

# **Community–University Partnerships in Practice: Development of Welcoming Learning Environments for New Immigrants**

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## **Abstract**

This case study examined how community–university partnerships have helped develop welcoming learning environments for new immigrants, particularly the increasing number of South Korean students and families in eastern Alabama. The creation of South Korean–owned automobile manufacturing plants in the southeastern United States has brought numerous South Korean families to this region, which has historically had a very small immigrant population. To help educators in these areas understand the culture of new immigrant students, we developed partnerships with local auto suppliers and have provided educators with an international cultural immersion experience in South Korea for the past 7 years. This study investigated the experience of 38 teachers and school administrators participating in the program 2014–2017. Findings revealed that the program helped participants develop empathy for immigrant students, critically reflect on their pedagogical practice, and find effective ways to support immigrant students.

*Keywords:* Cultural immersion program, Korean immigrants, study abroad, transformative learning, South Korea

## **Introduction**

**A**mong the largest land-grant universities in the southeastern United States, Auburn University has a special mission to serve communities in the state of Alabama and beyond. This article examines Auburn University’s effort to develop welcoming learning environments for new immigrants, particularly the increasing number of South Korean students and families in eastern Alabama. With the development of South Korean–owned automobile manufacturing plants (i.e., Hyundai and Kia), many South Korean families have moved to this region since 2005. However, because the number of South Korean and other immigrant students in the region has historically been very low, local educators have lacked sufficient background knowledge about the culture and education systems of South Korea. Amid the influx of South Korean immigrant students, educators and school administrators have thus faced challenges in both providing relevant sup-

port to the newcomers and addressing students' class disengagement and misbehavior. In response, we—professors in the College of Education who specialize in teacher education and school counseling—began working with local South Korean-based auto suppliers and University Outreach at Auburn University to explore effective means to support schools in the region's communities.

While working with local educators, we found not only that most did not know about South Korea but also that what they knew about the country was no longer accurate. Some continued to conceive of South Korea as a third-world country struggling to recover from the Korean War in the 1950s, and many focused solely on current tensions between North and South Korea. We also found that many local educators had lived in the same community for nearly their entire lives and had very limited travel experience in foreign countries. Consequently, despite their enthusiasm for supporting English-language learners (ELLs), they struggled to understand the difficulties that immigrant students at their schools face.

We determined that an effective way to help the educators learn about current South Korean society and understand the struggles that immigrant students at their schools encounter was to host a short-term international cultural immersion experience in South Korea. We predicted that affording participants the opportunity to interact with native South Koreans and to explore places where they would not know the language would guide them toward critically reflecting on their teaching practice. We also hoped that such experience would help them learn about ways to support immigrant students, who often feel vulnerable in their new school environments. Therefore, we developed the Global Studies in Education–South Korea program to provide local educators with an opportunity to fully immerse themselves in South Korean culture during 10-day visits to South Korea. As of June 2018, 68 K-12 school teachers and administrators have visited South Korea as participants in the program since 2011. This article describes the program's background and activities, reports its impacts, and shares lessons learned about promoting community engagement through cross-cultural learning experiences.

### **Relevant Literature and Context of Study**

Although the United States has been home to many different racial and ethnic minorities throughout its history, U.S. communities and schools are increasingly more diverse than they once were (*Lichter, 2012; Marrow, 2010*). In 2015, immigrants representing

nearly every country in the world accounted for approximately 13.4% of the U.S. population (López & Bialik, 2017). Although many immigrants live in large northeastern and western cities (e.g., New York City and Los Angeles), an increasing number of immigrants have settled in the South (Marrow, 2010). The number of immigrants from Latin American countries who have settled in the six states of the Deep South (i.e., Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina) has dramatically increased during the past 20 years, as has the population of Asian-born immigrants (Adelman & Tsao, 2016).

Alabama's immigrant population is small but growing and, in 2015, accounted for 3.5% of the state's total population. Although nearly 40% of those immigrants are Latino, the increasing number of South Koreans in Alabama accounts for approximately 4% of the state's total immigrant population (American Immigration Council, 2017). One reason underlying the increase of South Korean immigrants in Alabama is the development of South Korean-owned automobile plants in the region, including Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama (HMMA) in Montgomery, Alabama, and Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia (KMMG) in West Point, Georgia. HMMA was opened in 2015 and has produced over 300,000 vehicles annually (HMMA, *n.d.*). Similarly, after commencing mass production in 2011, KMMG increased its annual production capacity from 300,000 to more than 360,000 starting in 2012 (KMMG, *n.d.*).

As the manufacturing capacity of both plants has grown, so too has the number of South Korean automobile suppliers in the region. In 2014, the Korea Southeast U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2014) reported that 61 South Korean-owned companies were located in Alabama and 71 in Georgia. The expansion of South Korean automakers in the region has in turn increased the number of South Korean employees and families in the two states. The exact size of the Korean population living in this region is unknown, as the United States census data presents figures just for the Asian population as a whole, not Korean people specifically. According to the Census Bureau website, approximately 64,000 people live in Auburn, Alabama, where Auburn University is located (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). About 7% of them are Asian, and about 8.8% are foreign-born. Based on the number of K-12 Korean students and the number of Korean churchgoers, we estimate that approximately 2,500 Koreans live around this region. Regarding the number of K-12 students, 945 Asian students were enrolled in the Auburn city school system in 2017, and 503 of them listed their primary

language as Korean (C. Herring, personal communication, February 1, 2017). Before the Korean automobile plants were built, fewer than 20 Korean students attended the school system, but the number of Korean students has increased dramatically over the past decade. Although many immigrant students have quickly acculturated to their new school environments, some have continued to disengage in classes and demonstrate behavioral problems, often by pretending they do not understand English. Lacking experience working with new immigrant students, their teachers have been poorly prepared to face those challenges.

## **Asian Immigrant Students in U.S. Classrooms**

Asian immigrant students in the United States are often called *model minorities*; they are high achieving in school, excel particularly in math and science, and are quiet and nonconfrontational. Often adjusting well to U.S. school systems, they thus serve as models for other immigrants (Ryu, 2015; Wing, 2007). However, research has shown that although Asian students generally appear to excel in school, the extent of their academic skills can vary greatly; some drop out before graduation and struggle to pass core classes, whereas others matriculate into elite universities (Lee, 2009).

Although the model minority stereotype seems relatively harmless, it negatively affects students who cannot live up to its assumptions (Park, 2011). More generally, it leaves most non-Asian schools poorly prepared to help low-achieving Asian students or students from low-income or uneducated families, particularly given the widespread myth that Asians are all alike and receive strong educational support from their families and communities (Wing, 2007). Contrary to the stereotype and the myth, Asian students abroad come from more than 40 ethnic groups, not all of which have demonstrated high achievement on math tests (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011). Even within the same ethnic group, students' levels of academic skills vary greatly depending on their parents' education, their age of immigration, their school contexts, and the socioeconomic backgrounds of their families (Ryu, 2015).

Research has additionally revealed that many Asian immigrant students experience exclusion, alienation, and discrimination at school in the form of mockery about Asian foods, their foreign accents, and their physical appearance (Endo & Rong, 2013). In some cases, they have become targets for the anger of nonimmigrant students who conceive that Asian immigrants steal jobs or university placement from nonimmigrants (Wing, 2007). Although

Asian immigrant students can face increased exposure to bullying and violence for those reasons, they resist discussing their concerns or fears with authorities due to their lack of English-language proficiency (Koo, Peguero, & Shekarkhar, 2012; Yeh, 2003).

Research on South Korean immigrant students' engagement in subject learning has revealed several trends. In their study of 43 South Korean immigrant students' learning experiences in social studies classes, Choi, Lim, and An (2011) found that most participants reported facing multiple challenges, including (a) lack of English-language skills and subject knowledge, (b) culturally dominant U.S.-centric perspectives and misrepresentations of South Korean culture, and (c) teachers' failure to understand the needs of immigrant students. They concluded that "social studies teachers need to consider how sociocultural backgrounds and contexts of recent immigrant students influence their social studies learning and how teachers can better support immigrant students to actively engage in social studies learning in a culturally relevant way" (Choi et al., 2011, p. 13).

Ryu (2013) observed a similar trend regarding South Korean immigrant students' participation in science classes. She interviewed seven students in middle and high school and found that they struggled with and were anxious about engaging in discursive practices in the classroom (e.g., scientific argumentation). She suggested that before encouraging immigrant students' engagement in discursive practices in science education, educators should consider "what the blanket emphasis on discursive participation may mean for these minority students and how teachers and curricula may support these minority students' participation" (Ryu, 2013, p. 669). One way to guide educators in learning how to support immigrant students is to provide them with opportunities to critically reflect on their perceptions of diverse students and teaching practice while participating in a study abroad program. Unless teachers encounter an event that challenges their stereotypes or perspectives on immigrant students, changes to their perceptions or behaviors will be limited. Previous research has shown that international cultural experiences provide opportunities for critical reflection, which leads to transformative learning (He, Lundgren, & Pynes, 2017; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011; Zhao, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009).

## **Transformative Learning and Study Aboard**

Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning addresses the structural change of basic expectations, perceptions, feelings,

and cognition during learning. The theory's chief tenet is that people revise their meaning structures through critical reflection, self-reflection, and rational discourse. Meaning structures include two components: meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Meaning schemes consist of "specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that constitute interpretations of experience" (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 5–6). They are visible signs of personal actions and expectations that influence behavior and perceptions—for example, how people are likely to act on subway trains. On the other hand, meaning perspectives are worldviews, personal paradigms, and general frames of reference. Each meaning perspective is "a collection of meaning schemes made up of higher-order schemata, theories, propositions, beliefs, prototypes, goal orientations, and evaluations" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 2) and offers criteria for distinguishing good from bad and right from wrong.

As children, people acquire meaning perspectives uncritically during the processes of socialization and acculturation with the help of teachers, parents, and mentors. Such perspectives not only help people make meaning of events in their daily lives but also generate subjective worldviews that color their sense of reality. Mezirow (1991) has thus called meaning perspectives "a 'double-edged sword,'" for "they give meaning (validation) to our experiences, but at the same time skew our reality" (p. 7).

Transformative learning occurs through critical reflection on existing points of view when individuals face radically different, incongruent experiences—what Mezirow (1991) calls *disorienting dilemmas*—that cannot be explained by existing meaning perspectives. Upon encountering a disorienting dilemma, a person questions the integrity of his or her beliefs and assumptions and explores new roles, relationships, and courses of action. During those processes, engaging in dialogues with others can facilitate the outcome of transformative learning, which affords perspectives that are "more (a) inclusive, (b) differentiating, (c) permeable, (d) critically reflective, and (e) integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163).

Studies on teachers' study abroad experiences have shown that study abroad participants face disorientation, confusion, and discomfort in new cultural contexts (Merryfield, 2000; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). During study abroad, when travelers face problems that they cannot solve by applying familiar problem-solving processes, they often experience disorienting dilemmas that lead to transformative learning when critical reflection and rational discourse opportunities are provided (Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012). Researchers have

also found that such experiences can foster teachers' empathy for non-English-speaking students and form more profound understandings of immigrant students' struggles (*Zhao et al., 2009*).

Those findings convinced us that providing an international cultural immersion experience to educators in school districts in eastern Alabama would be a highly effective way to lead them to critically reflect on their stereotypes of Asian students and to experience their immigrant students' culture at a personal level. Accordingly, we developed a short-term cultural immersion program for educators in Alabama to travel to and experience South Korea.

### **The Global Studies in Education–South Korea Program**

To guide educators in developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes useful to working with diverse learners, we developed the Global Studies in Education–South Korea program in 2011. The program began with approximately \$65,000 in funding from Ajin USA, a South Korean metal stamping company for automobiles located in Valley, Alabama, and University Outreach at Auburn University. Two years later, South Korean–based automobile suppliers in the nearby region acknowledged the program's benefits and began financially supporting the program as well. The 10-day experience in South Korea offered by the program is an all-expenses-paid opportunity. Participants are responsible only for the cost of breakfast and a \$300 participation fee.

As of 2018, 68 K-12 educators and five university faculty members have participated in the program. Approximately 62% of the K-12 educators ( $n = 38$ ) have worked in a school system that had an increasing number of South Korean students and their families. The rest of the K-12 educators have worked in school systems in the towns where the South Korean–based companies are located. Although only a few South Korean immigrant students have attended these school systems, graduates of these schools have been employed at Korean auto suppliers. Donors wanted to provide teachers with some experience of learning about Korea, so they could teach their students about Korean culture and systems on returning from the Korea trip.

### **Program Description**

Although participants' visit to South Korea occurs in late May each year, preparation for the program begins in October of the

previous year, when we start soliciting funds for the program. In November, we begin accepting applications from educators interested in participating, and in December, we select participants through application material reviews and following individual interviews. Throughout spring semester, we host five monthly 3-hour predeparture meetings. During the meetings, participants share what they have learned from the required book, Daniel Tudor's *Korea: The Impossible Country*; reflect on their stereotypes of Asian students; learn travel tips from previous program participants; and practice basic Korean (e.g., "Hello" and "Thank you"). Because participants are required to develop a lesson to be delivered in their schools on returning from the trip, part of the meeting time is used to develop potential lesson plan ideas.

The visit to South Korea occurs from late May to early June each year. During the visit, participants have opportunities to get involved in various educational and cultural activities. They make several classroom visits at public and private K-12 schools, attend university lectures on South Korean education and culture, and meet with local South Korean families over dinner. They also visit Korea Job World, where K-12 students explore career paths by engaging in hands-on activities. In addition, they participate in various cultural activities, some of which involve learning about Buddhism at a temple, making Korean cuisine, attending a traditional Korean music performance, learning Korean pop (K-pop) dances, and attending church worship services. Participants also visit sites of historical importance, including the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and royal palaces. The program also includes a self-exploration day, which gives participants free time to visit places of their choice or meet people whom they know in South Korea. Most activities and site visits occur in Seoul, South Korea's capital city, though the trip also includes visits to the outskirts of the city. Each day of the program follows a defined schedule: Morning activities begin at around 8:30 a.m., and participants return to the hotel at around 9:00 p.m. Once participants return from South Korea, they are expected to teach a lesson about South Korea or one that promotes diversity in the classroom. Upon completing all of the requirements of the program, participants earn 60 hours of professional development credit.

## **Method**

To explore the extent of participants' transformative learning during the trip and how they have put their new knowledge into practice, we have conducted focus group interviews and indi-



vidual post-program interviews. Prior to data collection, Auburn University's Institutional Review Board approved the study (#14-003 EP 1401: The Evaluation of Global Studies in Education–South Korea Project). Although 68 K-12 educators have participated in the program since its inaugural year of 2011, for the study reported here we analyzed data representing the program from 2014 to 2017 only.

## Participants

The participants consisted of 38 educators—nine administrators, 12 elementary school teachers, and 17 secondary school teachers. The school subjects taught by participating teachers varied and included math, social studies, and language arts. Participants also included three ESL teachers, two special education teachers, two school counselors, one instructional coach, and one school librarian. Approximately 32% of participants ( $n = 12$ ) were African American, and all others were Caucasian. While 16 participants worked in city schools where the Korean student population continues to grow, the remaining 22 worked at schools where there is little or no South Korean student presence. Only four participants were men.

## Data Collection

We collected data from focus group interviews, reflection papers, post-program interviews, and field notes. Field note collection commenced at the first predeparture meeting, at which participants shared the goals of their participation in the program, their knowledge of Korea, and their perceptions of Asian students. We also recorded informal conversation that occurred during the trip to South Korea (e.g., daily activity reflection over dinner) in our field notes. On the last day in South Korea during the 2014 and 2015 programs, we divided the sample into groups of three or four participants and conducted focus group interviews. Prompts for focus group interviews addressed (a) participants' most significant experience, (b) their comparisons of the South Korean and U.S. education systems, (c) their reflections on self, and (d) their plans for implementing a cultural lesson. Focus group interviews lasted about an hour and were audio recorded with participants' permission. Due to time constraints during the 2016 and 2017 programs, instead of participating in focus group interviews, participants wrote and submitted reflection papers that addressed the same questions posed in the focus group interviews of the previous years.

Four to 10 months after their return from South Korea, participants were asked to participate in semi-structured, audio-taped post-program interviews at their classrooms or offices. Post-program interviews addressed (a) critical incidents in South Korea, (b) participants' sharing experiences with others after the trip, (c) the extent of participants' changed perceptions, and (d) suggestions for program improvement. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Because post-program interviews with all 10 participants in the 2017 program are currently in progress, our analysis excluded data from those interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

We read all interview transcripts and other data multiple times to familiarize ourselves with participants' experiences during and after the trip, and analyzed data by applying inductive coding (*Miles & Huberman, 1984*) and the constant comparative method (*Strauss & Corbin, 1990*). At the beginning of data analysis, we generated various codes, including "increased knowledge about South Korea," "reflection on American culture," and "awareness of global education." Although all codes elucidated participants' learning through the program, we were interested in identifying how the program influenced participants' views on immigrant students and their interaction with diverse learners. We were also interested in examining events/experiences that promoted participants' transformative learning. We specifically wanted to learn about any disorienting dilemmas (*Mezirow, 1991*) that altered participants' perceptions of immigrant students and how their teaching practices or interactions with diverse learners have changed. This prompted us to focus on codes that were related to changed perspectives or altered teaching practices with diverse students, including immigrant students and students with disabilities. We also compared codes among participants. We predicted that the codes that not only appeared for many participants but also reoccurred year after year would best highlight the overall impact of the program. We thus examined codes that appeared in many participants' datasets and investigated whether the codes appeared year after year. During this process, we identified three major themes.

To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, we collected multiple data and compared codes identified from each data source. We also performed member checking by sending e-mails to participants and asking them to clarify specific meanings of the transcripts (*Carspecken, 1996*). We spent over 100 hours with the group of participants each year; this prolonged engagement helped

us establish trust with participants and gain familiarity with the experiences that they had in South Korea.

## Findings

The analysis of data revealed that the international cultural immersion experience helped participants better understand immigrant students' struggles and reflect on how to better support diverse learners. The experience also helped them integrate cultural knowledge in schools. Specific examples are provided below.

### Increased Understanding of Immigrant Students' Struggles

Findings indicate that visiting South Korea, where program participants do not speak the dominant language or understand the dominant culture, afforded participants an opportunity to reflect on ELLs in their classrooms back home. For instance, Rachel (ESL teacher, 2017 participant) wrote in her reflection paper:

Each and every day I was reminded how my students feel when they come to America, regardless of what country they are coming from. Being new to a language, culture, and country was overwhelming. For me, it brought out insecurities I didn't know I had. I felt helpless at times when I didn't know how to communicate basic information. This has been an opportunity to put myself in their shoes.

Beth (third-grade teacher, 2016 participant) shared a similar thought. During the post-program interview, she stated:

I was understanding the difficulties that my ELL students faced before, but I think now, I'm more empathetic to that. I try to relate more. I have felt myself in a situation where I was considered a foreigner and didn't know the language. So, now I try better to understand what they are feeling.

Pam (instructional coach, 2014 participant) also said that the trip to South Korea clarified her understanding of the struggles that Latino students in her school system have experienced:

The trip was really an eye-opening experience for me because, in my school system, we have a lot of Hispanic

[Latino] students, and some of them don't speak any English at all. When I was in Korea, I didn't understand anything they [South Koreans] were saying. It was scary because I didn't know what they were saying, if it's something nice or something ugly. I realize my students are almost in the same way. . . . They're really stressed and upset because you want them to do certain things, but they don't have a clue. They're not familiar with your language, with your culture . . . . They're just drawn into the situation.

Participants also discussed unsettling feelings coming from separation from other group members when they were divided into groups to have dinner with South Korean families. Some participants channeled that experience into their reflections on the trepidation that immigrant students might have. During the focus group interview, Linda (social studies teacher, 2014 participant) stated:

All I could think about is how the exchange students must feel when they come to America. We're so naïve to think that they're going to be so excited to be in America and don't understand the fear that they might have.

In a similar vein, Angela (fifth-grade teacher, 2014 participant) remarked:

I think Korea has made me more sensitive to the feelings of immigrants. I felt like Alice in Wonderland when I was over there because everything was so different. . . . I feel like I have much more of a heart now for people who are in an unfamiliar place and trying to adjust and live a normal life.

## **New Insights into How to Support Immigrant Students**

Participants also shared their new insights into how to support immigrant students. During her post-program interview, Mandy (language arts teacher, 2015 participant) reported that the lecture on South Korean culture expanded her understanding of her South Korean students' behavior. She noted that when she asked those students personal questions (e.g., "What did you do this weekend?")

and “Do you like this movie?”) or invited students to ask questions if she was unclear, her Korean students seemed unjustifiably nervous. However, the lecture illuminated their anxiety for her:

They’re afraid to show that, “Oh, I might be wrong,” or “The teacher is the one who should know everything” — just kind of that different mentality. When I listened to the lecture, I was like, “Oh, that’s why they’re so reserved or might feel intimidated beyond the fact that everything is in English, and that is difficult.” I’ve seen that a lot this year because I have several very sweet, very shy Korean girls. And so we’ve been able to connect on different things, whereas before I wouldn’t even know where it starts. So, that’s been really, really cool to see.

Emma (school librarian, 2017 participant) also articulated similar insights in her reflection paper. She explained that the lecture on the relationship between teachers and students in South Korea allowed her to reflect on ways to make her South Korean students feel more comfortable communicating with her. She wrote:

What I took to be superfluous formalities, such as taking the time to greet each person individually and bowing, I now realize is a show of respect. I feel that I learned a great deal to help nurture the relationships with my multicultural students and do a better job at researching their specific cultural norms.

During her post-program interview, Katie (language arts teacher, 2016 participant) described how she had altered her teaching practice for South Korean students in her classroom. She explained that her former lack of knowledge about South Korean culture had prevented her from resonating with South Korean students while teaching a lesson on naming children. After visiting South Korea, she conducted independent research on Korean child-naming practices and discussed the topic with South Korean students before the lesson. She remarked:

Realizing that I don’t know much about Korea was a real coming-down-to-earth moment. . . . I felt guilty of being so self-centered and focused on how I’m used to things happening. “I understand that this is how we name people here. That’s all we really need to focus on.” Shamefully, I have not been really paying attention to

how important it is for my Korean students to understand their own culture.

Participants also expressed that interacting with local South Koreans helped them reflect on both their prior perceptions of immigrant students and ways to better support them. For instance, Taylor (career tech coach, 2017 participant) explained that media reports of high test scores among South Koreans had once convinced her that all South Korean students were exceptionally smart. However, over dinner with a South Korean high school girl, Jieun, she observed that Jieun was quite similar to typical U.S. teenagers insofar as she disliked going to school and studying. Reflecting on her former stereotype of South Korean students, she wrote in her reflection:

I plan to remove my personal stereotypes about Koreans all being smart and loving to study. My interaction with Jieun proved that this [the stereotype] is not always the case and that it is unfair to assume this. It places added pressure on these kids and can harm their self-esteem.

During her post-program interview, Jessica (math teacher, 2016 participant) explained that meeting with a South Korean friend from her time at university during the trip's free day allowed her to reflect on better ways to support her Spanish-speaking students from Guatemala and Mexico. While touring areas of Seoul with her friend, Jessica felt quite at ease because she could rely on her friend, a local who was familiar with the places. That experience taught her that her tendency to allow Latino students to work with other Latino students might undermine her efforts to make them feel similarly at ease in their new community. It also suggested to her the importance of helping new immigrant students to make American friends whom they could ask for help when necessary. In her words:

A lot of times I have my classroom set up in pairs. Before I went to Korea, I thought "Let me just pair them with someone who is Hispanic [Latino]." Now I've figured out it's got to be so much better for them to be paired with somebody who is not, like American kids, because it gives them a chance to feel more comfortable when they have to be paired up. I can also say to them that this is your buddy to sit next to at lunch too, so they don't

just feel like they're in an isolated group but trying to give them those connections throughout the classroom.

## **Intercultural Knowledge Implementation in Schools**

After returning from South Korea, participants in the program have been expected to deliver culturally focused lessons in their classrooms or elsewhere at their schools. During their post-program interviews, most participants described specific activities that they implemented and their outcomes. For instance, Emily (language arts teacher, 2015 participant) co-taught a geography lesson on South Korea with a teacher who had previously taught in South Korea for a year. The lesson included a brief history of Korea, its cuisine, its current social trends, and K-pop. She explained, "We went into a conversation of why it is important to learn about other countries and learning about other cultures and being respectful of those cultures. We talked about the similarities and differences between cultures, and that's something to celebrate." Angela (fifth-grade teacher, 2014 participant) shared her experiences in South Korea in her history class. Students had no prior knowledge of Korea and, as Angela reported, were therefore fascinated to hear about her lived experiences. The cultural immersion also helped Angela to realize the importance of learning foreign languages, so she started teaching basic Spanish to her students. At the post-program interview, she said:

That trip made me realize how important it is that we're able to communicate with people other than people who live in our neighborhood. So, I talk to my class a lot about that and how important it is if they learn a foreign language and being able to take their place in the world one day.

Promoting global perspectives at school was another theme that participants emphasized in their culturally focused lessons. As Sarah (first-grade teacher, 2016 participant) remarked:

One of most notable changes that I've made since I visited Korea was to put in global perspective. So, when we have our grade-level meetings, I often ask "Okay, let's look at this from an English-language learner's per-

spective” or “Let’s look at this from a different cultural perspective” and have valuable discussion about that.

Sarah also shared how the class at a Buddhist temple helped her develop a closer interaction with students. She explained that having tea with a Buddhist monk at the temple was a critical moment for her, for she was in awe of the monk’s openness to different cultures and religions. It made her realize that her sheltered Christian view sometimes prevented her from connecting with people different from herself:

It was an “A-ha!” moment that I can’t connect to my students unless I appreciate them for who they are and experience life with them from their perspective. My students come from all different backgrounds, and until I can connect with them on a personal level with something that they can relate with, they are not going to invest in me. I see a major difference in my students now when I have that connection with them.

Unsurprisingly, participants who worked in school systems with sizable South Korean student populations reported increased interactions with their South Korean students and parents. For instance, Tami (fifth-grade teacher, 2015 participant) had coached two South Korean students in Science Olympiad and shared with them her experience in South Korea. She reported, “When I showed [them] what I have done in Korea, their personality opened up to me, and now when we walk by, I say ‘*An-young-ha-se-yo*’ (‘Hello’ in Korean), and they are grinning and smiling.” As coordinator of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, John (school counselor, 2014 participant) has assisted numerous Korean students, many of whom were excited for him to visit South Korea. Upon returning, during a presentation about the Preliminary SAT to South Korean parents, he had an opportunity to share his experiences in South Korea:

The interesting thing was that when the parents were coming in for the session in the morning, many of them were already made aware that I had been to South Korea and they were all excited. “We heard you visited South Korea.” And it was almost that they took pride in knowing that I had gone there. And so it made me feel that much better about that experience in wanting to share it with them, too.



Administrators also shared how their cultural immersion had benefited their interactions with the South Korean families of students at their schools. For instance, Allyson (principal, 2016 participant) explained that a struggling first-grade South Korean student in her school did not communicate well and had difficulties with understanding very simple tasks such as hanging up a backpack. School administrators faulted the language barrier until they found that the student had attended kindergarten in the United States. After communicating with the family, they further learned that the student had difficulties in learning Korean when they were in South Korea and had been diagnosed with development delay. Consequently, the school called for a meeting with the parents to discuss whether the student needed additional testing to pinpoint his disability. However, at the meeting, the student's father mistakenly understood that his child's problem was too severe for the school to manage. Allyson illustrated:

The dad was listening and then said, "I want what's best for my son." And then he got teary and said, "So, what hospital do we go to now?" At the moment, my head almost exploded. "Oh, everybody—stop talking! Stop!" I said to the dad, "I need you to understand that the American system is different from the Korean system." So I explained that the testing was done at the school, and even if we decided the son needed additional support, he would still stay with the class that he's in with his classroom teacher. After that, he cried because he thought that it meant that the child wasn't even going to stay at his school with his peers. . . . And the relief on his face then, as he understood—that was so great. I was so glad that I had the Korea experience and helped him feel relieved when we had the meeting.

## Discussion

*Community engagement* refers to "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (*Community Engagement, n.d., para. 1*). This article reports an exemplary case of community engagement, in which faculty members in the College of Education at Auburn University have worked with local schools and companies to fund educators'

participation in an international cultural immersion program. The program is designed to boost educators' professional development through understanding cultures and education systems that are different from their own, and examining pedagogical needs of new immigrant students in the community. The analysis of participant data indicates that participants' cultural immersion experiences have allowed them to develop empathy for immigrant students and build broader cross-cultural perspectives, which have resulted in more effective interactions with new immigrant students and their families. The program has also allowed participants to critically reflect on their pedagogical practice and examine ways to support ELLs.

Sleeter (2008) has posited that students need teachers with contextual knowledge of students' culture and who understand students' classroom behavior in culturally informed ways. Without such firsthand experience, teachers' familiarity with immigrant students' lived experiences is limited, and, as our study has confirmed, providing a short-term, international cultural immersion experience can be an effective way to foster educators' multicultural growth (He et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2008). The findings also suggest that participants' international cultural experiences benefited both their South Korean and other immigrant students, including Latino students. The opportunity to become immersed in unfamiliar situations allowed the educators to understand the inner experience of immigrant students and perceive the vulnerability that such students often experience, as well as reflect on their teaching practices and search for new ways to better support diverse learners.

Notably, the experience also dismantled participants' stereotypes of Asian students. During focus group interviews, several participants expressed that "kids are kids regardless of where they come from." Seeing South Korean students making jokes and engaging in various classroom activities in South Korean schools convinced them that South Korean students are more or less like U.S. students: Some are motivated, others are not, but all need teachers' respect and support. By extension, such recognition allowed them to realize that although the model minority stereotype seems to benefit Asian students, it could also cause unnecessary stress for Asian students who do not perform well in school.

While developing the program, we have learned the importance of establishing strong university–industry partnerships. Building trust among stakeholders is foremost, and the program should continue to evolve according to the needs of participants. The culture of South Korean corporations derives primarily from

Confucianism (Yang, 2005), and South Korean companies continue to stress hierarchical management, employee loyalty, seniority-based decision making, and a sense of brotherhood. To establish initial partnerships, we shared our vision with several top chief executive officers (CEOs) who could influence other CEOs. They acted as change agents and convinced other CEOs to support the program.

We have also learned that helping educators reflect on the purpose of cultural immersion and develop worthwhile personal and professional goals is critical to generating transformative learning. While analyzing the data, we observed that, depending on participants' goals or motives for the immersion trip, each participant engaged differently in the new environment, which precipitated different learning outcomes. Allen (2010) has claimed that foreign contexts do not automatically generate learning but that how foreigners engage in activities in light of specific goals triggers learning. From our experience, we suggest that study abroad participants need to contemplate the short- and long-term goals of their immersion experiences and how such experiences might assist them in interacting with students and other community members. Helping participants continually reflect on set goals during their immersion experience is also critical. To that end, participants could blog about their experiences or attend debriefings in which they share their goals, lessons learned, and experiences with others in the program (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Zhao et al., 2009).

Last, we have also learned the importance of providing direct interactions with people native to the culture. Although participants engaged in various communicative activities, they faced disorienting dilemmas that challenged their previous beliefs and perspectives and, in turn, triggered critical reflection that prompted new understandings (Mezirow, 1997). Based on our findings, organizers of cultural immersion programs should provide both intended and unintended opportunities for interactions with people in the culture in order to promote critical reflections based on authentic experiences. Providing opportunities for participants to share their new understandings and feelings with peers during the program is pivotal to validating their new perspectives. As Mezirow (1997) has claimed, "Discourse is necessary to validate what and how one understands, or to arrive at a best judgment regarding a belief. In this sense, learning is a social process, and discourse becomes central to making meaning" (p. 10).

Although the findings demonstrated positive impact of the program on developing a welcoming community environment,

participants were limited to educators who had been teaching in a region where the number of immigrants has historically been very low. Thus, generalizations from this study to other contexts should be made cautiously. As program coordinators, we conducted the focus group and post-program interviews with all participants and analyzed data. Although the close relationship with each participant and familiarity with all the events during the trip greatly helped us interpret data, we acknowledge the challenges of conducting critical analysis. Also, there is a possibility that social desirability bias influenced participants' responses due to the closeness with us. In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience and validate findings, we triangulated our results by using multiple data sources, conducting member-checking, and analyzing a set of data that had been collected over time (*Patton, 1999*).

Many participants shared instances of changed interaction with immigrant students, but actual classroom observation occurred only once. Future studies should include more frequent classroom observations and interviews with immigrant families whose teachers participated in the program. Additionally, the current study did not divide participants based on their roles or types of students whom they had taught. Examining how the experience was similar or different depending on participants' roles or types of students can provide new insight into designing international cultural immersion activities that directly impact teachers or students whom they are serving.

## **Conclusion**

Universities' involvement in supporting teachers' professional development is important to cultivating a welcoming community for all, especially new immigrant students. Teachers need to be familiar with immigrant students' cultures, lived experiences, and education systems, and universities can support teachers' learning in those fields with short-term international cultural immersion experiences. Teachers who form more profound understandings of different cultures and empathy for ELLs can work as change agents to positively influence the learning of K-12 students. This article has reported a successful case study demonstrating strong university–industry partnerships focused on supporting the acculturation of new immigrant students at U.S. schools. The findings indicate that the cross-cultural immersion experience that Auburn University has provided with support from local companies has allowed participants to develop more effective interaction with new

immigrant students and their families. We hope that our experiences can guide other universities in becoming actively involved in supporting schools in their vicinities and developing welcoming community cultures for all.

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