the identity formation process is acknowledged by a significant number of researchers (e.g., Adams & Fitch, 1983; Adams & Marshall, 1996; Goossens & Phinney, 1996; Marcia, 1980; Markstrom-Adams, 1992). Marcia (1980) considered schools as the most important societal institution for adolescents' identity development. Grotevant (1987)



was one of the first identity researchers who identified different contexts that play important roles in identity development: the culture and community, family, peers, and professional and social environments. This initial research led to the question of which characteristics in each context facilitate the rise and formation of different identities.

Socio-cultural and positioned explorations of identity (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schachter, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978) have shed important light on the connection between growth of identity and its context; that is, they have emphasized the interaction of personal, social, critical, and cultural situational elements in our understanding of identity. Identity is very much affected by the context of our lives and by personal experiences. In addition, according to Bamberg (2011), identity is not limited by one societal discourse, but is open to change. Identity is able to transform in order to overcome the challenges of increasing cultural multiplicities in increasingly globalizing environments (p.10).

### **Social Context and Identity**

Identity theory traces its roots to the writing of Mead (1934), who explains how social structures affect self and how self affects social behavior. From sociological point of view, Bransen (2000) argued that identity is an ongoing activity of trying to make sense of oneself. A person is constantly trying to find his or her place in relation to the environment. In addition, identity construction, from a sociological perspective, is a result of interaction between people, institutions, and practices (Sarup, 1998). Moreover, identity is not only the way we view ourselves, but also how we are viewed by others, which is tied to the social contexts in which people live. It is constructed through a mixture of social practices in which individuals engage in their daily lives. So, identity can be a reflection of the various ways in which people understand themselves in relation to others (Ige, 2010).

Furthermore, social identity theory adopts the concept of identity based on the social categories created by society (nationality, race, relation to power and status). Individuals derive identity or understanding of self in great part from the social groups to which they belong (Abrams & Hoggs, 1998). In this view, that people are defining their own identities is only partially true due to the fact that outside categorization impacts individuals' senses of identity. A person can identify with any number of cultures, but that culture is part of most people's definitions of identity actually comes from an outside force. So, even though society may not dictate with which culture one identifies, it influences the fact that people identify as a culture as part of their self-defined selves. Also, from social identity theory point of view, a person does not possess only one self, but rather multiple selves, where each is activated accordingly, based on the specific situation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is why many researchers prefer the use of the term "identities" instead of using the singular form. For example, a person might have a student identity in their university, but a teacher identity in their place of work.

From a sociocultural perspective, identity is not a personal characteristic, but is rather "social, a learning process, a nexus, and a local global interplay" (Wenger, 1998, p.163). Wenger does not view identity as narrowly individualistic nor abstractly collective, societal, or institutional. Identity stems from our experiences, social interpretations, and relations with others; all these layers build upon each other to produce individuals' identities (Wenger, 1998).

Moreover, Wenger asserts that identity is "lived" and a "becoming" (1998, p. 163). It involves "negotiated experience" (Wenger, 1998, p.149), in which people experience different identities while involved in different social participation, and then make choices among the identities within them. Researchers such as Peirce (1995), McKay and Wong (1996), and Armour (2004) state that the experience of negotiating multiple identities is a site of struggle, in which the

individual has to decide which identity to activate. For example, one of the participants of McKay and Wong's (1996) case studies, was "Michael Lee" (a pseudonym). He was from China and wanted to contradict the stereotype of Asians being "nerdy" by being proficient in sports. He attempted to refuse to give in to the way he was positioned as an Asian ESL student. He refused to write about proposed topic of family and school when he was asked to in a language classroom. Alternatively, he chose to write about his hobbies as he felt much more content with this side of his identities. McKay and Wang (1996) concluded that he experienced internal social negotiations to form a preferred identity in the school setting in which he existed.

Each identity that a person shapes and is shaped by necessitates the following: (a) membership in a community in which people define who they are by the common and the uncommon, like a group of professionals who identify with a common set of ethics and reject ethical stances that are uncommon within the group; (b) a learning journey in which learners define themselves by past experiences and imagined futures incorporated in the present. This journey is an accumulation of memories, stories, and interactions with people and places, as well as an image of oneself in the future. (c) a connection of multimembership in which people merge their different forms of membership into one coherent sense of self. Identity reflects the multiple memberships that one travels through. All these identities that may contradict one another coexist in oneself; and, (d) a relation between local and global ways of belonging to Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). Defining identities as "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice," Lave and Wenger argue that, "identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another" (p. 53)

In addition, Wenger asserts that construction of a coherent identity is "of necessity a mixture of being in and being out", a combination of participation and nonparticipation (1998, p.

165). When second language learners are learning in a new country, they participate in multiple communities across time and space. They may participate as part of the dominant Discourse group with full access to material and symbolic resources (full participation) in one community, or as part of a less powerful group with limited access to the community's resources in another (i.e., peripheral or marginal participation) (Lave & Wenger 1998; Haneda, 2005). This multiple membership results in constructing multiple identities of "being in and being out" (Wenger, 1998, p.165). An example would be, many women in academia identify with their academic community, and in that context they never join in conversations about family (effectively not participating in the community of working parents). In this case, they still belong to both, but not at the same time, because being seen as motherly in an academic setting can make them seem less a part of the academic community. Wenger asserts that we "not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in" (p. 164).

Moreover, Lave and Wenger (1998) made a distinction between the use of the term "identities-in-practice" and "identities", highlighting the difference between the notion of identity as a set of choices and practices that is co-constructed between individuals and a specific community (identity in practice), and a relatively uniform sense of self (identity). The concept of identities-in-practice describes learning as participation in a community of practice, involving the construction of identities in relation to what the community practices (Wenger, 1998). That is, to learn in any community means to become a particular person, to engage in a particular pattern of participation with respect to the opportunities permitted by that community. By negotiating membership (receiving, resisting, or revising expectations) individuals practice a particular

identity in that context, reflecting who they are expected to be, to match who they think they are or desire to be in that specific setting (Faircloth, 2012, p.187).

### **Literature Review**

Relevant literature plays an influential role in the formulation of research questions. In the case of this study, which is, in part, an autoethnography, my personal experiences that have left an impact on the development of my own identities, had influenced the formulation of the research questions in addition to the relevant literature. This chapter includes a review of the literature in several areas related to identity construction related to past, present, and future educational and social contexts. I reviewed the literature related to educational (school) context and identity, second language learning, imagined communities and identities, and international education and identity.

#### **Educational Context and Identity**

The participants in this research are international students, and I look into how educational contexts such as their experiences in schools may have influenced developing their identities and learning trajectories. That education and identity are related has been recognized by many scholars (Davidson, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Erikson, 1968; Gee, 2000; Kaplan & Flum, 2012; McCaslin, 2004; Ogbu, 1987). Identity formation is considered an outcome of the interrelated nature of the context and the individual (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Identity development processes and maintenance extend across one's lifespan (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1968). Identity formation starts early on, since children begin to learn about what interests them, what they are good at, and how they "fit" in the world. The definition of who they are develops in early years around defined roles (e.g., daughter, student, friend), some competencies (e.g., playing well at sports), and available opportunities to try different interests and expand their capacities, both in terms of access to

resources such as music, arts, and technology as well as social support. In adolescence, identity continues to form around experiences and the aspiration for a career or profession that might emerge from school activities, extracurricular or the extended surrounding environment (La Guardia, 2009).

Schools are considered a social context for learning processes. Kaplan and Flum (2012) acknowledge the importance of focusing on identity formation in education and state that school contexts are central to students' life experiences and sense of who they are and who they want to become. Negative educational contexts, such as those that deprive students from connecting with their own interests and goals, can act as barriers that limit learners' use of their voices and life experiences in school and their opportunities for building a strong sense of identity (Faircloth, 2012). In contrast, Flum and Kaplan (2006) posit that if schools pay more attention to students' identities by relating school experiences to students' development of goals, life stories, social roles and worldviews, students will likely feel more engaged in school work as they are taking part in their learning process.

When classroom and school activities connect with an individual's identity or sense of being, engagement is most productive (Waterman, 2004); and engaged students tend to have better learning outcomes (Waterman, 2004). Students who try to understand school content and learning with respect to their identity and sense of who they are (or want to become) develop an exploratory attitude toward learning, which includes active engagement (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). For example, Faircloth (2012) investigated the effects of teachers facilitating connections between students' identities and learning experiences on their engagement in learning. In this study of a ninth-grade English classroom, class activities were designed with input from students to provide students with opportunities to connect learning with issues relevant to their own identities and around students'

experiences and interests. The teacher co-designed activities with the researcher and one research assistant that were intended to offer students with opportunities to connect learning with problems related to their own identities. Students were asked to write about and discuss their senses of whether a connection existed between their own lives and viewpoints and tasks and topics taught in their English class. They also had to complete weekly journals exploring connections between the literature they were reading and their selves. Through qualitative surveys, interviews, and class observation, the researcher concluded that many engaged students credited their engagement to the attention to their voices and selves that was offered by teachers through the classroom activities they provided. Before the intervention, many students reported feeling isolated. As one student explained, “To make it at this school, I’d have to...be someone I’m not” (p. 190), and multiple students defined ‘boring’ activities as those ‘not related to me or my life’ (p.190). After the study, students reported things like “I felt like I was there ” [meaning the student felt he was seen, and not ignored in school] (p.190). Thus, learning about the lived experiences of students and relating activities to student’s identities can be an important element of curriculum development and pedagogy, and can increase the participation and engagement of the students.

Education should promote development of students’ identities, including self-knowledge, values, goals, and skills for personal and social transformation that can help in coping with rapid changes in life (Brophy, 2009; Flum & Kaplan, 2006; Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010). Teachers can support this process by dialoguing with students about the meaning of school learning, supporting students’ skills, relating the material to self-knowledge, and encouraging students’ sense of self as related to school content and experiences (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Not attending to students’ identities may result in failing to prepare them to understand deeply what their lives could be about or what their places could be in the world around them. This, in turn, may result in

students not gaining complete fulfillment in their personal lives (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011).

Kaplan and Flum (2012) state that identity commonly connects between the self and aspects of the world. It synthesizes past, present and future experiences. They argued that students should construct their identities through making sense of and interpreting discourses and dialogue rather than merely relying on official institutions and dominant power interpretations and constructing of knowledge.

Rich and Schachter (2012) state that students' identities develop positively in nurturing contexts and that school is a potentially important venue for identity development. They looked into whether high schools are characterized as being strong in promoting student identity development. In particular, their study examined the contributions of three characteristics of school climate that nurture adolescent identity development: teacher caring, teachers as role models, and a school program that cultivates the student as a whole, rather than just academic learning. They theorize that when secondary school students perceive that (a) their teachers care about them as people, (b) their teachers act as positive role models and (c) their school actively encourages different goals and aspirations and is not exclusively focused on academics, they grow confident in their ability to develop positive identities in the future and they engage in exploration activities.

An inclusive perspective that focusses on the student as a whole, including emotional and academic aspects, as opposed to an exclusive one that focusses on grades and academics, enables students to explore different aspects of the self and can provide different ways for students to be more fully engaged and to reveal areas of self-worth in school (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias 2003; Hare, 2006). Furthermore, cultivation of the whole student in school, and creating an atmosphere that does not prioritize only academics could enhance



students' confidence in meeting future identity development challenges. Also, the school curriculum can be especially important for students' identity formation when it incorporates ideas that will become meaningful to the students in the context of their own lives (Whitehead, 1929).

Not far from the idea of inclusive perspective in educations is Gee's (1989) notion of liberating Discourses, which can be achieved by providing juxtaposed Discourses to students for comparison and contrast. Gee encourages providing space and opportunities to expose students to multiple Discourses instead of exclusively limiting them to a narrow one. He argues that this juxtaposition boosts meta-level cognitive and linguistic skills, which in turn can prepare students to critique various Discourses throughout their lives. He believes that liberating Discourses reconstruct and resituate people. According to Gee, there are two kinds of Discourses: Primary and Secondary. A Primary Discourse is one which is a home-based sense of identity. It is the one we primarily acquire, and use initially to make sense of the world (Gee, 1989). This Discourse is used in unmonitored social interactions and is not learned by overt instruction, but by being a member of a social group. As for secondary Discourse, there are two types. These two types are the dominant and the non-dominant secondary Discourses. The dominant is the one that leads to attaining social goods, such as money and status. The non-dominant is the mastery of what brings solidarity with a certain social network, for example, interacting with institutions like churches and schools (Gee, 1989, p. 5). Moreover, Gee (1989) states that students should be encouraged to recognize the primary Discourses that they have already acquired from their home and how they relate to the secondary ones they are trying to obtain in school, and how the ones they are trying to obtain relate to self and society.

Rich and Schachter's (2012) study also looked into students' reflections of what positive school experiences look like. They stated that when academic activities are personally meaningful,

and students are actively engaged in exploration, they are more likely to feel safe and comfortable in the school atmosphere, as well as to experience a feeling of social acceptance. Engaging students in meaningful activities and exploration and encouraging them to express their voices and practice their agency may help students to be more confident in exploring the world and confronting challenging future life tasks (Rich & Schachter, 2012). Along the same line, Lens, Simons, and Dewitte (2002) stated that students will likely develop a sense of exploring possible future life roles and feel greater comfort in doing so when their school experiences encourage and value meaningful engagement, and help create awareness of sense of personal capabilities and confidence to explore and face future challenges.

### **Language Learning and Identity**

Up to this point, the research that has been described has, for the most part, been about general school contexts. In this section, I discuss research about learners' identities in second language learning. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language learning is a process of identity construction (Norton, 1997). This section gives a brief overview of what research says about second language acquisition (SLA) and identity.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, it is necessary that SLA researchers understand the social contexts in which second language learning occurs (Norton, 1997, Myles, Mitchel, & Mardsen, 2013, Young, 1999). Another important point that sociolinguists have focused on is how communication in a second language impacts individuals' senses of social identity (Norton & McKinney, 2011; Norton & Toohy, 2011; Pierce, 1995). Language is theorized not only as a linguistic system, but as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated.

Norton (2000) emphasizes the sociolinguistic view that second language acquisition impacts individuals' identities, but she further states that in order to understand the relationship between language and identity, understanding poststructuralist theory of language is essential. The poststructuralist approach to second language acquisition recognizes that second language learners are engaged in dialogic relationships with the target society, in which context is negotiated rather than accepted, and in which speakers must constantly negotiate their positions relative to other speakers (Giroir, 2014) in the context of social environments (Hawkins, 2005). Poststructuralist concern about such issues has led many scholars to frame identity not as something static for life, but as evolving by nature. In particular, when individuals move across geographical and psychological borders, immersing themselves in new sociocultural environments, find that their senses of identity are destabilized and that they enter a period of struggle to reach a balance (Block, 2007).

Norton defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2000, p. 5). Moreover, she states that the construction of identity cannot be separated from identity negotiation, in which an individual seeks answers to the question, "who am I?" (Norton, 1997). This means that identities are not static, but rather are questionable, changeable, and negotiated for the purposes of evolvment, construction and reconstruction. Particularly, learners who choose to study abroad in a new country and in a different language, tend to question their thoughts about themselves, and change their visions about the world and the way they recognize their identities (Norton, 1997). So, language learners are investing in their identities that are constantly alternating, developing, and changing. Norton (1995) was the first to introduce the concept of SLA as investment in order to shed light on the

multifaceted relationship of the learner and the changing social world. By investing in learning a second language, learners are investing in their own identities too.

Pierce (1995) sees investment as a social concept, not as a psychological construct of motivation. She argues that the desire to learn a second language is not as simple as the desire to obtain a tangible reward. Learners' lives are shaped by learning the language, and their access to second language communities. Adult learner participation is not typically a problem of motivation, but rather the interaction between who learners are and how they are positioned, alongside which identities are acknowledged in the classroom. This, in turn determines the level of investment in participating (Pierce, 1995).

In Skilton-Sylvester's (2002) ethnographic case studies of four Cambodian women enrolled in an adult education English class, the researcher looked into the participants' identities. For some of her participants, being mothers was very important to their investment in learning English, because they wanted to assist their children with their homework; that was their initial reason for attending the class. The teacher acknowledged the goals of her students as mothers, and the curriculum was organized around their goals. The classroom context that the participants attended incorporated their identities. For one, their children were allowed in the classroom, and issues around parenting were incorporated into the curriculum, which had a positive impact on the students' desire to participate in the language classroom. From these case studies, Skilton-Sylvester concluded that attending to the identities of the language learners, the social contexts of their daily lives, and the classroom context, influences the level of learners' investment in learning English (2002).

Norton (1997, 2001) adds that investment is also understood with reference to Bourdieu's (1991) concept of cultural capital. That is, when learners invest in a second language they do so

with the intention that they are going to obtain a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase the worth of their cultural capital, their identities, and opportunities for the future. For this reason, she contends that there is a relationship between investment and identity. In her case study of five immigrant women in Canada, through interpretation of their dialogue journals, Norton illustrated that the language learners with whom she worked continued to learn a new language persistently because of responsibilities attached to their identities, as mothers, breadwinners for their family, or workers. The participants viewed their investment in learning the language as a means to expand their cultural capital and social power for themselves (1995).

Some SLA theorists have overlooked the relations of power in the social world that can affect social interaction between second language and target language speakers (Norton, 2011). For example, the refusal of some native speakers, or target language community to accept new members into their communities restricts language learners from possibilities of even participation. Certain institutions or communities positions language learners in a weak and limited view, which may result in resistance and vice versa. Learners have expectations and desires and they tend to exercise their agency to negotiate participation; they may resist participation when their expectation is in conflict with their imagined community. Sometimes the rejection of native speakers to accept new members into their linguistic communities restricts language learners from possibilities of participation. The concept of imagined communities inspired Norton's work with issues of nonparticipation (Norton, 2000).

*Imagined communities and identities.* The term “imagined identities” was initially created by Anderson (1991), who stated that individuals have an artificial sense of connection with fellow citizens that they have never seen in real life. Kanno and Norton (2003) define an imagined

community as, “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible with whom we connect with the power of the imagination” (p. 241). For many language learners, the target community is a community of imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities. For example, middle school students in Pakistan, who were involved in a global community education project, sought to promote the literacy and English skills of a group of Afghani refugee children. The students were imagining Pakistan in the future as a contributing member of the international community in which literacy and proficiency in English were important to development and peaceful coexistence (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Norton (2001) also extended the notion of communities of practice proposed by Lave and Wenger (1998), which focuses on learning taking place as a result of immediate engagement with accessible communities. Norton expanded this idea to include imagined communities, or connecting with a group of people through the power of imagination. She posits that doing so gives a sense of direction for learners to envision their goals and aspirations. When students are encouraged to envision future affiliations, their investment in learning is positively affected (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagining an alternative human world in a way that enables learners to act in the present as if this alternative had already begun to emerge provides hope for a better future.

These imagined communities should not be equated with fantasy or a withdrawal from reality; the communities are real; the imaginative aspect is the learners’ participation in them. Learners must know the requirements to gain access to these communities. For example, a study done on bilingual students’ identities by Kanno (2000) described the experiences of a Japanese teenager who spent two thirds of his life in English speaking countries (Australia and Canada). Although his values and ways of thinking related more to the Canadian teenagers than Japanese

ones, he firmly believed that he was Japanese. He made a strong effort to keep his Japanese language proficiency, because he wanted to be recognized as Japanese. The boy had never seen Japan; it was an imaginary community to him. After visiting and experiencing the real Japan, he realized that his imagined Japan did not resemble the real country. His severe disappointment led him to declare that he did not want to be Japanese anymore. The participant had focused on the power of imagination and lacked the fundamental knowledge about the country.

The benefit of imagined communities lies in that they encourage learners to expand the range of possible selves as they invent imagined identities (Norton, 2001). Envisioning an imagined identity within the context of an imagined community can impact learners' engagement with educational practices and may drive learners to seek certain kinds of educational participation (Norton, 2001). Learning is not only based in the present, but also in future aspiration as learners envision an imagined and desirable identity needed to realize their imagined futures, and hence invest in. For example, Al Harthi (2014) employed the concepts of imagined communities, possible selves, and investment in her study of learners' positive imagining of linguistic communities and of themselves in the future as members of those communities. When interviewing her participants, who were Arab Muslim women, one participant declared that watching English films triggered a certain imagined community and motivated her to invest in learning English by imagining herself in the future. She imagined the English-speaking community as educated, modern, and civil people from the films, which motivated her to imagine herself as a member of those communities in the future. Her image of herself as educated and modern promoted her to invest in learning English. These pictures and future images were determining reasons that pushed her to invest in her learning and pursue her educational and professional identity.

Learners' experiences must be understood in terms of multiple identities, embracing their imagined identities, and their selection of participation in both real and imagined worlds. It is a way of affirming that what has not yet happened can be a reason and motivation for what learners do in the present. Norton (2001) asserts that we should make an effort to incorporate learners' pasts and envisioned futures instead of focusing only on the learners' immediate present so that learners' emotions are not in isolation from their personal histories and future aspirations.

### **International Education as Self-formation**

International students move across geographical, cultural, and language borders, and are in a constant state of evolution, rapidly learning about the new country, culture, and life system. When international students face a new culture, social structures, and ways of life in a new country, they find themselves in a constant search of who they are and who they want to become, driving them to be engaged in a journey of identity change (Marginson, 2014). Through this experience of novel choices, students gain an ability to reflect on and be critical of their past history, their own social values, and attitudes towards themselves and their home cultures (Marginson, 2014).

Researchers primarily identify issues of adjustment and adaptation to the host country as major dilemmas that international students face during their sojourn. Adaption to life in a new location is mostly conceptualized through the use of the terms "acculturation" (Barry, 2001; Berry, 1997; Brender, 2006; Dolby, 2004; Hopkins, 1999; Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). The concept of acculturation has become broadly used in cross-cultural psychology. The classical definition of acculturation was presented by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits: "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (1936, p.149).



Acculturation attends to the influence that cultural factors have on the development of individual human behavior. The focus is on how individuals who have developed in one cultural context manage to adapt to new contexts (Berry, 1997). Researchers advocating for adaptation view the self as addressing and adapting to the requirements of the outer or external reality. The concept of acculturation covers important issues of adaptation and coping with the new country, but fails to adequately address the role of self-formation within cross-cultural learning contexts (Dirkx, Anger, Gwekwerere, Brender, & Smith, 2007).

On the other hand, a self-formation paradigm deviates from the idea of reconstructing identities in order to encourage adaptation, coherence, and stability with the new country. It highlights the importance of attending to the inner dimensions of the self, attending to identity and agency (Marginson, 2014). International education is not only how students adapt, but also how they change, develop, and re-evaluate their own values and the ways in which they used to engage with people in the past, “at home.” As a result, they learn more about themselves and their cultural roots. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of empirical research done about international students’ self-formation.

The idea that international students travel to the foreign country just to assimilate is ethnocentric and reflects cultural hegemony (Koehn, 2005). Students should have the freedom to choose who they want to become and choose an identity between home country identity, host country identity, and other large set of cosmopolitan options (Koehn, 2005). In her study, Koehn utilized a poststructuralist lens as a way to investigate international students’ experiences of reconstructing their story lines about themselves (2005). She interviewed 25 international students from different countries (inclusive of countries in South East Asia, China, Europe, Africa, and South America) who were studying in the United States, and investigated the ways in which

international students constructed their storylines about themselves and who they were as international students. In her findings, she asserted that storylines are developed through reconstruction of self as a site of multiple identities, as hybridity, or via resistance to positions that are made available to them. This reconstruction demonstrates the diversity of international students, a diversity that needs to be acknowledged by welcoming a plurality of Discourses within institutions, rather than prioritizing adaption to the institutions' norms and cultures.

A distinguishing feature in the self-formation paradigm is that it highlights the individual differences among international students in the process of their personal growth and acknowledges that international students form their identities and themselves in ways that differ from student to student, even when home cultures are very similar. Giving international students space, will allow them to question their old selves, negotiate new identities, figure out their position in the new world, and reach multiplicity and hybrid identities (Margnison, 2013). This process of self-formation within conditions of disequilibrium will encourage students to manage their own lives reflectively, and style their own changing identities. The experience of self-directed agency during the foreign sojourn and the complex journey of making a new self among a range of often new choices, are underrecognized in literature (Marginson 2014).

Unfortunately, some academic institutions may view international students through a narrow lens, for example, as requiring extra attention, having many deficits (Asmar, 2005), as entities that are positioned according to different and similar nationalities (Koehn, 2005), or as weak (Marginson, 2014). When assumptions are made about international students based on their nationalities, it often leads to stereotyping and students being offered limited ways to express themselves (Koehn, 2005), which, in turn, is likely to diminish a sense of agency that should direct to their desired path. When a host institution or the dominant power dictates certain positions to

international students, that of a weak or lower status in universities, international students' identities are being manipulated (Koehn, 2015). Institutions and teachers can build conscious international student agency and work with it rather than adding pressure to acculturate. One recommendation is to engage in open and direct communication between students, teachers, and classmates, in which they are learning from an open, diverse cultures and identities. This can be done by fostering a norm that international students' histories, perspectives, and decisions as worthy and to be respected (Koehn, 2015). Also, this can be done by placing a heavy weight on the importance of dialogue and reflection, and developing multiple interpretations of the world culturally, historically and socially (Freire, 1970).

Self-formation gives students a wide range of identity possibilities, which they can coordinate to create identities from more than one culture. Self-formation empowers international students in that it does not position them as weak, but rather as individuals who have the agency to be involved in continuous change. In self-formation, students are encouraged to fashion themselves as they go, and are often conscious about their own changing identities; they persist shaping and reshaping until they make themselves who they want to be. They can free themselves from identity expectation placed upon them by their home culture and new culture (Marginson, 2014).

Similar to Marginson is Freire who asserted that learning is not possible without "reinvention" of self: knowledge rises through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, ongoing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world with the world and with each other (1970, p. 58). Freire emphasizes that "to know" is not to have reached a predetermined endpoint, but is a way of traveling, a way of being in and interacting with the world via dialogue

with others (Freire, 1970). To know is to possess a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection, to reflection upon action, to new action (Freire, 1970).

Another study on international education as “becoming” was conducted by Tran (2016), who utilized the idea of mobility as “becoming” as a theoretical concept to explain the dynamic and complex dimensions of international students’ mobility. She describes it as “becoming”, because international students utilize the overseas experience as means to realize their aspiration and to become more advanced in their profession and enhance their future social and economic positioning. She describes the characteristics they acquire through their engagement in geographical, cultural, intellectual and linguistic move related with overseas study as the products of both their investment in the self and their exercising of their own agency.

Kung’s (2007) study aims to uncover the lived experiences of international students’ educational journeys in the United States, for the purpose of gaining an in-depth understanding of the way in which international students navigate U.S. higher education to enhance their academic, personal, and professional learning and development. Kung conducted two in-depth interviews with eighteen participants. She found students facing challenges and difficulties led her participants to deal with disequilibrium and re-equilibrium in the host country in ways that their lives were never the same after the journey. She recognized a conceptual schema of “being and becoming” to describe the change and growth of the international students in the United States. She stated that during the process of being international students in the United States, in a way the chaos shattered these students’ old identities and fueled them to critically reflect on issues of who they were and who they want to become.

In her dissertation, Erichsen's (2009) goal was to make the worlds of international students' lived experience visible to the readers through a lens of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). She conducted multiple semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven participants. She stated that her participants' transformations led to more flexibility in understanding and open-mindedness. In her final remarks, she criticized Mezirow's transformational learning theory in its lack of consideration to the role of multiple contexts and the social dimensions of a person's life, and argued that the kind of transformational learning that occurred for the participants in her study is actually identity work.

In each of these studies, the researchers found that the move across geographical boundaries caused disequilibrium to the international students. In this disequilibrium, students navigated their way through, reflecting on their past context and self and investing in the present to become a new self. This process to become a different person entails self-formation or identity work.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the theory and research presented in this chapter, the elements of identity formation that I focus on in this research study are social, educational, linguistic, and family-oriented (Marginson, 2014), as well as additional elements that emerged from participant interviews. The literature on school and language learning contexts, study abroad journeys, and the relation of both to learners' identities focuses on embracing learners as a whole. This requires giving attention to their histories and life experiences, and allowing students the space to give use their voices and negotiate their identities. The researchers cited in this chapter also agree on

the importance of the social context in affecting learners' identities, which in return affects their learning and trajectories.

### Chapter 3- Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the social and educational factors that affect international students' identity formation, and consequently their learning processes. In this chapter, I describe the specific research methods employed in this dissertation and clarify how the methods chosen align with my research questions. The four main questions under investigation concerning identity and learning are:

- In what ways, if any, do social and education contexts, either past or present, play a role in shaping international students' identities?
- What roles, if any, do international students' imagined communities and future aspirations play in forming their identities?
- In what ways, if any, does the study abroad journey play a role in identity formation?

Semi-structured interviews and autoethnography are the two research methods used to answer these questions. These qualitative methodologies assist in exploring and analyzing personal experiences within social contexts that may lead to identity formation. Autoethnography stems from the field of anthropology and shares story telling piece and self-narratives; it also involves cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). There are several types of autoethnography. Since I am interested in identity, the self, and social factors related to formation of both, I used analytic autoethnography because it focuses on analyzing and explaining personal and cultural experiences (Allbon, 2012).

In this chapter, I first describe why qualitative methods are well-suited for my research. I then discuss autoethnography and semi-structured interview methodologies; provide information on the data collection procedures, subjects, and data analysis strategies; and discuss the limitations of my methods.

## Qualitative Research

Exploratory, qualitative approaches are useful in developing hypotheses and in-depth explorations and interpretations of certain topics experiences, situations, or phenomena. The strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to provide an insiders' perspective, to capture the heart of the lived experience of one or more individuals. It can also provide understanding of the role culture plays in a phenomenon or psychological process reflected in language, thought, and behavior from the perspective of the participants, themselves (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). This focus on participants' subjective views can empower them to tell their stories (Creswell, 2007).

I chose to use analytic autoethnography, because it uses the personal and emotional to advance a researcher's understanding of self and culture through its reflexive quality that invites readers to become co-participants in the story (Adams et al., 2015; Denzin, 2014; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In analytic autoethnography, researchers reflect upon their own experiences as data to understand a certain question or inquiry, and use reflection and writing to make meaning from those experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I used analytic autoethnography to help me understand my own experiences as an international student, with the purpose of guiding my inquiry and interpretations about others' experiences. Semi-structured interviews draw out life experiences from participants. Participants are asked the same set of open-ended questions, enhanced by probes to follow up on their responses (Schensul & LeCompete, 2010). Thematic analysis is utilized. In-depth discussions of both data collection and analysis can be found in the following sections.

### Data Collection

This study also utilizes semi-structured interviews as the external data collection tool. Two, oral, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, each lasting approximately



one hour. The answers to the open-ended questions were audio-recorded and transcribed. In addition to collecting data from participants' interviews, this study will also consider the researcher's memory as data. Some data in this study are drawn from the past experience of the researcher (autoethnographic data), others were collected at the time of the study. Internal data was generated from researcher's memory (Chang, 2008), as is appropriate in any autoethnographic study. What is recalled from the past is the core of autoethnographic data (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographers investigate deep inside their past experiences to generate data for readers. It creates space for sharing the unique, subjective, stories of experiences that provide understanding of the author's social worlds. As an author, autoethnography allows me to assert that what I know matters (Wall, 2006).

### **Autoethnography**

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography (AE) as autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally-involved self, along with cultural explanation mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation (p.742). It is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe (graph) and analyze personal (auto) experiences in order to understand cultural (ethno) experiences (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Autoethnography is an approach that acknowledges subjectivity and researchers' influences on research, and recognizes the countless ways personal experience influences the research process. It is a method of inquiry that authenticates the inner dialogue of the researcher, and encourages self-reflection (Anderson, 2006). One of the ideals of autoethnography is to abstain from making any assumption or reaching a general conclusion that holds true for all people, and instead to consider social science as an ongoing conversation, encourage multiple perspectives and plural voices, and unsettle established social meanings (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares the storytelling piece with other genres of self-narratives, but exceeds narration of self to involve cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). It entails telling a story about how much we, as researchers, authors, and readers, are concerned about fitting in and being normal, accepted, loved, and appreciated (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 114). Autoethnography may take many different forms depending on the emphasis that is placed on the study of others, the researcher's self and interaction with others, traditional analysis, as well as on power relationships (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). Some of these forms are Indigenous/native ethnographies, personal narratives, narrative ethnographies, reflexive narratives, and layered account. In the sections that follow, I will first explain the similarities and differences between autoethnography and biography, and then briefly describe different types of autoethnography.

**Autoethnography vs autobiography.** Though autoethnography and autobiography have similarities, they are not the same thing. AE combines features of both autobiography and ethnography. When writing an autobiography, authors write retrospectively about past experiences. In autoethnography, authors tell their experiences, analyze them, and focus on being part of a certain culture (Ellis, et al., 2011). Moreover, autoethnographers must use literature to analyze their own experiences and analyze other ways people navigate their experiences. Autoethnographers can explain characteristics of culture for both insiders and outsiders by using personal experience and examples (Ellis, et al., 2011).

Another difference between autobiography and autoethnography is that autobiography typically aims to be aesthetic and evocative; engage readers; and use storytelling conventions such as characters, scene and plot development (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). When researchers write autoethnographies, they, too, use aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions, but contextualize their

personal experience in social experiences. Autoethnographers make personal and social change possible by making personal experiences meaningful and cultural experiences engaging, which makes the texts reach a wide variety of audiences (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994).

**Different autoethnography forms/narratives.** There are many different types of autoethnography. Here, I will explain the most common. First, is Indigenous/native autoethnography. Attempts at introspective portraiture of indigenous and native people was once dominated by white, masculine, Christian, middle-upper class ethnographers, but has now often comes from the colonized or subordinated people themselves. Indigenous/native ethnographers construct their own personal and cultural stories (Ellis, et al., 2011) as opposed to serving as subjects for an ethnographer from a dominant cultural group. As a result, indigenous/native autoethnography uncovers the experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive authority (Neumann, 1996, p.189).

Another form of autoethnography is personal narrative, which is often presented as a typical product of autoethnography, but is also considered an independent method, itself. It is defined as a way of understanding yourself and your topic (Richardson, 2000). Personal narratives are written in as evocative narratives and often focus on the authors' academic and personal lives (e.g, Berry, 2007; Goodall, 2006; Poulos, 2008; Tillmann, 2009). The author's aim is to understand his or herself or any aspect of life that intersects with a cultural context or connects to other participants as co-researchers. Personal narratives invite readers to enter the author's world and use what they learn from it to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (Ellis, 2004, p.46). This method emphasizes a relationship between reader, writer, and texts, which allows the reader to change and understand how their own experiences fit in with the research

(Romerhausen, 2011).

The other two prominent forms of narrative are narrative and reflexive/narrative autoethnography. Narrative ethnographies are narratives presented in the form of stories, yet the emphasis is on the ethnographic study of others, which differentiates it from personal narrative inquiry. Reflexive/narrative focuses on the ways the researcher documents the changes he or she went through as a result of doing fieldwork; there is a focus on the journey of the ethnographer's backstage of the research (Ellis, 2004). Furthermore, layered accounts focus on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. This form emphasizes that data analysis proceeds simultaneously with data collection (Charmaz, 1983, p.110). It frames existing research as a source of questions and comparison rather than a measure of truth. It allows researchers to connect with their own questions and problems as valid ways in the search for knowledge and understanding (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40).

**Evocative vs analytic autoethnography.** It is noteworthy that not all autoethnographers think alike. In addition to taking several forms, there are two primary paradigms of autoethnography: evocative and analytic. The evocative approach prioritizes “an epistemology of emotion” (Anderson, 2006). It also gives high importance to the aesthetic dimensions (e.g., Irwin, 2006), and storytelling (e.g, Watt, 2012). From the evocative point of view, AE should focus on encouraging the reader to care, feel, and empathize, and researchers should be vulnerable and intimate (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Evocative autoethnographers dwell on lived experiences. They contend that evocative AE is superior to analytic AE, because it does not use lived experiences for the purpose of abstracting something like knowledge or theory, which makes it closer to realist ethnography in its lack of emphasis on feelings (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Analytic autoethnography is a second sub-genre of AE that focuses on analysis of personal experiences as well as others' experiences. It does not prioritize story-telling (Badley, 2014; Chang, 2007, 2008; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009; Merryfeather, 2014), but rather focuses on the interrelationships between the researcher and others to change social knowledge, which enriches self-understanding and widens social understanding (Anderson, 2006). Anderson (2006), a proponent of analytic AE, expresses his concern with "evocative or emotional autoethnography" (Ellis, 1997, 2004, 2006), in that it may have the consequences of obscuring other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may effectively fit in any other traditions of social inquiry (Anderson, 2006).

In spite of the strong argument between the two paradigms, some autoethnographers combine elements of evocative and analytic paradigm in their research; hybridity is possible. For example, in her dissertation, Leal-Covey (2015) combined both Ellis and colleagues' (2011) conception of personal narrative inquiry as evocative autoethnography, where the writer relates his or her personal story perceiving the self as the phenomenon, and she also utilized analytic autoethnography, because she wanted to explore and analyze the phenomena experienced by other people.

To clarify my focus, since my study is about exploring and analyzing my own experience as well as other participants, the primary focus will not be on descriptive or performative storytelling (though participants may tell stories in the course of their interviews). Rather, I will take an analytic approach to cultural analysis and interpretation, incorporating narrative details (Chang, 2008, p.46). In the following section I will further define and describe the analytic autoethnography, as well as explain the rationale for its use in this study.

**Analytic autoethnography.** Analytic autoethnography is not only grounded in self-experience, but stretches beyond it as well (Anderson, 2006). An essential part of analytic autoethnography is the interrelationships between the researcher and others to change social knowledge (Davies, 1999).

[Self-understanding] lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by—and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live. (Anderson, 2006, p. 390)

Anderson (2006) proposed five key features of analytic autoethnography: (1) complete member researchers, meaning researchers are both members and considered legitimate participants in the group being studied, but are more analytic and self-conscious than the participants. I am an international student myself who has been studying abroad for 8 years, so I am a legitimate participant in the group being studied; (2) analytic reflexivity, which entails introspection directed by a wish to better understand the self and others through investigating one's perceptions in reference to and in dialogue with those of others. In this study, I reflect on my own journal (personal experiences and memories) and I utilized semi-structured interview to look into students' perceptions; (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, meaning researchers are visible social actors within the written text and they integrate their own feelings and experiences into the story, which is fundamental data for understanding the social world being observed. My own past and current experiences are incorporated into the stories of my participants and considered as vital data for understanding; (4) dialogue with participants beyond the self, which is the interrelationships between the researcher and other; I examine my own perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others; (5) commitment to theoretical analysis, which entails use of empirical data to gain

insight into some broader set of social phenomena, providing theoretical illumination or modification of the topic under investigation (p. 388). I use data from interviewing the participants and myself to look into how different social contexts contributed to the identity change.

**Data collection through analytic autoethnography.** Personal memories are the primary source of data for autoethnographers, because the past gives a context to the present self (Chang, 2008, p.71). I used a journal to record my own past experiences during and after the time period of the interviews, as interviewing the participants might trigger more memories (Chang, 2008). My journal has bits of information that are arranged chronologically. Creation of an autobiographical timeline entails selecting major events and experiences from personal memory in chronological order. For example, my timeline starts from the events of childhood schooling and moves forward until my time as an international student. Autoethnographers might also select major events by making it thematically categorized relevant to the study (Chang, 2008, p.76).

Autoethnographers collect data from the present, too. Collecting data related to what is happening at the time of research (thoughts, behavior, emotions) is called self-observation. Also included in autoethnography are self-reflection, which is gathering data resulted from introspection, self -analysis, and self-evaluation of who you think you are (Chang, 2008, p.95).

**Limitations of autoethnography as data-collection tool.** Autoethnography creates a space for a reexamination of familiar ways of thinking and gives us power to question pre-established ideas and thoughts (Holman Jones, 2013, p. 21). Like any other method, it is criticized for its limitations, primarily the lack of objectivity. However, autoethnographers do not attempt to escape bias, but rather acknowledge it (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Instead of the researcher putting subjectivity aside in the scientific research process by denying his or her identity, first-person narrative gives opportunities to the reader to connect to the text by passionately experiencing an

author's narrative of a lived event (Romerhausen, 2011).

Moreover, autoethnography has also been criticized for its risk of possible self-indulgence and narcissism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Coffey, 1999; and Sparkes, 2000). To refute the claim that autoethnography emphasizes a single speaking subject, Bochner (2001) asserted that the focus on the self cannot be decontextualized. Individual voice does not speak in isolation from societal structure of co-constructed meaning.

Although I was fascinated by autoethnography when I was introduced to it during my PhD proposal phase and after reading more about it, I still do not consider myself as an expert. I consider myself as a new swimmer, and still swimming at the surface level, not deep in autoethnography, which is something I aspire to dive further into. During my PhD program, as in many PhD programs, I assume, I was mostly trained to write in an academic traditional style. The shift from leaving the traditional way of writing to AE was not easy, I felt like I was leaving my comfort zone. At times being very subjective felt as if I was making a mistake that I should avoid. So, I tried to make a somewhat kind of balance, I wrote in a traditional style in the first three chapters and mostly used analytic autoethnography in my findings and discussions, and it is where I share most of my personal stories. This format for an autoethnographic dissertation, three traditional chapters followed by two more subjective chapters, has precedence, as in the work of (Carrico, 2009; Dunn, 2001; Green, 2016).

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

In autoethnography, among the methods of collecting additional external data is interviewing. Interviews are usually used to draw out life experiences from other people. When applied to autoethnography, interviews offer external data that give contextual information to confirm, support or reject introspectively generated data (Chang, 2008, p.106). It is beneficial to



autoethnographers, as it can be used to, “stimulate memory, fill in gaps of information, to gather new information about the researcher and other relevant topics, to validate the personal data, and to gain others’ perspectives” (Chang, 2008, p.106). Interviews are an integral part of this research; they provide profound insights into learners’ personal experiences. Also, because I looked at students’ perceptions of their experiences, and perception is an internal construct not an external visible behavior, interviews are appropriate for data collection (Creswell, 2014).

In semi-structured interviews, each participant is asked the same set of open-ended questions, enhanced by probes (Schensul & LeCompete, 2010). Semi-structured interviews allow significant reciprocity between the participant and the researcher. This reciprocity, or “give and take”, generates space for the researcher to probe a participant’s responses for clarification, meaning making, and critical reflection (Galletta, 2012).

**Participants.** The population for the present study includes both male and female graduate students at large Midwestern Universities who had formal English learning experience either in their home country or host country. These students are currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a graduate program at the University. The sample consists of six participants drawn from this population, four females and two males. Duke (1984) recommends studying three to ten participants when engaging in case study research. Since the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize, but to profoundly explain something specific, and to collect extensive detail about each individual, this sample size provides sufficient opportunity to identify themes as well as conduct thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007). The sample is appropriate to the purpose of the study (Sandelowski, 1995), which is to better understand the ways in which international students’ identities are formed by different social and educational contexts.

To recruit the participants, I first posted the research advertisement in Academica, the landing page for university systems log-in at a large, Mid-Western university. Students who were interested were asked to click on a link to a survey where they first gave consent for participation and then answered four survey questions for screening purposes: What country are you from? How long have been living here? What degree/degrees are you obtaining/obtained? Do you plan to go back to your country after you get your degree? These questions were used both as a point of context and to determine eligibility for the study. In addition, this information was used to help me select a diverse sample based on country of origin and academic focus.

To select participants for individual interviews, I used maximal variation sampling, which requires selecting participants that represent a diversity of perspectives (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p.432). I ensured the maximum variation of the sample by selecting participants from different countries and different majors, which allowed me to explore various social and educational factors that played a role in influencing their identities. Once selected, I notified participants by email and solicited times for interviews. Nine respondents to the questionnaire met the inclusion criteria for the study and were invited to participate (I recruited extra participants and collected extra data to compensate for possible attrition); eight of them showed for both interviews. One participant did not respond to my second email in order to coordinate for the second interview and was dropped from the study. Two interviews were completed with the other eight students. I made decisions on which six participants to include in the final analysis based on maximum variation. There were two Iranians who completed both interviews, so, I made the choice to choose the one who was not an education major, as two of the other participants were majoring in education. Also, there were two students from Saudi Arabia who completed both interviews. I made the decision to include the one who had completed both interviews at the time data analysis began. The other

Saudi Arabian student did eventually complete the second interview, but he was not included in the final sample for analysis. The final sample includes six participants, two males and four females. At the time of data collection, four were PhD students, one was a PhD graduate, and the last one was enrolled in a master's program.

**Criteria for inclusion/exclusion.** Participants in this study include graduate international students who are non-native speakers of English and have been in the United States for about three years. No one was excluded from this study based on, gender, nationality, or religion; rather participants were purposively selected to create variation within the sample. Since my interest in the study is not a certain cultural group, I avoided recruiting two participants from the same country to ensure variation. I also tried to vary the sample based on academic major and gender. See Table 1 for basic demographic information about each participant and descriptions below.

Table 1: *Participant Information*

| Participant's pseudonym | Gender | Country of origin | Years in the US | Degree, major                    |
|-------------------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Leenah                  | Female | Lebanon           | 4               | PhD student, education           |
| Mala                    | Female | India             | 5               | Masters, public health           |
| Ahmad                   | Male   | Saudi Arabia      | 8               | PhD graduate, health informatics |
| Ashkan                  | Male   | Iran              | 6               | PhD candidate, computer science  |
| Edna                    | Female | Indonesia         | 5               | PhD candidate, communication     |
| Chun                    | Female | China             | 5               | PhD student, education           |

Leenah is from Lebanon. She is currently a student in the PhD program in Education and has been in the United States for four years. When Lennah achieved her bachelor's from her country in computer science about twenty years ago, she had a chance to continue her higher education in France because she was among the top five in her class. At that time, she decided to choose family over higher education. She moved with her husband to Saudi Arabia as he had a job there. She then had three children. After her children grew up, she decided to pursue higher education internationally, without her husband. Leenah has not decided whether she will return to Saudi Arabia with her husband when she completes her degree.

Mala is from India. She is a masters-level student in Public Health and has been in the United States for about five years. She moved to the United States, because it was her family decision to move here. Interestingly, what she aspired to be when she was a school girl was a fashion designer, but her father had told her that he would only support her if she chose a degree in the medical field. She asserted that her father would not have abandoned her in any way, but also would not have supported her decision. She chose medical field at that time, and says, "it has been medical field ever since." Mala is not planning to return to India when she completes her degree.

Ahmed is from Saudi Arabia. He is a PhD graduate in Health Information Management and has spent the last seven years in the United States. Ahmed came to the United States alone. He quit his job, applied for scholarships, and pursued higher education in Health information management in the United States because he saw the need for it in his country. Ahmed has already graduated and is planning to return to Saudi Arabia.

Ashkan is from Iran. He is currently a PhD candidate in Computer Engineering, and he has been in the United States for six years. He came to the United States alone, and stated that he made

the decision to study abroad because he did not want to spend his youth in Iran, he feels that there is no future there for him because it is not a stable country. As he put it, “I just wanted to spend next six years or so abroad”. He has not decided whether he will return to Iran upon completing his degree.

Chun is from China. She belongs to an ethnic minority in her country called Ughar. She is currently in the PhD program in Education and has been in the United States for five years. She lives with her husband. Chun is happy to have found her passion in Educational studies and has not decided whether she will return to China after graduating.

Edna is from Indonesia. She is a PhD student in Communication. This is not her first experience studying abroad. She completed her undergraduate studies in Singapore, obtained her masters from Holland, and is currently working in her PhD in the United States. She describes herself as a curious individual, and likes to explore the world. She came to the United States without her family. She states that she eventually wants to go back to her home country, but she wants to get a work experience in the United States before she leaves.

Semi-structured interview is beneficial for its attentiveness to participants’ lived experiences, while also attending to theoretically driven variables of interest (Galletta, 2012). This allows the researcher to explore the participants’ understandings of the phenomenon being studied. Semi-structured interviews assist in further clarifying initially identified domains based on previous research and the researcher’s experiences. The semi-structured interview assists in confirming or disconfirming the validity of the initial domains and assists researchers to add new domains as they arise from the interview (Schensul & LeCompete, 2010, p. 176).

The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. The semi-structured questions are divided into five categories: past (academics), past (self & others), present (academic), present

(self and others), and future. Many of the questions were initially generated and formatted based on my own memories and past experiences regarding the different social and educational contexts that impacted the development and negotiation of my own identities I reread my journals and viewed them in “what” questions. However, everyone has different experiences, even when in similar social and educational settings. I wondered how my experiences relates to other learners who might have similar or very different experiences as international students.

The first set of questions is about students’ past experiences with school. When I was examining my journal entries, I noticed that school played a big role in forming my identity as it was not a pleasant experience. In one instance, I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and had just returned from a three-and-a-half-year trip to the United States; and I was having difficulty fitting in the Saudi school. Sadly, teachers were not supportive as much as they were critical of my poor Arabic language. They were very critical if they heard me codeswitch, and accused me of being less patriotic to my own native country. It was hard for me to completely stop using English, because language, to me, was not about the letters and words. At that time, English for me was a kind of a connection to my old friends and teachers that I lived within the United States, a connection to a beautiful memory, and to a part of me. Arabic teachers trying to push me to be more patriotic (in their terms) by rejecting a part of who I am just caused me to resist engaging in the classic Arabic language classroom, consequently failing in it. This personal story made me wonder if any of the participants may have had a similar story or past experience that caused him/her to resist learning due to a negative school context. This lead me to ask participants: *Can you tell me what your educational journey was like for you growing up? Would you describe your past educational journey as positive, negative, or with both positive and negative aspects? Why? In your view, what would the ideal positive educational experience looks like?*

Additional questions were influenced by Marginson's (2014) idea that identity is attached to external labels. Therefore, I wanted to ask participants about labels relevant to their educational life, such as: *What were the criteria of a 'good student' in the schools you attended? What do you think a good student is? Do you consider yourself to be a good student?* Other set of questions influenced by Marginson (2014) are about self-formation. For example, I asked: *In what ways, if any, has the study abroad experience affected your perception of yourself? In what ways, if any, do you feel that this abroad journey has changed you? What do you think contributed to this change?*

Other questions inquired about their roles in the family because I wanted to know if the roles and responsibilities that are attached to their identities as mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, sons or daughters has changed due to the study abroad journey. To explore this topic, I asked: *What role has your family had in your educational journey? What role has culture has in your educational journey? In what ways, if any, has the study abroad journey affected your role in the family/ your own culture or society?*

Furthermore, in the literature, Norton (2001) asserts that incorporating learners' identities, goals and social contexts of their daily lives, will influence their level of engagement, participation, and investment in learning the language. In order to learn about participants' goals, levels of engagement, and investment, I designed the following questions: *How would you describe your drive/motivation to learn English when you started? Do you think your drive/motivation has changed at any point? How/why? In what ways, if any, have ELI classroom experiences helped you reach your short-and long-term goals? What has helped you progress in learning English? What has hindered your progress in learning English?*

Additional questions were influenced by Norton's (2001) concept of imagined community, which is affiliation with a group of people not directly tangible that we connect to with the power of the imagination (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). It gives hope and a sense of direction to learners' goals. I asked participants about their future aspirations, such as: *When you decided to study abroad, what did you imagine your future would be like after earning your degree? Growing up and now, what were your goals for yourself in education? Where did these goals come from?*

### **Role of the Researcher**

In autoethnography, the researcher is the primary data collection tool, and also a source of data. He or she drives away from objectivity and embraces personal memory, self-reflection and self-analysis (Chang, 2008). The primary source of data for autoethnographers is lived experiences, past and present. Personal memory is essential for autoethnography as it gives a context to the present self (Chang, 2008), so both past experiences and personal interpretations are vital for autoethnographers.

At the time of the study, I, like my participants, was also a graduate international student in the United States who had also been enrolled in the ELI and was currently enrolled in a graduate program. I do not enter this research as an outsider without preconceived notions or biases; it was important to not allow my perceptions of my own experience impact my interactions with participants. On the other hand, this position may enhance my sensitivity to some of the identity struggles international students may go through as a result of living in two different cultural worlds and the negotiation of identities that happens on a personal and the social dimension.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step in qualitative data analysis is breaking data into meaningful parts, followed by looking for patterns, discovering relationships, making interpretations, making sense out of the



data and generating themes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The process of analysis in qualitative research is an inductive process, which means that it follows steps from specific to general (Creswell, 2009).

### **Autoethnographic Data Analysis**

Regarding autoethnography, analysis and interpretation enable researchers to shift their focus from bits of information to transforming them into a text with culturally meaningful explanations. Maintaining cultural understanding is vital. It is the analysis and interpretation of the context in relation to the self on which autoethnographers thrive (Chang, 2008). Data analysis and interpretation involves shifting the attention back and forth between self and others, the personal and the social contexts. The self is interpreted in its cultural context as it is considered a carrier of culture that is connected to others in society (Chang, 2008). So, instead of merely describing what happened in one's life, one tries to explain how fragments of memories may be related together to explain the cultural views and relationship with others in society.

Chang (2008) suggests the following for analysis and interpretation: (1) Search for recurring topics by reviewing the entire data set and looking for recurring topics or thoughts. Then, topics maybe categorically labeled and organized. If a topic appears recurrently in the data themes and patterns, it signifies importance (p.132). (2) Look for cultural themes. Cultural themes are declared or implied positions or a controlling behavior that is approved and promoted by a certain society. The cultural theme describes relationships among elements for example "My Family Values and Education" is a theme dominated by a childhood and adult life (p.132). (3) Identify distinctive occurrences. Some experiences open our eyes to new perspectives and are life changing, leading people to leave their old selves to become a new self (p.143). (4) Connect the present with the past. This history-conscious strategy helps autoethnographers understand how their present

thoughts might be rooted in past events (p.134). (5) Analyze relationships between the self and others to search for connectivity. The “others” referred to here are either of similarity, which refers to others who share common identities or belong to the same community of practice, or those who have different set of values and or of differences. Chang encourages researchers to ask these questions: “Who are my others of similarity?” “What kind of others are included in my data?” (p. 134-135). (6) Compare yourself (the researcher) with other people’s cases (p.135). (7) Analyze inclusion/omission of participants. For example, asking a question about omission for each inclusion. For example, if you analyze a list of professional mentors and find that they are all female, you would raise the question of why? Why are there no men? Were male mentors accidentally or purposefully left out? Or, did I refuse mentoring relationship with males? (8) Contextualize broadly to shift attention beyond the self to the context. Here the researcher explains and interprets certain behavior and events in relation to sociocultural, religious, historical contexts in which they took place and in which data were recorded. (9) Compare with social science constructs. This strategy starts from literature, then moves to the phenomena being studied. It uses social views as way to see the autobiographical data being interpreted. (10) Frame the data with a theory. Theories can guide the process of data organization, analysis, and interpretation.

Moreover, Chang suggests that ideal data analysis and interpretation processes combine the “zoom in” and “zoom out” approaches (2008). The zoom in approach refers to the analysis of data in which you pay attention to details, investigate small parts at a time and keep a focus on one data set at a time. The zoom out approach is the interpretation that tends to pull you away from details to hover over the entire data and the context. The zoom out approach enables you to see how one’s own case is related to others and connected to its context, and how the past has left traces in the present. Thus, zooming in elicits the ethnographic details, zooming out produces

overarching cultural themes (McCurdy, Spradely, & Shandy, 2005).

I wrote in my own journal before, during, and after transcribing all the interviews. I then gathered all the interview transcripts and my own journal to look for recurring topics, cultural themes, distinctive occurrences, connections between the past and the present, and relationships between self and others. I also compared my experiences with the participants' experiences, and finally, framed the data with a theory (Chang, 2008).

### **Semi-structured Interview Data Analysis**

Data analysis of the semi-structured interviews are iterative in the sense that it requires the researcher to return frequently to the data. It is cyclical, or ongoing, because it involves continual reflection about the data (Creswell, 2009). In this study, data from the semi-structured interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed for coding. I then read all the interviews to get a holistic impression. Next, I started the first round of descriptive coding in which I provided a code or brief description of each potential theme (e.g., liberation, independence or feeling of alienation and absence of attending to social emotional issues in school), alongside the excerpt of the transcript that represented the theme. My advisor did the same, and then we read and discussed the potential themes and interpretations. Then, using constant comparative methods (Glaser, 1965), I reread through the transcripts multiple times for coding purposes, assigning descriptive codes to transcript sections. Then, I looked for patterns among the descriptive codes, particularly looking for codes related to educational context, cultural or social contexts, language context, study abroad journey, and imagined community/identity or future aspiration, acknowledging the timeline of past, present and future. Specifically, I was looking for evidence in participants' responses of the different ways that these contexts have influenced and shaped their identities. Codes were grouped together, leading to the emergence of categories (e.g., questioning mind, becoming liberal ) and themes

(e.g., more than just a grade, international education as self-formation). Providing detailed description and offering multiple perspectives about each theme (in this case from multiple participants), made the results more realistic and richer (Creswell, 2009).

### **Triangulation**

Preliminary analysis from the notes of the autoethnography were used to inform the interview questions, then preliminary analysis of the semi-structured interviews was used to inform topics of additional journaling for the autoethnography. Both journaling and interview informed each other as data collection and writing was going on, which added a layer of preliminary analysis. I looked for trends, similarities, and differences between and across transcripts and journal entries.

### **Verification**

As I am the only researcher in the project, there is always a possibility that I may be subject to my own 'analytical biases' (Perry, 2011, p.161). So, I tried to counter this possibility by discussing the interviews and findings with my participants to verify it (Creswell, 2002). To do this, I contacted all six participants and give them the summary of the analysis. I shared the findings drawn from each participant's data about each of the research questions with the participants, and asked them to verify it. I asked them whether they consider my interpretations to be accurate. Four of them responded and agreed with the findings and interpretation. Currently, I am waiting on two other responses, however if they report that they disagree with my interpretation, I will also report their interpretations as part of this study.

For autoethnographers, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's own credibility. Does the narrator believe that this is actually what occurred for her or him (Bochner, 2002, p. 86). Closely connected to reliability are issues of validity. For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks trustworthiness. It should evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is

lifelike, authentic, and possible; a feeling that what has been expressed is true. The story should be coherent, connect readers to the writer, and enable the reader to enter the subjective world of the writer to see the world from her or his point of view (Plummer, 2001, p. 401). I shared some of my personal stories in a way that invites the reader into my social worlds both past and present. I shared stories from back when I was in school, and how I, as a school girl, navigated some issues in school context. An autoethnography can also be judged in terms of whether it offer ways to develop the participants', readers', or the author's own life; or how well it helps readers understand others that are different from them (Ellis, 2004, p. 124). In particular, autoethnographers ask: "How useful is the story?" and "To what use might the story be put?" (Bochner, 2002, p. 282). My hope is that my readers would enjoy and learn from diverse cultural views and perspectives from my participants as they come from different countries (Lebanon, India, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Indonesia). Reading from different perspective might help them understand or compare and contrast their own life stories with my stories and that of my participants', which might spur memories and reflective questions about their own life.

Moreover, validity is improved through the use of theoretical tools and a research literature to compare and contrast personal experiences against existing research (Ronai, 1995, 1996), and interviews with members of a culture (Foster, 2006; Marvasti, 2006; Tillmann Healy, 2001). Without the theory and research to frame the story, it is difficult to justify privileging the story of the author over anyone else's. In my study, I utilized multiple theories such as Lave and Wenger's (1998) theory of identity as contextualized in communities of practice as I analyzed my identities and those of my participants in different social contexts. I utilized Kanno and Norton's (2003) ideas of investment and imagined identities and communities to frame how I looked at how learners' future affiliation with their desired community gives them a sense of direction and a

learning trajectory. I also used Marginson's theory of international education as self-formation (2014) to look in to my participants' identity formation, as well as my own during the study abroad experience.

Moreover, Eisner (1991) states that the research is valid if the reader understands a complex situation that might have been underrecognized in the literature and the research provides understanding that will be some kind of assistance in the future. I attempt, in my research, to shed light on the experiences of identity formation in different contexts of international students studying in the United States (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Generalizability is important to autoethnographers, but not in the traditional meaning that applies results of a random sampling of respondents to a larger population. The focus on generalizability moves from respondents to the readers, and it is always being tested by the readers as they decide if the story triggers any experiences about their lives or the lives of others they know. Generalizability in this type of study is concerned with whether the autoethnographer is able to shed light on unknown cultural processes (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). So, in autoethnography, readers are the ones who provide validation by comparing their lives to the writer's, by thinking about how the writer's life is similar and different to them and the reasons why, and by feeling that stories have enlightened them about different people lives (Ellis, 2004, p. 195).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was obtained from the participants after carefully discussing the research process, participants' right to privacy, and how I would protect the identities of the subjects. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms are used in recordings, transcribed data, and analysis. The researcher made sure that the participants do not feel pressured to share

information that would make them feel uncomfortable by sharing by telling them prior to and during the interviews that they were free to decline to answer questions if they were not comfortable (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Small and purposefully selected samples are often non-representative of the population, and findings are not typically generalizable (Morse, 1994). However, the intent of qualitative research is inquiry, and not to generalize the findings; the value lies in the description and themes developed in the context of the study (Creswell, 2009).

There are several limitations specific to autoethnography. For one, it is possible to focus on the self and personal experiences without giving much attention to the wider cultural context. In addition, autoethnographers may get too involved in the story telling and neglect the important errand of autoethnography, which is cultural interpretation and analysis. Third, researchers may over-rely on the personal memory as the source of data. To counter act these, I made sure to tell my story within a social context as the main concept in the study is “identity as contextualized.” I analyzed my stories and that of my participants in various social contexts, such as school and study abroad context. I tried to balance between telling my own stories and that of my participants and interpreting them in relation to literature.

One limitation of the semi-structured interviews in this study is that they were not performed in a natural setting, but rather in a formal one (Creswell, 2014). This might have affected the participants as they were more likely to provide information that they think the researcher wanted to hear instead of sharing their own reflections (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the participants were not able to recall or reflect on some of their experiences as effectively on the spot, removed from the authentic situation (Creswell, 2014). To mitigate this, I offered to email the questions via email

in advance so as to give the participants sufficient time to reflect on them prior to the date of the interview. Then, I emailed those who agreed to read the questions in advance.



## Chapter 4- Findings and Discussion

In this chapter I report on my participants' experiences and their reflections on how different contexts may have shaped their identities. Following analytic autoethnography design, I searched for patterns and culturally or socially related themes, attended to the past and present, and interpreted the self as well as others in different social contexts (Chang, 2008). There is an emphasis in autoethnography on whether the writing helps readers understand others that are different from them (Ellis, 2004). I tried to tell my stories from my own subjective perspective, as well as to represent the different perspectives of the participants. Some experiences of my participants in which they were encouraged to leave their old self to form a new self were life changing for them. Each had a different experience finding their place in their world.

My other wish while writing about my findings and conclusions was that my writing would reach the broadest audience as possible, and that the undergraduate or any person that was not fortunate enough to have already been in a position to obtain a higher education would be able to enjoy a smooth read to learn about the different experiences of international students as it might help them reflect on their own lives and their own changing identities. While reading and rereading my participants' transcripts, I enjoyed their different versions of English; they entertained the mini-linguist in me. I want my readers to enjoy that, too. Whenever possible, I used direct quotes from my participants and did not exert my voice over my participants' voices, so that the readers would enjoy the diverse multicultural voices in this study.

There are key topics addressed in this section. First, I begin by discussing the international students' experiences in school contexts in the past. Two prominent themes came up looking into students' experiences in school contexts: not fitting in, and believing themselves to be defined by

more than just a grade. Next, I discuss the study abroad context. Three themes were noticeable in relation to this topic: imagining an alternative future as a reason to study abroad, international education as self-formation, and reflections on self and social context. Third, I present my autoethnographic reflection. I begin with school context.

### **School Context**

Observing the participants telling their stories during the first part of the interview, which focused on the past, specifically school context, I noted their shiny wondering eyes while telling their stories, and the frequent pauses, which insinuated not so pleasant memories. Even as they sat in front of me as adults, I could hear in their stories that their younger selves had not completely healed; there was still some sort of aching. Interestingly, although the schools the participants attended are located in different countries around the world, they all consented that, at least to some extent, the school context did not give priority to their interests, goals, voices and future aspirations. Still participants also mentioned positive aspects of their school experiences, like Ahmed and Leenah who mentioned that school taught them self-discipline and hard work.

When participants discussed their school contexts, as they were reflecting on it, a common trend was that they frequently expressed their discontent with the level of conformity that was required, leaving little space to express their different identities. They were also unhappy with the fact that their schools prioritized students obtaining good grades over other aspects of “becoming”, such as connecting with their inner selves, their goals, interests as well as their social and emotional well-being. Across the interviews, there were two themes that were recurrent: not fitting in in schools and viewing themselves as more than just grades. In the sections that follow, I discuss each in turn.

## Not Fitting in School

Most of the participants, except for Mala and Leenah, expressed not being able to fit in school in one way or another during their elementary-and secondary-level educations. The reasons for this varied; some participants cited language issues due to not speaking the mainstream language spoken in the classroom, while others discussed the tension of being different and strongly opinionated in school settings that valued conformity and submission. I first start with language differences and then discuss having a questioning mind.

**Language differences.** Edna and Chun had a somewhat similar reason for feeling alienated in the classroom, which was related to language deficiencies. Edna explained that she was bullied in school due to language issues. Part of her childhood was spent in the United States, and because of that she had a hard time transitioning to the Indonesian schools:

So, my father was at the embassy in DC and we lived in Virginia, and it was nice. I have fond memories of that, being exposed to people from different culture. Then I did have a kind of rough time transitioning back to Indonesia. So, when we left the states and went back to Indonesia, um, it was difficult in the sense that I got bullied because of language issues because, at that point, I was more...I don't know...I guess had difficulty in speaking Indonesian.

Like Edna, I had very hard time transitioning to my home town schools when I went back to Saudi Arabia from the United States in middle school. I was code-switching between Arabic and English, and my Arabic teachers were insinuating that I was disrespecting my language and culture. I was trying hard to fit in with friends and follow up with teachers, but I was not catching up, especially with my classic Arabic grammar class, given that I missed couple of years of it. The teachers were not understanding and still insisted on holding me to similar expectations as my

classmates. The prevalent attitude towards the English language at that time was that it was the language of the “other”, and I felt that was how I was positioned in class by the teacher--as the “other”. Also, at that time, I felt that some of the students caught the teacher’s attitudes and viewed me as the “other” to. At that time, I interpreted the context as if everyone (teachers and students) was on one side, and I was alone on a deserted side; that was how I felt. It was not necessarily planned by anyone to be that way, but that was how I felt I had been positioned. At that point, I started to look at the whole class as the “other”, too, like they were a group of people I did not belong too. Yes, we all shared a small physical space, yet they all seemed distant to me. I lost trust in the few friends that I had. I internalized my feelings and developed an imaginary protective bubble around myself.

Crosnoe (2011) stated that one of the worst things youth could experience in school is not to feel accepted for who they are, as it causes students to experience identity discrepancies and may cause maladaptive coping strategies. It was also argued by Crosnoe (2011) that lack of belonging often leads to disengagement from schoolwork and overall disconnection from school. That is exactly what I felt; I just withdrew and tried to do the bare minimum of schoolwork. I agree with Ahmad, who, in reference to his own poor engagement with schooling, said, “I had more in me than I was showing, but I didn’t care to show it.”

Chun’s language issue was due to belonging to an ethnic minority that spoke a different language from the mainstream school population. She felt that she was positioned as a slow student for this reason, and criticized her teachers for not talking to the other students to help create more awareness of her challenging situation:

Because I am ethnic minority in China, so my first language is not Chinese. But I went to Chinese school, so my experience is very different from most Chinese students because I

am the one who don't speak Chinese in the classroom. So, I cannot understand what other people are talking about when I was in first grade, second grade. I started to speak up Chinese, I think third grade. So, when I was first grade, second grade, I just sit there and try to guess what the teacher say based on their expressions or gestures. So, I don't have a lot of friends in elementary, because of the language barrier people would say am a little slow. They think, 'Oh this person is not smart,' because they are kids. They don't know it is because of the language or something, they say this person is slow, like that. But from the third grade my Chinese proficiency became as good as other students, you know that kids are good at learning language.

So, in the first grade, some people don't wanna sit with me because they think I know nothing, I am slow. But in the third grade, those people wanna sit with me, because they think, 'Oh she is the best student.'...And then I don't know, maybe it influenced me to study hard because I realize that if I study hard people are gonna be friends with me.

Chun goes on to criticize the ignorance, and lack of support and understanding from her teachers stating:

The environment should be supportive. Students should help out each other, cooperate. Also, teachers should tell the students that her first language is not Chinese, but maybe we learn her language. Maybe she should encourage other students to learn from me. Not let me look down or slow or make people don't understand each other.

As young school girls, Edna was bullied, Chun was labeled as slow, and I was positioned as the "other", in each case, due to language deficiencies. Although, our schools were in geographically different places around the world, we had similar language issues that led us to

stand out as different in classrooms where conformity was emphasized, and we all were in contexts that did not encourage understanding and being compassionate with those who are different.

Though our issues were similar in some way, the way we dealt with them was different. Edna and Chun both thought the solution for this problem was to have good grades and friends. As Edna puts it “I ended befriending someone.” I, on the other hand, felt that I wanted to isolate myself. There is no way to be certain about the origins of these differences. It is possible that age had to do with that as they were still in elementary and I was in middle school. Erikson (1968) stated that experiences during adolescence age hold critical meaning in people’s lives, particularly in social contexts such as schools, as self-reflection abilities starts to expand, which in turn affect identity development. Alternatively, it could be the interaction of cultural expectations, personality, and any number of other factors.

**Questioning mind.** A second reason students felt like they did not fit in was the determination they had intrinsic drives to be critical and not to take norms as they were. Ahmed felt that he did not fit in because he liked to raise a lot of questions about his society, and because he had different world views than those of his teachers, his expressions of this thoughts were faced with rejection:

At that time, I started reading different books. Some books about ideology, like how things has been evolving and changing in the Saudi community, like some novels, like Turkey Al-Hamad or some books by Ghazi Al-Gosaibi or Abdullah Al-Gathami and some other well-known authors at that time, and they wrote about how our culture has changed after certain events and became more strict. So, I was surprised to see things that I took for granted that has been in our culture for very long.

So, when I started asking questions about these things that I've been reading, then my teachers didn't like that. They were not trying to answer my questions [and avoiding them by] by giving some false information, I think. Then, when I tried to challenge them, they didn't like that. Then, they started to antagonize me in one way or another. Then, I felt that I am into something, but I felt like I want to understand more. Then, I felt that I am into something; I felt like that there is something else. So kinda shaped my own journey to educate myself about the differences between what they think and what other cultural possibilities...I just wanted to know what else is out there, 'cause this is not the only thing that's there. So, sometimes by telling you not to look at the window or not to eat the apple, a classic example, somewhat pushes you to do the opposite; and sometimes the opposite, I am not saying it's more suitable, it's just worth exploring.

I asked Ahmed to describe one of the stories that he described as teachers antagonizing him, he stated the following story:

That was probably in the second year of the intermediate or third, I can't remember, probably the second. I remember when I started to ask bigger questions, at the beginning teachers were trying to challenge, and I challenge them back. But teachers stopped talking to me in the class, then they asked me one day to come to the vice principal's office and they told me hey we don't like the way you do it, you go and prepare, and you bring questions that poisons your colleagues minds and wastes their time. And I said, 'I am not preparing for anything, you are the ones who bring the subject and I am just asking you questions', and it was the day that I stopped asking questions, to them at least.

Similar to Ahmed, Ashkan talked about how he refused to be submissive:

You have to just be quiet, don't move a lot, don't cause fights, don't question, don't make the teachers feel stupid, I did that a lot ... They also favor people whose name was Mohammed or Ali. So, religion played a part, which I wasn't good at ... I questioned religious teachers, they didn't like it. I thought that a good student is someone who learns on their own ... It means when someone tells you something that you don't agree with, you should have the autonomy to say, 'I don't agree with that.' You make your own choices; you don't follow instruction.

So, Ahmed was antagonized by his teachers, because the school context did not welcome raising critical questions towards the norms and that did not fulfil his curiosity, which lead him to stop engaging and stop asking questions. He started to shape his own journey in educating himself to know what else was out there. Similarly, the excerpt from Ashkan's interview reveals that, as a school boy, he was not very well liked by his teachers. He had an idea of what a good student was that did not line up with how the school context defined a good student, which was one who is quiet and submissive. Ashkan, on the other hand, believed a good student should have the autonomy to disagree, and make his or her own choices. He ends the above quote with a direct statement that good students should lead, not follow.

In both cases, these students demonstrated their beliefs that students should be more than copiers of behaviors or merely receptive or rote memorizers. They asserted that there must be space for different interests and intellectual capacities (van Lier, 2007). Ahmed and Ashkan wanted their voices heard in the classroom. For Ahmed, his teachers were antagonizing him as a result of his questions and his opposing views towards society's norms. Ashkan wanted to have the autonomy to make his own choices and come up with his own opinions but was deprived of that. According to van Lier (2007) the core of identity is voice, and voice involves agency. When



students are deprived from practicing their agency, from using their (literal and figurative) voices, it will likely affect the identities they form.

In the section below, I elaborate on the importance of school attending to students as complex human beings and considers their social-emotional side as opposed to limiting them to a unified restricted social behavior that does not attend to their uniqueness as individuals and does not encourage the development of different identities, rather expects conformity. According to Rich and Schachter (2012), there are three characteristics of nurturing schools that are critical to cultivating students' confidence and identity development, which are teachers' care, teachers as role models, and cultivating the student as a whole, rather than just academic learning.

### **I am More than just a Grade!**

The participants in this study overwhelmingly felt that school systems were focusing mainly on the academic aspects of the students, and little attention was given to other aspects of students' identities, such as personal goals and interests, and exploratory or questioning skills, and social and emotional wellbeing. Interestingly, all of the participants viewed good grades as the defining mark of a good student, but not as the only factor. This aligns with research that indicates that giving attention to social-emotional aspects of the students does not necessarily jeopardize the academic aspect, rather the two reinforce each other (Cohen, 2006; Kress & Elias, 2006). Creating an atmosphere at school that restricts the experiences of the students to only academics neither encourages exploration or questioning skill nor cultivates the student as a whole, which hinders the process of identity development (Rich & Schachter, 2012). Rich and Schachter's (2012) study also looked into students' reflections of what positive school experiences look like. They stated that when academic activities are personally meaningful, and students are actively engaged in exploration, they are more likely to feel safe and comfortable in school atmosphere, as well as to

experience a feeling of social acceptance. Engaging students in meaningful activities and exploration and encouraging them to express their voices and practice their agency may help students to be more confident in exploring the world and confronting challenging future life tasks (Rich & Schachter, 2012).

All participants explained that the K-12 school systems gave importance to grades, and that little attention was given to students' growth in terms of social and emotional aspects. One is only seen as a good student if they have good grades. As Chun stated, "If you get good score, higher score, you will be considered as a good student". Ashkan also shared a similar experience, as he stated, "You have to get good grades, it's the numbers". He also explained that being treated as a good student influenced his confidence level:

In my elementary school, I was a good student and that was fine. But in middle school I wasn't treated like the good student and they, like, lowered my confidence. And then in high school, again I was a good student. I was, like, top of the class and that raised my confidence.

The school context affected Ashkan's identity in that if he was treated as a good student, he felt confident, and he would feel less confident if he was not treated as a good student. His school would consider him as good as his grades, consequently his confidence would be raised and lowered depending on the context criteria of who is good and bad. This echoes Ige 's (2010) notion in that identity might not only be the way we view ourselves, but also how we are viewed by others, which is tied to the social contexts in which people live. Ashkan's perception of himself was tied to how he was perceived by his teachers and others in school around him. Hallinan (2008) made the case that teachers' caring and support is needed for students to enhance students' self-confidence. School contexts can contribute to students' positive self-perceptions by giving

importance to other aspects of students' lives beyond focusing on good grades. One way to do this is by attending to student-student and teacher-student relationships (Faircloth, 2009; La Guardia, 2009).

My own school experience is similar to that of Ashkan. When I went back to my country after being in an English-only school in the United States for about three-and-a-half years, due to language issues, my grades went down. I was not a good student anymore in the eyes of my teachers, which was a shift after I had earned perfect grades and had been considered a good student for years. The feeling of not being a good student not only lowered my confidence, but it was one factor that contributed to me shifting to mute, becoming invisible. The shift was very obvious; I went from being a student who was vocal, liked to participate and share in activities, and had friends, to being quiet and isolated. Surprisingly, none of my teachers showed any care about that isolation. Chun shared a similar experience:

They make us only focus on one aspect, academic aspect, and the teacher even doesn't care if you have friends or no. The teacher thinks if you have good scores, that's good, it means you are doing good and then they don't care.

In terms of attending to aspects of students' social identity and making sure they have friends, I do not know if teachers believe that is part of their job. I strongly believe that it is an important element to attend to. It has been argued by La Guardia and Ryan (2002), that school contexts that foster positive social interactions and social acceptance can be beneficial to identity development by creating a sense of community, safety and personal support. This, in turn, encourages students to engage in socialization, explore different roles, and have confidence, which plays an important role in identity development. Also, Noddings (2005) writes about the importance of providing a safe environment for students to talk appreciatively with each other

regardless of differences. She asserts that it builds confidence and self-esteem. One way to do this is for teachers to open dialogues and discussion among students in the classroom and they can interact together in a judgment free environment. Flum and Kaplan (2012) argued that students should learn to construct their own identities by having an open dialogue and leaning to interpret and make sense of the discourses they are in instead of merely relying on how official institutions and dominant powers position them. While some educators may not view this as part of their professional directive, omitting this type of instruction and interaction is a missed opportunity.

In terms of teachers' care, Noddings (2005), asserts that when teachers demonstrate care for their students, it can have important effects on how the students think and feel about themselves. Chun expressed ideas about the inverse of this—the repercussions of teachers not demonstrating care—when asked about her school experience:

I think it is negative [school experiences]. It only focuses on scores and also it doesn't consider students' emotional aspect. At that time when I was miserable, I didn't say I am miserable, I feel like maybe because I didn't study hard, so I am miserable...Now, when I look back, its negative. But when I was in there, maybe not so negative.

In this instance, Chun did not view the school system as inadequate due to lack of support, but rather internalized the feeling, blaming herself for poor work ethic. This excerpt from Chun's interview reveals that she was not attending to her inner voice, or perhaps more accurately that her inner-voice had been coopted by messages from teachers and school. She was miserable and disliked herself because she thought she should have studied harder. She believed that the best way to end this feeling was to work hard for a better grade, and then the problem would be solved.

The stories expressed thus far by, Ashkan, Chun, and me revealed that we took what teachers' value about us based on grades, or what we thought about ourselves based on our grades, and internalized it. We took it as something that was inherently wrong with us, that we had done something wrong that actually made us less valuable. In this way, we let the outside system create our own identity for us, or allowed it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unfortunately, in this way, school systems put a strong emphasis on meeting the outside criteria such as grades and students connecting with their inner selves is neglected, as Chun expresses:

I think in my past experience I try to meet the expectation [of the school], not my own feeling. I try to think how can I meet the external expectation and I don't ask myself like what I am really interested in, my inner voice. It's like, how I can become a good person by outside criteria. They give you a mindset that only academic--only your score--is important, so you forgot that life is about all aspects.

She also criticized the fact that her teachers never asked her about her outside goals and interests:

They don't ask us what are you really interested in. They don't encourage us to think, "What brings you happiness?" They don't encourage us to think, "What makes you happy?" They don't encourage us to think, "What's your passion?"

This excerpt reveals that the school context that Chun was in defined who good students were in a narrow manner, and not much space was given to other parts of their identities, such as connecting with inner voice, goals, interests, passion and what makes a student a happy person. So, the emphasis, in order to feel like a good student, was on meeting a narrow, outside criterion.

Mitchener and Schmidt (1998), as well as Noddings (2005), state that schools' exclusive attention to academics, if done in a narrow and constricting manner, will increase some students' feelings of alienation from school, because they will feel that school does not relate to them as unique persons or that the school does not engage parts of their selves that students consider important. Along these lines, Ahmed explained that connecting with the inner self was not an option in his K-12 schooling experiences. You are just part of the flow as he states:

You are just part of the system, you have no individualism. Things define your path comparing to others. It's like this is what we have, whether you like it or not, whether it fits you or not!

Attending to the student as a whole and not only to grades is something that Edna also emphasized in her interview:

It's more of like a wholistic state of the student as an individual, you know as a human being so it's like a 360 perspective. So, it's not like students performing well in school but also the well-being of that student as an individual as a whole in society. Yah I think that's what I would say about student well-being.

The idea that, even in the classroom, we should view students with lenses that extend beyond academic lenses is not new. Dewey (1916) was one of the earliest and most influential scholars who stressed the importance of an educational focus on the whole student. Attending to the student as a whole means attending to a range of domains not only academics (Rich & Shcachter, 2012). In this context, the "whole student refers to realms such as the physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic, together with academics" (Noddings, 2005). Education,

in this view, must contribute to the all-round development of each student, which includes, mind and body, compassion, intelligence, aesthetic sense, personal responsibility and spiritual values (Delors, 1996). Such an inclusive perspective empowers students to integrate different aspects of their selves, to find ways to become more fully engaged, and to reveal areas of self in schools (Greenberg et al., 2003; Hare, 2006).

Proponents of holistic education acknowledges the multiple dimensions of human personality: physical, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and hence focus on moving towards an integrated approach to teaching and learning. A holistic education according to Clark (1991) is supposed to help students look at themselves and their relationship with the world in an integrative perspective, as a whole. That is, students should not define themselves as good students just because of a grade, they should view their worth as tied to more than that. Moreover, students who perceive their schools as relating to multiple aspects of themselves as persons find their studies more meaningful, have a stronger sense of being affirmed as proactive agents, and perceive a positive social climate among students (Hare, 2006).

The experiences of students shows how school context can affect students' self-perception, confidence and identities. School contexts should encourage students to connect to their inner selves by asking them about their interests and goals. They must focus on the adaptive formation of students' identities, promoting students' confidence, agency, and skills in questioning and supporting many student attributes, in addition to the focus on attaining skills and knowledge (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). In the absence of this, students can lose interest and disengage from the learning process as well as develop negative attitudes toward school experiences.

## **Study Abroad Contexts**

In the parts of the interview in which participants were asked about the contexts of their currently study abroad experiences, they conveyed a more enthusiastic than when discussing the K-12 school contexts, using tones that connoted hope for change. They explained their reasons behind their decisions to study abroad, which were different for each participant. They also expressed how their journeys abroad helped them to reflect on their ways of thinking, examine their cultural views with different lenses, and gain new worldviews, which help birth new identities and lead to self-formation. The themes related to study abroad contexts that I identified are as follows: imagining alternative futures as a reason study abroad, international education as self-formation, and reflections on the self and the social context.

## **Imagining an Alternative Future**

Participants in this study's rationales behind their decisions to pursue an international education varies. For some, it is seen as a career-enhancing investment, a way to better compete in the labor market of their country of the origin (King & Sondhi, 2018). It may also be viewed as a step towards a high-income international career, or being involved in a global-related activity, as well as being a part of life-plan project of emigration and international mobility (Findlay, Prazeres, McCollum, & Packwood, 2017). It can also be to fulfill a dream of freedom of speech, parent expectations, or escape from an unsafe environment at country of origin. Also, it could be the discontent with the places or positions that they were in, which pushed them to explore alternatives.

From the interviews, I gathered that one of the main goals for students like Ahmed, Leenah, Chun, and Edna deciding to study abroad was the potential for career advancement. Career advancement, for some participants, hinged upon learning a new language. This was prominent in Leenah's and Chun's transcripts. As for Ashkan, the main reason behind his decision to come to



the United States was leaving an unsafe environment in his country of origin. For Mala, it was her family's decision to move abroad as she stated when I asked her about her decision to study abroad "My family moved here".

Although the reasons behind my participants' decisions to study abroad varies, it seems that most of them fall under an imagined community or an imagined future (Kanno & Norton, 2003) that they wanted to be part of, or imagining an alternative future (Kanno, 2003). Imagined communities and imagined identities (Norton, 2001; Kanno & Notron, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) refer to groups of people that are not immediately tangible that learners connect through the power of imagination. Communities that learners interact with on daily basis such as workplace, neighborhood, religious or educational institutions are tangible and reachable. However, these are not the only communities learners are associated with; imagined ties extend through space and time (Anderson, 1991). Learners might feel connected with a group or community with people they may not have met, involving future relationship with these people that only exist in their imagination. Kanno and Norton (2003) suggest that these imagined communities are no less real than the ones learners have daily engagement with for it leaves a strong effect on their current decisions and investment. Norton (2010) argued that investment in an imagined community is also investment in an imagined identity (p.3).

Moreover, Kanno declares that without imagining alternative futures people would be paralyzed by the status quo and fail to take action (2003). When students envision future affiliation, their investment in learning is affected (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Wenger (1998) suggest that imagination is a process of expanding oneself by transcending time and space and creating new images of one's world and oneself (p.176). Of course, this imagination is not to be equated with

fantasy only, learners must know the requirement to gain access and participate successfully in the new social worlds they aspire to be part of. Envisioning oneself being an active participant in imagined community that one wants to be part of expands the range of possible selves (Norton 2001). Thus, a learner imagined community invites an imagined identity. An imagined identity can reframe the learning experience of a given student. It can compel learners to seek certain kinds of educational opportunities they might otherwise not seek (Kanno, 2003).

In the following sections, I will discuss the reasons that my participants gave that compelled them to obtain an international education in the United States. I will also examine how might the role of imagining communities and imagining an alternative future played a role in their decisions, where applicable.

**Career investment.** Among the participants who expressed career investment as the main reason to study abroad is, Ahmed. Tran (2016) stated that overseas education can enable international students to become more advanced in their profession and enhance their future social and economic positioning. Ahmed found a gap or a need in his country for the specialty he chose, and the program was not available in his country, so he decided to study it abroad. He stated:

To accelerate my career, I felt the fastest way to achieve what I need to achieve professionally is to pursue my education in the US. The major I chose wasn't available in Saudi Arabia and I felt there was a common need for it, and most of the programs I found were in the US universities

He aspires to have a professional status in his country, so he invested in enhancing his career preparation in order to better compete in the labor market in his country, an opportunity that he would not have had if he stayed home. He envisioned what kind of professional opportunities

would be open for him if he obtained an education from the United States. He recognized the need for it, which gave him a sense of direction to take an international education route.

Career investment was also Leenah's main goal for studying abroad, although she had set her sights more broadly on an international career, as opposed to planning to return to her home country. Leenah's reasons for choosing to study in the United States, in particular, is that she believes it is one of the best, globally, in higher education, and that will open career opportunities for her around the world. She looked at international education as a means to enable her to achieve higher social status or employment opportunity, and also as a means to provide herself with opportunities to enrich her professional and personal outlook (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). She is investing in a better quality of education now as she sees her future-self as famous and associated with scholars who write famous books. Learners' connection with imagined communities or imagined future selves affects their learning trajectories (Kanno, Norotn, 2003). When students imagine future affiliation, their investment in learning is positively affected (Kanno & Norton, 2003). So, Leenah's vision of herself as famous and having a successful career working with famous scholars encouraged her to invest in a higher quality of education also in learning an internationally recognized language, as she explained:

I read that Education in the US is the best in the world, especially at the graduate level. Here, you have the chance to work with the same people who wrote the text book, who wrote the research around the world, and you have also the chance to have a name after, to have a brand that can reach to every country in the world. So, you can be famous here, in your country, in many other countries that you will work.

I feel US is advanced. It's more advanced than the other countries in education, especially in education. It's number one in the world, especially the study in the English language,

which is the first language in every country in the world. So, whatever I study here, I can apply it in another country; I can also work in another country; so, I will have more chances in my life.

**English language investment.** Leenah highlighted the English language as a world language that she believes will offer her more opportunities. Learning English expanded her sense of self, enabling her to become more than what she felt she was (Le Ha.P, 2009). As per Le Ha P. (2009), English language contributes to identity formation and a sense of belonging to a global citizenship. Similar to Leenah's view about how the English language can change her life for the better, Chun, also refers to learning English as an investment for future opportunities:

So, I feel like I will be good if I study abroad and my English would become much better; and if I come back to my country, maybe I can find more job opportunities. At that time [when I made the decision], I wanted to go back [after graduating]. So, I feel like when I go back, there will be a lot of job opportunities and I can work in company with high salary.

These two excerpts from Leenah's and Chun's interviews echo Bourdieu's (1991) concept of cultural capital. That is, when learners invest in a second language they do so with the intention that they are going to obtain a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase the worth of their cultural capital, their identities, and opportunities for the future. Learners' lives are shaped by learning the language and by investing in learning a second language, they are investing in their own identity (Norton, 1997). For both participants, Leenah and Chun, it was obvious that they perceived the English language as one of the most important means to future affiliation (Kanno and Norton, 2003). Thus, as per Pierce (1995), learning English must not be viewed as attaining a tangible reward, but rather an investment in a better quality of life.

**Freedom of speech.** Chun's interview also revealed an aspiration to an imagined future. She reported that she had listened to her professors in her undergraduate program talk about their experiences abroad, and she felt like she wanted that kind of experience for herself. So, it is through listening to her professors speak that she imagined a future that she wants for herself, she states,

Some professors, when they said, 'I have been studying abroad and have been in conferences in many countries', and they talked about their experiences and they said, 'if you learn English, you can also have my experience', and I feel like, wow that's good! I also wanna experience studying abroad because it seems like these professors have a lot of interesting experience; it seems like they see more things about the world than me. It seems like they opened their eyes for different things. So, I also wanna have this type of experience. I know one teacher said, in China you are not allowed to criticize the government, in US everyone is free to criticize. I feel like, oh, really? So, this kind of experience make you think about yourself and your environment.

She imagined the kind of life that her mentor had, or her "role model" as she states, and wanted that kind of life for herself, which gave her a sense of direction. She imagined the kind of life style that her professors had in that one is free to criticize anything in the US, freedom of speech, which as it seems it might be something she was deprived from in her country. Imagining that future helped her think what kind of world she wants to live in and what kind of person she wants to become, which directed her to make the decision and study abroad. This resonates Wenger (1998), who suggested that imagination can be a process of expanding oneself by exceeding time and space and creating new images of the one's world and oneself (p.176). Edna is similar to Chun here, in that her response to the question behind the decision to study abroad is:

You know the equality of education, the training and at that time, I had a professor who was my role model, and she went to the university in Wisconsin to do her PhD in political science and so that was kinda my first exposure to this idea of pursuing graduate studies in the US.

In addition to the obtaining a better quality of education, she imagined the kind of life her role model had and wanted to have it for herself.

**Where I am now is not my future.** The kinds of examples described by my participants were mostly imagined futures, communities, and who they want to become. In this part, I will talk about imagining a future that one does not want if they remain at the same place, thus reaching for alternatives. As per Kanno, without imagining alternative futures people would remain in the status quo and fail to take action (2003). For example, Ashkan did not have a precise reason as to why he chose to study abroad; it was mostly that he did not feel safe in his country anymore and stated that through his path, he would attempt to figure things out. As he explained, “It was not very stable in my country. There was no future there. I just didn’t want to spend the majority of my youth there. I thought I would figure things out as I go.” One could argue that he imagined the kind of future it would be if he remained in his country, which led him to explore alternatives and decided to leave. In other words, he was seeking a place from which he would be able to imagine a better future.

Chun also imagined a future that she did not desire, though for her, it was not out of fear for her safety. Chun had internship experience that allowed her to imagine a future that she did not want. It is through positioning herself in different contexts such as journalism, TV stations and writing reports in newspapers that she started imagining a future that she did not want for her life

if she remained at the same level, and also knowing what she did not want to become. As she states:

My undergraduate degree is journalism and during undergrad, I did internship in some TV stations, newspaper, and I worked to write some reports, but I am not satisfied with all my internship, I don't want to do this for my whole life.

Then, she expressed that she found her passion when she worked as a part time tutoring some kids and also taught in schools:

I wanted to change my major. So, I wanna to apply maybe education because I feel like when I did part time job in my undergrad where I tutored some kids and I also taught in some schools and I felt like that's something that I have more passion than news reports. Through transitioning from one job to another, or being in different contexts in order to find what her passion is, she realized what she wanted for her future and what she did not. She could imagine the future she was headed toward if she did not make a change, and actively worked to avoid it.

**Personal connections.** Through my interview with Chun, I noticed that we have a lot in common. We both positioned ourselves in contexts in which we did not fit in, which allowed us to know what kind of future we did not want for ourselves.

I am not exactly sure that I have specific clear reasons behind my decision to study abroad. I do not know if I was trying to look for something that seemed to be missing, or happiness, just something bigger, or just finding the right place for me, because I had always had the feeling of "this could not be it". In these ways, I can see similarities between my decision process and Chun's. Also, I have always wanted to connect with my happier, younger self that I was when I was here in the United States. So, I had always yearned to come back. Little did I know back then that

returning is not that easy. Coming back as a different person to the same place you were in, does not guarantee that you will relive the happy memories again.

For me, higher education in the United States was initially just a dream, or a product of my imagination. My fears and doubts that stemmed from my early experiences in school made me very hesitant to believe that I could achieve higher education. However, I talked to my parents about it, and they were very supportive. Yet, still, I allowed hesitance and fear to take over for a while. I had a very good paying job in a hospital, and it was a risk leaving it to become a student again, especially because initially I was not on scholarship. I remember a couple of days that I came back from my work and my mom greeted me excitedly saying that she was talking with international offices that specialized in helping students find study abroad programs. She would go on talking about the universities they recommend in the United States, perhaps imagining a future for me, but I would look at her very tired just scared to get my hopes up. I did my research, but it felt like it was a faraway step.

I still remember vividly the time that encouraged me to make the decision. It was 6:45 or 7 pm, I was still at my office in the hospital basement. It was after working hours, but I had to stay to finish some paper work. It had been a very busy day. I know every job has its challenges, and I did like this job at the beginning, but it had become very robotic by this time, and it did not help me evolve as a complex human being or something of that sort. In spite of that feeling, I still gave it 150% effort, but the hierarchy in the hospital was an issue. I would often face disrespectful behavior from arrogant medical doctors. That day, I was angrily crying because of a work-related issue. One of my best friends brought me curl Cheetos; they were my favorites. Crying did not stop me from eating those Cheetos. I was crunching angrily and talking to my friend, who was laughing at me about what has happened with a rude medical doctor, because things like that



happens very often in the hospital environment. It is noteworthy to mention here that this friend was my number one supporter to obtain a higher education, not necessarily internationally, but she always believed that I would make it at a time I felt it was too far, or too good to happen.

Going back to that evening, I felt that I was tolerating an office job that had become too routinely and meaningless for me. In addition to that, I had to be patient with disrespect. I was not happy, and I knew that this could not be my place for long. It was that day that anger overcame my fear and turned my hesitation into determination; I decided this could not be it for me. As I was packing my stuff and closing the office, I said to myself, why not just take one step, have a new start, and give another place a try? I was not sure if it was higher education that I wanted, but I wanted a new place, even if it was for a short time.

I came to the United States in the Spring/Summer semester and entered the English Language Institute for academic writing courses, and things went on from there. I applied for my master's degree after talking with couple of professors in education. I did not have the PhD in mind at that time, but I think it was both the need of the employment market in my country, the feeling that there was still more to explore, and the drive of "this can't be it" that encouraged me to go on.

Like Ashkan and Chun, where I was in my life at that point was not the place the I imagined myself to be in the future. I tried to seek alternatives to find my place in the world, which directed me to the study abroad journey. International students' aspirations behind their decisions to study internationally are not as simple as a desire to get good grades, learn a new language, assimilate, or get a certificate; it goes beyond that. It is a complex journey of imagining a new future that is different from one student to another, depending on the imagined future or imagined communities that they aspire to affiliate with. The process that international students go through prior to and

during the journey abroad is more fascinating and is worth exploring with a different lens than that of acculturation and assimilation. The belief that the main reason international students travel to a foreign country just to assimilate is ethnocentric and reflects cultural hegemony (Koehn, 2005).

### **International Education as Self-formation**

When viewed within a self-formation paradigm, successful international students do not merely adjust or acculturate to the host country's norms within conditions of social order and stability; rather the journey supports the process to self-formation within conditions of disequilibrium (Marginson, 2014). Transformation within the conditions of disequilibrium in international education contexts calls for strong agency as it gives importance to the students questioning their old selves, forming new selves, and figuring out their position in their world (Erichsen, 2009). International education within self-formation paradigm prioritizes attending to the inner voice instead of giving primary importance to fitting in with the outside world, which helps students learn about themselves (Marginson, 2014). For this reason, self-formation is an individual, not uniform, experience related to students' goals, aspiration, and personal growth.

Identity formation is not a linear narrative or a journey from home country's identity to host country's identity. It is a fluctuation between past, and present, because memory and experience exist in the present. The journey of moving from one place to another puts international students in a position that triggers self-formation as the disequilibrium that the physical move causes allows them to look at themselves—how they were, how they are, and how they could be—in ways that they could not before. Participants expressed their identity changes or development as becoming more independent, liberated, social, reflective, and then I will discuss my personal connections to the stories. I will discuss each, in turn.

**Becoming independent and liberated.** Independence is a theme that is widely covered in the literature, and had a tremendous effect on my own sense of self and development as well as those of the study participants. Across the interviews, there was a strong sense that independence can lead to a high sense of responsibility, strength, and liberation. Trans (2016) contends that international education is a pathway to independence, as it incorporates investment in the self as human capital and it changes what a person can do. The two participants that stood out the most in terms of claiming their independence were Mala and Leenah, who reflected on the ideas of their changing or discovered independence and responsibility.

Speaking about independence and responsibility, Mala expressed directly that, "...after coming here, I've learned to be more independent." Unlike many of the participants, Mala's family also moved to the United States. In her interviews, she talked quite a bit about how she used to rely on her family, but in the states they are not very much knowledgeable about the American system. As she says:

In my country anything that I want I can get it done ASAP with my parents help, whereas her my parent don't know much about the American education system so it is up to me to figure it out. I need to figure out by myself, so I am exploring way more than I did back in India.

Mala used to navigate her way with her parents' support as they were familiar with the systems in India, while here she has to navigate her way without her parents' support. So, even though Mala's study abroad journey did not involve separation from her family, it did involve a shift in the need for her to support for herself.

For me, before moving to the United States to study abroad and live on my own, I never knew that being the only one responsible for household chores and bills and also a car required so

much attention. As much as I tripped over these new responsibilities at the beginning of my study abroad journey, I have now developed a high sense of responsibility. As I look back at the responsibilities I had back in my country, they are small compared to the ones here in the United States. I am more aware of the responsibilities that my father was handling for me before I left the country, and I appreciate that more now. Although the high sense of responsibility is tough and not pleasant at times, now I know that I can live completely independently without fear or sense of needing help or support from a family member or anyone. This part of my study abroad journey, among others that I will talk about later, revealed to me a strong sense of self that is able to handle difficult situations. For me, knowing that I can depend on myself and stand on my own two feet without leaning on anyone is also liberating. There is a sense of liberation that comes with believing that you can manage your life on your own.

In a sense, independence can lead to liberation, and liberation here is defined as freedom from any constraint of thoughts or expected social role or behavior. For example, during Mala's interview, she talked about being free from the mono-perspective thinking in her country. In the United States, she met with diverse people who held diverse perspectives. Also, Leenah talked about how her study abroad journey helped to free her from the constraints of the social roles imposed on her by her home society as a woman. In light of this, she started shaping her life differently, which is an element in Marginson's self-formation (2014). Leenah said,

It [study abroad] changed me as a woman, it changed my thinking of myself. I feel I have the right to earn my own money. I don't feel like I am depending on anyone. I feel I can be the main person in the house.

Through these statements, we can see that Leenah felt liberated in the sense that she was not relying on others to survive, and recognized that she could "be the main person in the house",

depending on herself which as she says changed the way she thinks about herself giving her a strong sense of self-worth. McKay and Wang (1996) stated that any person or any language learner undergoes social negotiations within his or herself in order to form an identity she or he prefers in the setting in which they exist. Being in a context that allowed Leenah to have different social roles led her to feel more independent and liberated from previous predetermined social roles. She was independent because she was not reliant on others, and also liberated because, she was not constrained to her previous social roles as a woman in her home country.

Mala also shared Leenah's feeling of liberation, but driven by the fact that the study abroad context provided her with the opportunity to meet people from different cultural backgrounds and who held different worldviews than her family and community in India. This helped change her way of thinking in a way that was not tied to familial or cultural constraints. In reference to becoming more liberated Mala stated,

In terms of being liberal, it is just I am surrounded by people from different cultures here; that's not the same back there ... I feel like I am more liberal than my family, and I think if I haven't moved here I would have the same outlook as my family, so that has changed.

For Mala, being exposed to a context that is more diverse than her home country encouraged her to become more aware of her own ideas, accept and critically consider differing views, re-evaluate her own, and become more broad-minded. As she explained it,

I like meeting people from other cultures, I feel like I am like learning a lot, when you learn about other religions, about other cultures. Those people who have diverse backgrounds, you know sometimes you are thinking of things and you find that the people are thinking about it differently and maybe they are right in it. So, I feel that the more you know people from other culture, from other countries, you learn a lot in life. So, yah I feel like here, you

have this opportunity.

In her home country, Mala was surrounded by a largely homogenous family community and exposed to largely homogeneous set of views, which did not provide her with any point of comparison to evaluate those views. She accepted them for the lack of alternatives. When she lived in the US, she was exposed to a very heterogeneous population. This gave her the opportunity to see lots of viewpoints on issues and make conscious decisions about her beliefs. This is in a way tied to the work of Freire, as he asserts that one must be able to look critically at the culture that one is shaped by to be reflective and take positive action in the world (1970). Learners must have the power and be able to make sense of their lives in relation culture and society in order to be liberated from the dominant social practices and construct one's voice, rather than merely consenting and being submissive to the wishes of the dominant in society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This, in turn, leads to a greater awareness of one's own power (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Both Leenah and Mala expressed feelings of becoming more liberated, though they were driven by different reasons. Leenah liberated herself from the social roles she was attached to in her country as a women. When she immersed herself in other contexts that consisted of differing roles for her, it allowed her to analyze and critique the old ones and liberated her from the roles she was attached to. During her study abroad experience, Mala has learned from a context that is more diverse from the one she was a part of in India. This has allowed her to analyze and critique her old views, which liberated her from a homogenous way of thinking.

In reflecting on my own views on independence and liberation, I believe that there is nothing wrong with having help and support on daily basis. However, as an Arab woman who lived in the Middle East, I can see that for a woman to free herself from the cultural notion of not being able to live on her own without a family member, to acknowledge and trust that she can

make it on her own without depending on any family member, frees her from feeling of fear of making it successfully on her own and becoming independent. This, in my view, develops a feeling of liberation.

**Forming a strong sense of agency.** If identity is how one understands her or his own relationship to the social world, agency is a person's capacity to act on her or his own behalf. A strong personal agent is someone whose actions and achievements are assessed according to his or her own values and goals as opposed to some external criteria and assessment (Sen, 2000, p.19). When people try to understand and analyze two or more social worlds and utilize their inner voices as opposed to depending on outside lenses, and come up with their own views and decisions, it strengthens their agency (Marginson, 2014).

In one's country of origin, a person is consumed by their usual social rules and roles. When they find themselves in a whole new context, whether in a different country, culture, or religious setting, they start to consciously learn, understand, and reflect on both worlds and try to understand where they stand and know their place in the world. As Ashkan puts it:

It wasn't very clear to me what I wanted to do when I came here and I didn't understand society and didn't understand the world. So, I was very confused about a lot of stuff when I got here; but now I am not confused anymore. Um, there was a bunch of stuff that I didn't understand, I didn't understand what I wanted to do...So now I have a purpose or direction. I can say I became a better version of myself.

When international students face new and different social structures and new ways of life, it can trigger a state of disequilibrium. As Ashkan states, "I came here and I didn't understand society, so I was very confused about a lot of stuff". This disequilibrium allowed him not only to

analyze and understand the new context, but also to start a continuous search for who he is and who he wants to become (Marginson, 2014). So, the disequilibrium put him in a position where the new society could not define him because he did not understand it, but neither could the old, because he was not currently a part of it. Thus, by default, he had to search for and listen to his inner voice. In international education as self-formation, instead of international students seeing themselves as weak or deficient until they adjust to the norms and expectation to reach success, they understand themselves to be a strong agents, piloting the course of their lives. The role of agency in revealing or forming one's true self is also apparent in Ahmed's interview:

If you have beliefs, you never tested them...it is just something you know...I think being alone...without your family and depending on yourself with different cultures shows the real you....You start questioning yourself...It shapes your way of thinking and it keeps you challenging yourself.

This quote indicates a mark between identity and agency. Identity can be influenced, labeled, or imposed by social power on an individual, while agency is self-driven. Ahmed detached himself from invisible limitation that might have been dictated by his own society. He detached himself geographically, and now he is able to question his identity and beliefs. The power of making personal choices does not depend on outside forces, rather stems from within him. The statement Ahmed made about how being on your own, away from the familiar context, shows you "the real you", is a strong statement. This resonates with what Gee (1989) and Freire (1970) believes, that primary Discourses or one's own home culture can never be liberating in the absence of secondary discourses due to lack of the meta-knowledge it offers. You are limited in your ability to assess your own circumstances unless or until you obtain a Discourse that allows your own primary Discourse to be analyzed and critiqued in comparison. Secondary Discourses are the ones



we learn outside our home culture or primary Discourse. Secondary Discourses are the ones that allows one primary discourse to be analyzed and critiqued and spurs powerful and liberating Discourses. Gee define Discourse as an identity kit such as, talking, behaving, and valuing. So, by Discourse he means ways of talking, behaving, acting, and ways of being (Gee, 2008, p. 3). This excerpt reveal that in one's country of origin, one is always exposed to a predetermined societal or familial expectation, beginning at birth, and socialized to act accordingly. When international students relocate themselves into new and different contexts in which they have to learn new belief systems, values and ways of thinking, it compels them to start questioning and analyzing the ones from their past. This questioning and analysis entails changing their ways of acting and behaving, and consequently forming a new identities. Space far from the past social world provides support for the agency to reevaluate values and form identities. Similar to Ahmed, Ashkan talked about figuring out what he wanted for his life, far from societies' voices and expectations:

I needed space... from my parents and society, space from expectation to fit in to a place, to figure stuff out. I figured out what I am planning to do, and what's my place is in the world, and who I am, and what's my identity.

Along the same line, the space away from norms, societal voices, and familial expectations in the study abroad context helped Chun rethink her perception of life and question whether her decisions were based on her own passion or external criteria. As she said:

It makes you think about your life and your perspective of life. When you make a decision, are you based on your own thought, passion, interest or based on what other people say?

People often conform to the expectations of people around them, what they consider to be acceptable or not, wrong or right, bad or good (Enrichen, 2009), instead of following the voices in their minds, hearts, or souls. Chun raises a question of whether the decisions one is making is coming from one's inner voice or societal voices. In other words, are the decisions and actions emerging from her own personal desire or is it just to satisfy external considerations?

When international students first arrive in a country, most students have no family and have not yet formed a community, so it is only their own voice that determines who they might become. This can be liberating and terrifying at the sometime. Once international students form a new community in the new country, there are still some expectations to be met which may be different from their original country's norm. This causes disequilibrium as students start to understand the expectations, find their own voices, and start organizing a new identities. According to Bamberg (2011) identity is not tied to one societal discourse but open to change. Identity is able to transform to meet the challenges of increasing cultural multiplicities in increasing global environment (p.10). In addition to emphasizing attending to one's inner voice and becoming a strong agent, self-formation encourages one to become reflective.

**Becoming reflective.** Self-formation is open and highly reflective. Through this experience of navigating different choices, students develop an ability to reflect on and be critical of their past history, their own social values and attitudes towards themselves, and their home cultures (Marginson, 2014). As Chun stated:

I realized that just studying abroad is not enough, we have to have the ability to reflect. We have to have the ability to think about ourselves, not always criticize others. Like think about yourselves and also made me think of something that maybe that we are doing thing maybe it's actually not good. But we did not realize it.

She states that being an international student encouraged her to think about herself and to look at some practices she used to engage in with a new lens, realizing that they might not be good after all. It developed her to ability think and become more reflective. This is a possible overlap between a cultural expectation of academia, and how it interplays with the idea of disequilibrium. Being an international student in graduate studies, students simultaneously learn to question and critique everything, at the same time as all of these cultural differences are being highlighted. Moreover, in self formation people learn to change themselves as they go. As Norton states that identities are not static (1997), it is an on-going and continuous.

**Becoming social.** Being social and participating and interacting with the social world that one lives in is essential, one understands him/herself as well as others through interaction. An example from this study of becoming more social as a result of being in an international education context is Ashkan's explanation of how being immersed in a diverse society affected him. He stated:

Well, [before I began my study abroad journey] socially, I was very awkward, I didn't know how to interact with people, now I am pretty good at that. So that changes a lot .... by interacting with all the different people ... So that inquires a lot of changing perception of myself and my place in society, you know thinking about how others view me. But I don't think classrooms or any of that affected it. I just used the environment for my advantage.

Ashkan's excerpt indicates that he was an isolated person in his own country. He also felt that he was socially awkward when he first started his journey, and then he became a social person. It could be that he thrived in a context where everyone was different as opposed to a monoculture environment that might entail conformity, or it could be that he just made a conscious decision to

allow his new environment to shape his new identity within it (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This quote from Ashkan also reminds me of Bransen (2000), who asserts that one is always in search for his or her own place in relation to the context and that identity is an ongoing process of trying to make sense of oneself. Ashkan shows a concern about how others view him, it resonates with Ige's (2010) statement in that identity can be a reflection of the various ways in which people understand themselves in relation to others. So, this excerpt reveals that his identity is not only determined by the ways in which he views himself, but how he is viewed by others in particular social contexts.

**Ongoing self-formation.** Edna referred to her self-formation as “something that I am still going through; it’s ongoing,” and I feel the same way. I am always shaping and reshaping my identity. As long as contexts change, identities need to be changed or reorganized. I have often asked myself, when will I feel like “This is it. This is who I want to become”? I can say that I still have not reached that point completely, but I have become more accepting and flexible of the idea that the process of becoming keeps changing. When I change contexts and interact with different people, I keep acquiring different roles. Different contexts necessitate activating different identities. Sometimes, I am not aware that these identities exist in me, but particular contexts and situations triggers the me to reveal them or build more identities as I go. So, the “this is it” for me, is the continuous and the ongoing.

**Personal connections.** My experience moving between two countries triggered major questions about my social roles and my place in both worlds. I remember when I started living alone in the United States, I felt a little lost. I remember the mornings waking up, and drinking my coffee and just feeling confused and that something was missing. Later on, I knew what caused

these feelings is that at my home in my country of origin, I wake up, I am a daughter, a sister, an auntie and a granddaughter. I pick up my social roles automatically and act as expected. So, in my home country, I have many predetermined social roles that are defined by who I am in relation to other people. On the other hand, in my study abroad home, I wake up and it is just me, myself, and I. Now what role should I play, without my familiar social context?

This echoes Norton (1995), who writes that changing geographical boundaries invites construction of identities, which necessitates negotiation of identities in which individuals seeks answers to the question, “Who am I?” Moreover, the distance and disconnect between the self and the past social world that have defined a person can lead to feelings of alienation and can contribute to a sense identity crisis (Enrichen, 2006). We often define ourselves in terms of our relationships to others, but what happens when, at the beginning of the study abroad journey, you have no others? That required a lot of reflection on the social roles that I previously possessed, and spurred questions like, if I performing the roles I automatically performed on a daily basis in the past, who was I without these roles? Who did I want to become without my familiar social roles? I eventually, became a student, teacher, friend, but not in those first days.

The findings of this study thus far reveal that the disequilibrium of the international education journey birthed new identities for each participant, and that the process and identities were different from one student to another. For some, they become more independent, others more liberal, more social, more reflective and for some is the realization that their identities are ongoing and changing.

In sum, the experience of studying as an international student is transformative and greatly impacts identity development. Living within an international context requires international

students to define their identities between past and present contexts, and in that process, they reform themselves (Enrichen, 2016). International students should not look at the new challenges in another country to merely adopt, acculturate, and assimilate, but they should deal with using multiple resources, perceptions, values, inner directedness and self-will. International education as self-formation places high importance on the conscious agency of the individual (Marginson, 2014)

### **Reflections on Self and Society**

Different contexts play an important role in identity development: the culture and the community, family, peers and professional and social environment (Grotevant, 1987). Through the experience of studying abroad, students gain an ability to reflect on and be critical on their own social values and attitudes towards their home countries and cultures (Marginson, 2014). Participants expressed that they started to change their outlooks and views when viewing their culture from distance. Some viewed it more positively and started to appreciate it more; others viewed it negatively, and become more aware of some of its negative impacts. For example, talking with Edna revealed that she appreciates her culture more as a result of studying abroad:

So away from my culture, I perceive it more positive, especially you know here its individuality, and I think that is, I don't know, I am not supposed to be casting judgement, but I feel like I see the collective mindset as being more better and I think part of the problem here in the US is that people are just egocentric. It would be great to see what's happening in my culture happening here, where we look after each other and just feel less self-centered, more community kinda of like.

Edna appreciates the collective nature of her home society more now that she felt that she is in a context that values individualism more. On the other hand, Mala started viewing her home

culture in a more negative way. In her home country, social surroundings put her under stress with being always compared with her cousins. As she states:

I was constantly compared with like my cousins and how they do or my neighbor kids and how they do, so I don't know if it was positive, I would say it was negative.

I don't think it was positive for me, the culture. I think people here are more laid back. I think here they also have the option of understanding what sort of learning works for you and then working through that, whereas there you don't really have an option. You gotta get the scores or else you are not good enough

Mala views her country in a negative way as she did not feel that she was free to make her own choices as she was constantly compared with others, which might have put her under pressure to conform and compete with the rest of her cousins. Becoming a person who can make free choices without the voices of others is something she values in the United States, where she is away from her familial expectations. Enrichen (2006) states that creation of the self is a process that is constantly negotiated through interaction with others in our lives, and within our social contexts. If the context and the people that we interact with change, then it can be assumed that aspects of who we are in turn renegotiated.

Similarly, Chun, wanted to have freedom to choose her own interests and goals. She started to see the negative aspects of her culture when she critiqued it from a distance. She noticed the way her country values suffering for gain, and she wanted to steer away from it and focus on her own goals and interest of becoming a happy person, as she explained in her interview:

Chun: I think I started to understand my own country, because when I was in there, I didn't notice some of these things, then I am here, I noticed. The environment there actually is not very good.

Researcher: In what way was it not good?

Chun: The environment is like you don't have a lot of freedom to do things you like. And people will like ... you have to work for other people. You have to work like for government or other people's goal.

Researcher: Okay, can you say more about not having freedom of choice, like what?

Chun: Making money, the main goal is making money and maybe the goal should be something that is good for everybody. We have been trained into a mindset that now I don't want for myself. So I changed a lot of my mindset. When I came to the U.S. I started to be aware some of the mindset that I developed in my own country, so I started to change them. For example, like when I was in my own country, they tend to train us like, you have to have a lot of suffering and they don't encourage you to enjoy the moment. That's the mindset that the environment tells people. But when I came here, I started to realize that people here, not all, they live and enjoy the moment. I started to realize maybe I don't have to be too hard on myself. I realize that there are differences. In some culture, the suffering and gain are separate, but in some culture they think should not be separate, they should be united. So that while people here enjoy their work and their study, they choose the thing that they really like. They combine their hard work with enjoyment. So here they try to let people enjoy the moment and find their own passion, find their own interest. These are the things I realized.

So that's why a lot of people in China worked really hard. For your life, you have to seek how to find a way and enjoy your life when you are working hard. This makes you think about your life and perspective of life.



Being away from the familiar societal expectation, she realized what she does and does not want for herself. She wants to follow her own goals. She puts a lot of value on happiness and not a lot of value on making money. In the first part of the interview, she raised the critique towards her school in that it did not give much attention to students' happiness, goals and interests and now she became critical to the way that her own society values hard work and suffering more than happiness. She decided to become a happy person and follow her own passion. This echoes Freire (1970), as he asserts that thinking critically is important for self, social empowerment, and agency. Agency means the ability to be present as an active agent in a struggle by being able to locate oneself in one's own history, and reclaiming one's voice in order to expand the possibilities in one's life and future and to not consent to the wishes of the dominant discourse in society. So, becoming critical is vital to uncover dominant ideology and construct one's voice for empowerment (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For Chun, being in an international education context that represents different values than that of her own country broadened her knowledge and helped her learn new life skills relevant to her new community, which helped her become a different person. This resonates with Wenger (1998) notion that learning from a community of practice and participating in it leads to identity construction. He asserts that learning entails becoming a different person or avoiding becoming a different person. In Chun's case, she avoided becoming a person who values suffering for gain and became a person who acted on her valuation of happiness, supported by the context of her new community.

While Mala and Chun were clear where they stood in terms of their views towards their culture, Ashkan seemed to reject the idea of strict cultural expectations, in general, at least in terms of predetermined societal rules as how to talk, behave, etcetera:

I thought it was important, my culture. I thought it was interesting and like I wanted

to have children in the future. I wanted to raise them with my culture, my language.

Now I don't care, they shouldn't follow any culture. They should be their own people.

Ashkan does not want his children to be pressured, to be tied to firm societal expectations. Pressure to conform to the mainstream is not something that he wants for his children; he prioritizes their becoming authentic people.

While Ahmed did not reject his home culture, he did talk about negative aspects that he was able to see now that he has a point of comparison. In the following excerpt, he discusses minor issues in his home culture such as bad driving, but also more serious concerns about sexism:

Looking at your society from far made me more able to see the flaws, through comparing it with other society. That made me more determined to go back again and to try to apply the good things I've learned [while studying abroad] into my [home] society. Before that, you don't know better. For example, I didn't realize how bad the way we drive. I knew it wasn't good, but it's actually disastrous. If I was an insurance company, I wouldn't dare to get into this market, because it is nonsense. Other things, how unequal the society was when it comes to sexism. We are by every measure sexist, that's our culture, not the law or religion, but we were just using both to justify that, and I am so happy to see the changes happen. The road is long, but we have to walk it.

Ahmed's statement reveals that when he resided in a Western society, where women have more opportunities than where he lived, it shaped his own views toward women's rights in his own country. He goes on to state that his society does not accept people who are different, in general. Per Ahmed, in order to succeed in Saudi society, you have to have two personalities: acting the same among your friends, but different among employers or something of that sort. This is relevant to Wenger's (1998) statement that people experience different identities while engaging in

different social participation, and then make a choice among the identities within them. Ahmed explained:

In my society, some people think being born and raised in one society, that's a guarantee membership, which is not. The Saudi society appreciates the typical people. If you are a typical person then you are good, and you are welcome, and that is different about the culture in the states. So, you have to look the same, but at the same time you have to distinguish yourself, and this is very challenging. You have to look the same among your classmates, otherwise, they are going to mock you and laugh at you and do bad things to you, which is a headache, but you have to look different in the eyes of the people who actually matter. So that's the challenge, you have to play two personalities. So, I think that's the effort that I had to do, being looking normal to my peers, but also distinguish myself in front of other people who I think can actually give me chances and take me to higher places. For the States, I think having the membership at some point telling them you are not crazy. They have no issues accepting the differences, but they had always a concern that you might be a serial killer or crazy. They have these thoughts, I think it was filled in their minds, because of too much movies or TV shows and the media overall. The American mentality is suspicious. I think, until you prove you're not [crazy], then you are welcome with all your differences. They don't care. So that was my effort, proving to them that I am not crazy, then its fine.

This reminds me of Lave and Wenger's (1998) concept of identities in practice, which characterizes learning as participation in a community of practice, involving the construction of identities in relation to the practices with the communities. That is, to learn in any community means to become a particular person, to engage in a particular pattern of participation. By

negotiating membership (receiving, resisting, or revising expectations), individuals practice a particular identity in that context reflecting who one wants to be in that particular place. Ahmed recognized that in order to fit in, he had to understand the context he was in. He decided to become a ‘typical’ person among his friends, to look and the same way in order to fit in. Then he marked himself as a ‘different’ person among people who mattered to his career, like a group of professionals. He activates those two identities depending on the context he is in after understanding and getting a sense of the communities operate (Wenger, 1998).

Ahmed’s statements about the American society, and the importance of “proving to them that I am not crazy”, align with what Giroir (2014) believes, that second language speakers constantly negotiate their positions relative to target language speakers in the context of social environments. This excerpt is also relevant to Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) theory, in which a person does not possess only one self, but rather multiple selves, where each is activated accordingly, based on the specific situation.

We are each born into our home cultures and Primary Discourses—we acquire them naturally (Gee, 1989). When a person is dropped as an adult into a new place, they have to first find which group(s) they want to become a part of and then actively learn—through all the missteps that entails—to be part of it. Lave and Wenger (1989) also talk about this, how we apprentice into communities, moving from the periphery to the center. Wenger (1998) contends that learning is not just cognitive of acquiring skills and knowledge, but it is part of changing participation patterns in various communities with shared practices.

**Personal connection.** As for me, I will share a brief story that was a turning point for me. It was the time that I discovered that my culture’s or societal voices are more dominant in my head than my own voice. It was my first time struggling with anxiety and depression. It’s not uncommon

that international students studying abroad would go through a phase of anxiety and depression as being away from their families, figuring out how their surrounding works, figuring their place in the surroundings, all these may trigger stressor for some international students.

One day, I opened my eyes and I felt that my bedroom was spinning, and I did not know what was going on. I knew I had been having migraines and headaches very frequently, but why was my room spinning?

I thought, I should call one of my friends, and my brain decided to bombard me with familiar voices:

“Nothing is wrong with you, you speak good English you shouldn’t be struggling, you are just being over dramatic.”

“Nothing is wrong with you, why are you depressed, aren’t you a strong believer? Don’t you have a strong faith in God?”

Wow! The vertigo was increasing. The voices broke me, especially lacking faith in God, as religion plays an important part in my life. The attitude of some people in my culture towards those who suffer from anxiety and depression as people who lack faith, non-good Muslims. Saudi culture mostly view depression illness is that it would not happen if one is close to God (e.g., Alrahili, Almatham, Bin Haamed,& Ghaziuddin,2016), which I know now that it is not true.

I wanted to reach out to my phone, but I couldn’t walk, my legs were too heavy, so I crawled to the living room and I sat at the corner for hours thinking what I should do. I should stop my PhD and go home, no but I would really disappoint my parents and myself. I was just breathing deeply and telling myself this will end. Within couple of hours, it lessened, and I could start walking steadily again.

I went to the clinic the next day. “You have to take the pill that we prescribed to you, I told

you that before,” the medical staff said. “You have several symptoms associated with anxiety and depression.” It sounded like the medical staff was familiar with the stigma associated with depression, as she explained that taking the pill for depression is just like taking any pill for any other disease like diabetes, or hypertension.

I changed my mindset and was convinced later on, especially after I saw the results of the medicine, that depression is just like any other disease, it has nothing to do with your faith. But what I know now that I wished I had known back then is to not let societal voices take over my power to make choices in my life that will affect no one but me. How strange these societal voices are engraved in our brains that we are ready to follow them even if it interferes with our happiness and well-being.

What led to this point was layers and layers of pushing for conformity since a young age, to consider or put more weight on meeting outside criteria; viewing yourself as good or bad from the outside. Who is a good student? Who is a good Muslim? Who is a good person? Putting high importance on societal voices and meeting outside criteria is something we were trained to meet without attending to the voice of the inner self, which sets the stage for allowing societal voices, and norms to have more control and power. Changing places or having space to disconnect from norms allows you to question yourself. There will always be that pressure to conform be as “good” as people expect you to be.

I am grateful for this incident; I look at the time I was crawling from my bedroom to the living room as my turning point in my life. The power of making a choice will never depend on what is dictated by society. As per, Kung (2007) turbulence and chaos are gifts allowing international students to recognize and reorganize their inner world to further develop their potentials. This reminds me of Mezirow (2000) who enforces the idea that human beings have a

need to learn to negotiate and act on their own, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those that have been subconsciously absorbed from others and the surroundings. Mezirow (2000) transformative process involves separation from those rules, recreating new perspectives, and dealing with life with a greater degree of self-determination.

It was reported by Bochner (1972) that “the better a student adjusts to the host society, the harder it will be for that student to readjust once he or she returns to the original culture” (as cited in Mata-Galan, 2003, p. 12). Students adjusting to the norms of the host country may face issues adjusting back again. Instead of adjusting to the norms of the host country and then readjusting back to one’s original culture, Marginson’s (2014) concept of self-formation encourages international students to attend to their own inner voice to analyze and reflect on the social worlds they once lived in and the ones they are trying to live in. Within this disequilibrium, students must utilize their sense of agency to figure out their places, make their own choices, create new identities, and decide which identity to activate depending on the context, then positioning themselves.

### **Autoethnographic Reflection**

Autoethnographic researchers are present in their study, which I was by including my subjective reflections on my participants’ interviews as well as by including myself as one of the participants. The dissertation writing time was daunting for me, just as it is for any PhD student, but reading and reading my participants’ stories was uplifting and sometimes put a smile on my face, which added a levity of some sort. My interviews with the participants opened more doors to an inward journey. Recalling memories was the hard part, but unpacking them was liberating.

From my participants, I noted that fitting in and the strong desire to belong is something that is crucial to them as students in school. It was very important to me too, trying to fit in. I

always had issues of fitting in. So, to the Saudis I am always perceived as not Saudi enough, because I do not follow the typical way of talking, dressing, or behaving. In the United States, for many Americans, I seem to be treated as the “other” too. There is a small story that I want to share here. A teacher in a high school I worked in recently, approached me and asked, “Are you Muslim or Islamic?” I thought the terms meant the same thing for a long time. But with what is going on with political and religious ideologies, I learned that “Islamic” means terrorist to some Americans. She went on to say “Because you can’t be Islamic and be in school with us, right? I smiled and said, “Right, I am just Muslim.” I walked away, and while I was walking in the hallways, I asked myself “Was I just asked by a teacher if I was a terrorist or not?”

I think there is no certain place that would feel that I completely belong or fit. There was a time prior to finishing my dissertation where I wanted to graduate and just settle down in my country and find a job and feel safe with the familiar. But now, after being enlightened with different stories from my participants. I feel I want to explore more places. There is no one certain place that I want to be attached to, which reminds me of Maya Angelo words, “You only are free when you realize you belong to no place - you belong every place – no place at all.”

Perhaps the most significant thing that I came to acknowledge through this work is knowing that this constant feeling of wanting to belong is overestimated. From reflecting on both my participants’ stories as well as unpacking my stories, the feeling that I gleaned is that a reasonable amount of effort goes to searching for who accepts us, where we fit or where we belong. When we do not fit in, then there comes a feeling that there must something inherently wrong within us, especially our past selves. Now, I think spending this effort searching for a sense of



belonging, is a waste. The real entity that I need to belong to is myself, with all the contradictions it may hold.

*To whom do I belong?  
 To the east, to the west, to the multination  
 To desert storms, to snow storms  
 To the conservatives, to the liberals  
 To the local, to the global  
 To the broken, to the scars, to the imperfections  
 To compassion, to understanding  
 To humanity, to spirituality  
 To the lost yet found  
 I belong to me*

Once again, looking back on my school experiences, we were expected to follow mainstream values or silence our voices. I wonder now if training students to store knowledge and conform to the outside expectation without attending their inner voice. Is that fruitful in the long run? Is it fair to deprive students from of voice and agency at early age? I am wondering if training students to meet outside criteria in order to be “good students” without attending to their inner thoughts, helps prepare them to be future leaders in society.

Some stories in school contexts stood out more than others for me because of the identity turmoil the participants so clearly expressed. Much in the same way that one can sometimes wish that they could go back and tell their younger selves that it will all work out, I wish I could go back and talk to participants in this study during their K-12 years. Edna was bullied because she spoke a different language than the mainstream, but grew up to become an “ambassador for diversity”, as she put it in her own words. Chun was labeled as “slow” and described herself as “miserable”, but has now found her passion, which is education. She is happy, working on something she loves

as opposed to conforming to the to the mindset of suffering in order to gain, propagated by her home culture. Ahmed, as a little boy, had a lot of questions and enthusiasm. He was able to critique what was going on in society at a young age, but his voice was not taken into consideration and he was antagonized. That led him to come up with successful techniques to survive, which included having the ability to switch between multiple personalities, one that goes allows him to fit in with the mainstream, and another that allows him to proudly distinguish himself. Ashkan, who had his confidence shaken because of a narrow definition of who is a good, and who is bad. Now he has found his place in the world and his identity and is confident. Finally, when I reflect on my own school journey, I think of my younger self who was sitting at the back chair in a classroom wondering why was she being guilting for being different. She was lost and afraid to speak up, and did not understand what was she guilty of doing. Speaking two languages? Having multiple identities? Talking and acting different? Why was that a crime? Well, that little girl is writing a dissertation about identity struggle and will always be advocating for embracing multiple identities, both in a professional environment and on a personal level.

## Chapter 5- Conclusion

The study aim is to examine international students' identities and identity formation, past, present and future within different social contexts. Identities are how we understand ourselves relative to the world we live in (Norton, 1995). I explored educational and social factors and study abroad contexts that contributed to shape identities. For some participants, the school context caused them to feel alienated, and disengaged from participation for reasons such as merely being different in terms of speaking another language that is not spoken by mainstream or for having an inquisitive mind and not being submissive. Participants' responses indicated that schools prioritized grades and disregarded the student as a whole person. It is my hope that the effort, attention, and priority that is placed by teachers and education policy makers, towards the development of students' identities gets reevaluated and considered as important as students test scores and grades.

Schools should move beyond the restrictions of subject information towards mastering the tools of learning and the use of knowledge in multiple contexts (Delors, 1996). Schools systems have to make the effort and prepare students for a life-long, persistent process of personal learning and development in different contexts and situations. Schools should prepare students to seize any learning opportunities throughout their lives, to broaden their knowledge and skill, and to familiarize themselves with changing contexts (Delors, 1996).

As for the role of imagined communities and future in playing a role in international students' identities, the findings reveal that these imagined futures give learners a sense of direction, which encourages them to invest in their present to reach the imagined future to which they aspire. Learners envisioning themselves as active participants in imagined community that

they want to be part of expands the range of their possible selves (Norton 2001). Some of the participants envisioned a high-prestige professional career, locally or globally. They invested in acquiring the needed skills, knowledge, and credentials to gain access to the community they want to be part of. Humans are capable of connecting with communities that lie beyond immediate connections, and investment to be a part of or to be an active participant in these communities strongly influences their learning trajectories, engagement in learning, and identity construction. Through this journey of investing in their imagined futures, learners invest in forming new identities, too. Identities must be understood not only in terms of investment in the real world, but also in terms of investment in possible imagined worlds. Such investment in imagined communities offers wider possibilities for social and educational trajectories. Since students invest in their present selves in order to reach their aspirations for what they see themselves to be in the future, instructors and educational institutions should seek to integrate learners' imagined futures into the classroom.

As for the role of study abroad in forming international students' identities, the findings revealed that the disequilibrium of the international education calls for students to reevaluate their perceptions, values, and senses of agency. International education as self-formation places importance on the conscious agency of the individual to self-direct their paths. International education as self-formation steers away from viewing assimilation to the host country as a success of the journey.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

For school administrators, policy makers, or teachers, finding solutions to problems of alienation, ignorance, and unhappiness is crucial, and cannot be done by increasing and imposing more tests or a greater emphasis on grades. Instead, there must be space for teachers and students

to interact as whole persons (Noddings, 2005). Teachers must allow students to be themselves, and to connect with their goals, dreams, interests and who they are or want to become. Classrooms must cultivate a culture of acceptance, including dialogue in the classroom that embraces respect, and understanding. When students feel socially accepted in school context, it contributes to feeling safe and comfortable to be themselves, hence fostering their personal growth.

For international students, this journey is not an A, B, C step linear journey. Rather, the journey involves false starts, missteps, and direction changes; the disequilibrium is not to be avoided. Being in a new context is an opportunity to reflect and unpack predetermined roles that were once attached and to examine one's self and cultural roots with a different lens. The journey is not to transition from conformation to one country's norms to another country's norms. It is not a journey of adjustment and acculturation. It is a rich journey of identity change and formation.

The deficit model of international education holds the idea that international students decide to come to the Western universities in order to assimilate, and, at least initially, lack the skills required to be successful in the host country. To overcome this perceived deficit, international students are pushed to adjust and adapt to the host country's norms. International education as self-formation (Marginson, 2014) posits that international students can develop an ability to make sense of their lives by understanding and reflecting on both contexts, the one that previously defined them in the past, and the new one that they are trying to figure out. This helps them to redefine their roles and shape new identities. For universities and international higher education programs to embrace a more international environment, they need to advocate for culturally diverse communities by raising dialogue that builds on various cultural strengths rather than positioning students as lacking.

As to the recommendation to myself. Now what? Now, I would say that I will stick to the concept that identity is contextualized. Identities are ongoing, and ever evolving as long as contexts change. I must realize that I need to understand and analyze the different contexts I am in, and be conscious of the exercise of power that it might hold in any form, or not at all. Also, I must become flexible enough to successfully situate myself in different ways according to the context I am in, but resist losing the sense of who I am. I will always be conscious in that my agency is always active, and in touch with my inner voice, and authentic self.

## APPENDIX A: BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: International Students Identities and Learning Trajectories

Principal Investigator (PI): Suha Hamdan  
Teacher Education  
Wayne State University  
571-730-9059

### Purpose

You are being asked to be in a research study of International Students Identities and Learning Trajectories because you are a graduate international student who has been in the United States for three years or more. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled at Wayne State University is about 5. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

In this research study, the goal is to look into how different factors play a role in forming/shaping identities and contribute to learning trajectories.

### Study Procedures

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will first be asked about your country of origin, time spent in the US, degree obtained/obtaining, and your plans after your degree. If selected to participate in the full study, you will participate in two interviews about your educational past, present and future experience, each lasting approximately 45 min to one hour. You will be emailed the questions in advance in order to give you time to think about them prior to the interview. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You will have the opportunity to decline any question that you are not comfortable with and still remain in the study. After the interviews will be transcribed, you will also be contacted and invited to review the transcripts for accuracy. You will be Your name will be replaced by a coded identifier and not shared at any time.

### Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

### Risks

By taking part in this study, you may experience the following risk: Breach of confidentiality may occur. However, your personal information will be saved in an encrypted file that is only accessible by the primary investigator and your signed consent will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.

The following information must be released/reported to the appropriate authorities if at any time during the study there is concern that:

- Child abuse or elder abuse has possibly occurred.
- You have a reportable communicable disease (i.e., certain sexually transmitted diseases or HIV).
- You disclose illegal criminal activities, illegal substance abuse or violence.

### **Study Costs**

- Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

### **Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study. For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and any inconveniences, 20\$ Gift Card will be given, 10\$ in each session.

### **Confidentiality**

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

If photographs, videos, or audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. The audio recordings will be deleted after they are fully transcribed. You have the right to review and/or edit the transcripts of the recording. Only the primary investigator will have access to private information; electronic files will be stored on a password-protected computer and consent forms in a locked filing cabinet. Personal identities will be not published.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study, you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.



The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study

### Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Suha Hamdan [571-730-9059]. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Past: Academic**

- What were the reasons behind your decision to study abroad?
- What made you decide to study in this country in particular?
- Can you tell me what your educational journey was like for you growing up?
- What were the criteria of a good student in the schools you attended?
- In your own view, who did you think good student is? Why?
- Did you consider yourself a good student? Explain.
- Would you describe your past educational journey as positive, negative, or with both positive and negative aspects? Why?
- In your view, what would the ideal positive educational experience looks like?
- During your past formal education in your country, was learning English language a mandatory subject? If not, what were the expectations?
- In your view, was the way English was taught in those classrooms beneficial for you now? Explain
- When you decided to study abroad, what did you imagine your future would be like after earning your degree?

### **Past: Self and Others**

- What role has your family had in your educational journey?
- What role has culture has in your educational journey?

### **Present: Academic**

- Tell me about your expectations for your international educational experience when you first came here.
- In what ways have your expectation been met? In what ways is the experience different from your expectations?
- How would you describe your English language level before starting ELI classes?
- How would you describe your drive/motivation to learn English when you started?
- Do you think your drive/motivation has changed at any point? How/why?
- What has helped you progress in learning English?
- What has hindered your progress in learning English?
- When you first arrived, what were your short- and long-term goals for learning English?
- In what ways, if any, have ELI classroom experiences helped you reach your short- and long-term goals?
- What challenges did you experience in the first semester of your academic program after the ELI?
- What challenges are you facing now?

- What do you think the criteria of a good student is according to both ELI and current academic institutions?
- In your own view, what does it mean to be a good student in ELI?
- Do you think you were/are a good student in both ELI and your academic program? Explain.
- Through your educational journey, what learning experiences have empowered you to invest in achieving your goals?

### **Present: Self and Others**

- In your daily interactions, who are the people you hang out with? Are they from your culture or others? What has that been like for you?
- What kind of people do you feel more comfortable spending time with?
- In what ways, if any, has the study abroad experience affected your perception of yourself?  
affected your role in the family?  
your own culture or society?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel that this abroad journey has changed you? What do you think contributed to this change?

### **Future**

- In what ways, if any, do you think your future will be different after this experience?
- If you were to do this experience all over again, what would you do differently?
- What advice do you have for students who want to start this experience?
- Are there any additional comments you would like to add?

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**ABSTRACT****INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IDENTITIES AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL AND  
LEARNING TRAJECTORIES**

by

**SUHA MOHAMMED HAMDAN****AUGUST 2019****Advisor:** Dr. Kathryn Roberts**Major:** Curriculum and Instruction**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This study explores international students' identities and identity formation within social, educational, and imagined futures, and their study abroad journeys. I look into past, present and future contexts of international students. Qualitative analytic autoethnography and semi-structured interviews are the methodologies utilized. I explore my own experiences around identity and education as an international graduate student, as well as other participants' experiences. Data were collected from six participants from six countries: China, India, Iran, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. Thematic analysis was utilized. The findings revealed that these international students go through an identity journey, where they reflect on their past self and create a new one. Also, the study concluded that identities are multiple, and are continuously ongoing as long as contexts change.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Suha Mohammed Hamdan earned her bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Riyadh Literature College. She earned her master's of Bilingual Bicultural Education with a focus on Teaching English as a Second Language and a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Linguistics from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.