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School-aged children and decisions for studying abroad in Canada

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to examine parental and students' decisions regarding participating in K-12 level study abroad programs in Manitoba, Canada.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The study reports on data collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 18 international students and 14 parents.

Findings – The findings suggest that the key factors influencing decisions are perceptions of enhanced career prospects, changing global environments, and broadened post-secondary education choices. Country-specific factors include quality and safety of the learning environment, multiculturalism, and reputation associated with the country and people.

Research limitations – The participants were primarily students and parents from the EU countries associated primarily with horizontal mobility. Experiences of students from the main sending countries (China, South Korea, Japan) might differ.

Practical implications – The results are relevant to educational managers in designing high quality international programs and recruitment agents.

Originality/value – The study adds important empirical evidence to the limited research that has been conducted on study abroad experiences at the K-12 level. It is one of the first in the Canadian context. It provides unique perspectives in US and Canada comparisons for study abroad of school-aged children.

Keywords: Early study abroad, International education, Student mobility, Canada

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

International student mobility trends and relevant statistics are typically described in relation to post-secondary education (e.g. OECD, 2016; Eurostat 2017). However, the study abroad phenomenon among school-aged children is on the rise globally with increasing numbers of students enrolled in primary, middle, and secondary school levels (CIC, 2015; Government of Australia, 2017). For example, the Institute of International Education (2014) stated that the number of international students enrolled in U.S. secondary schools had more than tripled from 2004 to 2013, reaching 73,019 students (IIE, 2014). The number of international students enrolled in Australian secondary school was 25 762 in 2017, an increase of 10.7% since 2016 (Government of Australia, 2017). Most diploma-seeking students are coming from Asia; those coming for cultural exchanges tend to represent the European Union countries (IIE, 2014).

Evidence suggests that families are investing considerable resources to send their children of minor age abroad to study (Lee and Koo, 2006; Abelman *et al.*, 2017; Kotzyba *et al.*, 2018). Scholars have noted that, with the increasing competition for students and the array of educational choices offered at the global level, we are witnessing the emergence of an “international education marketplace” at school level (Ball and Nikita, 2014; Altbach, 2015), characterized by student consumerism, schools acting like businesses selling their programs, and the use of marketing and branding strategies to promote educational

programs abroad (Fallon and Poole, 2014; Pike, 2015; Hemsley-Brown, *et al.*, 2016). Critical analysis of governments' policies and practices has pointed to distinct ideologies related to international students and the perception of these students as the victims of governments' international education approaches (Hawthorne, 2012; Scott *et al.*, 2015; Stein and Andreotti, 2016). What is absent from this conversation is the perspective of parents and students who choose to participate in early study abroad experiences.

Scholars have noted that very little is known about international education developments involving school-aged children (Ball and Nikita, 2014; Stahl, 2017). There is limited information on how decisions are made, what are the actual benefits of studying abroad at this level, and what additional supports are needed to accommodate these students. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by examining decisions related to early studying abroad. The paper reports on the findings of a study that examined the experiences of parents and their children participating in the International Student Program (ISP) in Manitoba schools in Canada. The study was guided by the following research questions: *What are the factors that contribute to early study abroad decisions? Do the factors differ between the parent and student groups?*

International Education in Canada

International education in Canada is associated with economic competitiveness and the need for skilled labor (Scott, *et al.*, 2015; Trilokekar and ElMasri, 2016). To “maximize economic opportunities for Canada” and guide strategic activities, the Canadian federal government introduced a national strategy for international education in 2014 (Government of Canada, 2014, p. 5). International education is a policy sector with shared responsibilities and blurred lines of authority across the Canadian federal, provincial, and local jurisdictions. Education is a provincially governed policy sector across Canada. While the federal government does not have direct legal authority over education, it does have responsibility for immigration, and shared responsibility for advancing international trade and economic growth in the country. This fragmentation has arguably led to less effective pathways to permanent residency (Sá and Sabzalieva, 2018).

As the primary governing bodies of education policy, several provincial governments have issued their own strategies for international education (e.g. British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec). While most documents have not explicitly focused on the K-12¹ sector, recruitment of such students by schools is in the rise. The number of international students studying in Canada's secondary schools or lower was 25,343 in 2013 (CIC, 2015). The number increased by 121% (56 090 students) in 2015 with China, South Korea, and Japan as the top sending countries (CBIE, 2015). The main cities attracting K-12 students are Toronto in Ontario, Vancouver in British Columbia, and Montreal in Quebec (CBIE, 2015).

Canadian public schools have been accepting international students since the 1980s (CAPS-I, 2017). International education programs have been operating in Manitoba

¹ K-12 is a broader term used in the North American context to include kindergarten, primary, middle, and secondary school education up to Grade 12.

public schools since 1995. The Canadian Association of Public Schools-International (CAPS-I) is a non-governmental organization that supports K-12 public schools hosting international students. The decision to start an International Student Program (ISP) at a school is typically made at the local level by the school boards. An ISP is essentially a school-led program that caters to the specific needs of international students providing home stays, student care, and language support. In some provinces (Ontario, Nova Scotia), school boards have set up agreements with universities to continue education at the post-secondary level (CAPS-I, 2017). Usually the education of international students is non-fundable by the provincial government and all costs must be covered by the tuition students pay. Recruiting fee-paying international students allows public schools to generate additional revenues and has become a considerable source of income for some schools, especially those in popular study destinations (see Fallon and Poole, 2014).

Manitoba has been characterized by a school administrator as “*a very difficult sell*” (study informant). Nevertheless, Manitoba has been able to increase its international student numbers continually by almost 200% from 5,914 students in 2004/2005 to 11,174 students in 2013 (Government of Manitoba, 2014). For this reason, Manitoba is an interesting research case for understanding decision-making processes involving less typical study destinations among Canadian provinces. Policy support at the government level has been necessary to sustain the influx of international students to the province. Under the leadership of provincial International Education Branch (IEB) officials, Manitoba developed its first International Education Strategy in 2008 and adopted a legally binding International Education Act (2016), which regulates the provision of educational programs to international students and standardizes the recruitment of prospective international students (Government of Manitoba, 2016).

Decision-making for study abroad involving school-aged children

Research exploring the specific factors influencing students’ decision-making processes has mainly focused on university students. The dominant analytical approach has been the “push-pull factor” framework (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Ahmad and Buchanan, 2017; Lehto, *et al.*, 2017). This framework suggests that “push” factors are internal and mostly linked with a home country, triggering the study abroad decisions. Scholars have identified “push” factors such as a need for personal growth, the enhancement of language skills, and future career prospects (He and Chen, 2010; Eder, Smith and Pitts, 2010). “Pull” factors are external and are associated with the host country. “Pull” factors may include geographical proximity (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), lower tuition fees (Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman, 2012), and the desirability of the host country’s culture (Lee, 2017).

However, there are other, Canada-specific studies conducted on the topic that point to additional factors that need to be taken into consideration. For example, Chirkov, *et al.* (2007) argued that preservation and self-development are the primary motivational factors for study abroad. Preservation goals are linked to situations in students’ home countries as they strive to establish their security, freedom, and other humane conditions. Self-development goals include obtaining better education and establishing successful careers.

The authors also noted that students who feel that they initiated their decision to study abroad and stood behind it will be happier, less distressed, and more successful in adjusting to a new country (Chirkov *et al.*, 2008). The authors drew attention to cultural factors as well. Chirkov *et al.* (2008) noted that, for East Asians, the expectations of others are the predominant motivations for making the decision to study abroad. Conversely, Westerners (Europeans, North Americans, and Australians) demonstrated low levels of self-development goals so their move to Canada was most likely determined by other reasons, such as the less expensive cost of education in Canada, having a Canadian boyfriend/girlfriend, and other family and life circumstances.

In order to include those additional factors in the analysis, a modified conceptual approach to the traditional “push-pull” framework is applied in this paper – the “push-pull-plus factor” framework (see Van Hear, Bakewell and Long, 2018). The “plus” dimension in the framework allows examining additional details relevant and impactful in study abroad decisions. This modified framework emphasizes the role of individual agency beyond factors attached to particular countries, allows for examining the impact that other influential people can have on individual decisions, and helps to make sense of the choices made after study abroad. As Van Hear *et al.* (2018) noted, such a framework can also help to clarify nuances in the decision-making mechanisms and explain emerging migration patterns across countries.

Studies examining decision-making factors in K-12 study abroad decisions are hard to find. Early study abroad decisions tend to be associated with perceived socio-cultural capital with international experiences leading to enhanced cultural knowledge, social status, and power (Waters, 2012; Findlay, *et al.*, 2012; Ball and Nikita, 2014). One exception is Leung’s (2013) study in which she explored Hong Kong parents’ decisions to send their children abroad for secondary education. The author divided the factors affecting parental decisions into three main categories: (1) factors related to the formal learning environment, including subthemes such as an arts-focused curriculum, English-medium education, small class sizes, and balanced education; (2) factors related to the informal learning environment, such as self-care skills and independence, peers and social skills, and exposure to different cultures; and (3) factors related to the future of their children, including admission to universities and emigration. Personal recommendations that parents, other relatives, and friends give about a destination country or institution have an impact on choices and motivations to study abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) noted that word-of-mouth is one of the most powerful ways of promotion on which international educational institutions could strategically rely. Cultural and philosophical traditions constitute another influential factor on parents’ attitudes towards studying abroad.

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative case study approach to answer its research questions. Two main methods and data sources were employed—document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The first step was to conduct a background analysis of international education documents accessible through government and school websites. A content analysis

(Weber, 1996) of the policy documents was performed to identify how international education is regulated and what mechanisms are applied in student recruitment and supporting international students' learning experiences. The findings of the document analysis are integrated into the country-specific choice section of this paper.

The second step involved semi-structured interviews conducted with international students (18) and their parents (14). Parents and students were interviewed separately, using Skype and email. The students were still studying in Manitoba, Canada, while the parents were located in their home countries. The students were studying in Grades 6, 10, 11, and 12 at various high schools in a single school division in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The students were interviewed at the end of their yearlong study shortly before their trip back home. They all had acquired high level of English, and were able to communicate freely with the researcher. The students represented the following countries: Brazil (1), China (1), Germany (1), Hong Kong (1), Italy (7), Japan (1), Mexico (1), and Spain (5). Students' inclusion criteria involved their participation in the International Student Program, their parents' consent, and their own assent to participate in the study. Parents represented the following countries: Spain (3), Italy (4), China (2), Japan (2), Norway (1), Germany (1), and Mexico (1). Only those parents with sufficient English skills responded to the call to participate and were included in the study. In one case, a student served as an interpreter for her parents. The interviews took place in the spring of 2016 and 2017. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The analysis involved determining categorical themes (open coding), establishing patterns (axial coding, selective coding), and developing generalizations from the information provided through the interviews (Creswell, 1998). Based on the analysis, the research questions were answered.

A reflection on the ethics procedures when conducting a study with minors is in order. Popadiuk (2010) noted that the main reason for limited studies on minor international students, despite their unique concerns and more vulnerable status, is the difficulty in following research ethics procedures, which can be complex, time consuming, and costly. The author can attest to these complexities as this study went through four phases of approvals—the University of Manitoba Ethics Board, the school division's consent, parental consent, and, finally, students' assent. Reaching the parents required a willingness from the divisional ISP coordinator to send out a formal invitation to parents on behalf of the researcher. Interested parents could then reach out directly to the researcher, revealing the contact information of their child. The process was time consuming and largely dependent on the school administrators' willingness to assist. In this case, all school administrators were extremely cooperative and helpful.

Factors influencing study abroad decisions for school-aged children

The findings demonstrate that factors behind early study abroad decisions were most often related to securing a future for the student. Three main categories emerged from the interviews—*career prospects*, *changing global environments*, and *post-secondary education choices*. While these themes were represented in both groups, a theme focusing on *accessibility of technology* emerged as a unique factor only among parents' responses.

Career prospects

The most frequently mentioned theme influencing early study abroad decision was advancing the student's career in the future. The aspect of self-development has been emphasized by Chirkov *et al.* (2008) for university students. In this case, it was predominantly parents who most often discussed their child's career prospects, supporting the "push" factors of decision-making (e.g. Eder *et al.*, 2010). A parent explained, "*I do hope that this experience in Canada will benefit his future career development.*" In the global knowledge economy, increasing competition for well-paying jobs is becoming an issue and parents are willing to help their children to build specific skillsets early. The number one skillset for getting a good job was perceived to be fluency in the English language. Speaking English has become the minimum standard for most jobs and mastering the language early was an important factor in deciding to go study abroad. At least five parents mentioned language skills explicitly in relation to getting an advantage in the job market. The following quote from a parent is illustrative: "*Learning English by living in a foreign country will help him to find more possibilities of work in the future.*" Students similarly reflected on the potential advantage in the job market. One student commented, "*If you don't know English really well, you can't get a good job. You can, but if you know English, the chances are better.*" One student noted how language skills could even help in securing short-term summer jobs that are becoming more competitive.

Students themselves were also concerned about their future career choices, describing how study abroad experience and particularly fluent English language skills could help them succeed in a future job. One student specifically commented on how good language skills would potentially help them to advance their businesses by not losing international clientele. Several students had already decided on their future careers and talked about becoming a doctor, a psychologist, a businessman, a heart surgeon, or a lawyer. All those jobs are associated with the upper-middle class of society, showing how in some cases early study abroad experiences are made mindfully by those considering how to remain in their current socio-economic class or move up the ranks in a society that is increasing driven by global competition.

Global outlook

Another common theme among the interviews was the opportunity to receive global exposure and knowledge of different cultures through an early study abroad experience. This perspective aligns with the horizontal mobility approach for intercultural exchanges suggested by Richters and Teichler (2006). With people increasingly moving across borders, contact with others representing different cultures, traditions, and language backgrounds is becoming more common. The skill to adapt to these changing environments has become essential. Parents expressed the sense that study abroad opportunities would help advance their children's global knowledge of world events and help them learn about different cultures. Having an early exposure to global political situations and diverse cultural norms and traditions would help teach their children to develop cross-cultural competences and adapt to various cultural aspects early. The following quote from a parent represents this theme: "*I think now that we are dealing with global environments. It is vital to have the cultural awareness, knowledge about global situations internationally.*" Emphasizing the importance of providing an exposure to

different cultures, one parent stated, “*I thought [name of the student] would like the education style in Western country more than Oriental style.*”

A topic connected with the global movement of people across borders is immigration. Three students mentioned thinking about moving to an English-speaking country or living in a different country than their own. This approach represents an example of the vertical mobility for students who potentially consider immigration after study abroad. An early study abroad opportunity would provide them with first-hand experience of how to live in a foreign country. Among the parents, however, the topic of potential immigration for their children did not emerge as a theme. Most of the parents were from countries with stable political situations and well-paying jobs and they did not see the need for their children to relocate. Only one parent noted that it is easier to immigrate to Canada after completing a post-secondary education there.

Post-secondary education choices

This theme was the third commonality among the factors influencing early study abroad choices in general. Seventeen students noted that getting into a particular university was one of the most influential factors behind their intentions for early study abroad. At least five students had a clear understanding of where they would like to study after graduating from high school. Getting accepted and doing well in university was highly determined by their English language skills. The following quote demonstrate how mastering English would help them in their chosen education path:

I chose to do an international year abroad because I really want to go to a university in Europe and it's in the Netherlands and they ask to have a really good level of English.

Data suggests that study abroad experience in a particular country might have an influence on students' choice for post-secondary education. While most students had not chosen a specific university before making a decision to participate in an early study abroad program, the experience itself had an impact on students' decisions regarding further education. Eight students were considering or had already applied to a Canadian university, as they were now familiar with the context. The following quotations give a few examples of this:

I'm going to University of Toronto. I'm gonna study applied statistics. This experience really helped me to get accepted.

I would like to study in an English speaking country like Canada or US or England so it's helping me find a possible destination where I could end up.

I have already applied to Dalhousie University in Canada.

This is an important finding, because positive study abroad experiences during high school can lead to international experiences at the post-secondary level. Universities interested in increasing their international student numbers could consider focusing their

recruitment strategies locally, reaching out to international students in high schools and working more closely with local K-12 schools.

Impacts of technology

This theme emerged only from the parents' responses, yet it served as an important consideration in supporting early study abroad decisions. The physical separation, being away from their minor children, was not seen as a major barrier due to the accessibility of technology. Eight parents particularly commented on the fact that the physical separation was not too difficult. With easy access to the Internet, parents were supporting early study abroad decisions more readily, as they were able to stay in close contact with their children and keep an eye on their doings. One parent noted, "*Nowadays contact and information are no longer problems since Internet helps a lot. At least once a week we have been on FaceTime, talking to her and seeing her.*" Two noted that staying away was sometimes difficult, especially when the child had some problems they had to handle on their own, but overall it was not seen as a major issue.

Factors influencing the specific country choice – Why Canada?

The participants had chosen to study in Canada and were asked about their rationales for that decision. The findings suggest that the factors influencing parents' decisions in favour of Canada differed slightly from the students' decisions. Parents seemed to be more concerned about the *learning environment* of the receiving country, while students were more influenced by the overall *reputation and attractiveness* of the country. Both groups shared a concern over safety. In students' answers the "*had no choice*" answer emerged as a theme not because parents made the decisions for them but because many worked with agents and followed the rules of the agency. For example, one student commented, "*My agency didn't allow me to choose.*" Below are the common themes explained.

Quality of education and reputation

The perceived quality of education associated with Canadian schools was the most dominant theme that characterized parents' study abroad decisions. Eight parents explicitly reflected how, in their opinion, the education available in Canada is excellent and at a higher level compared to some other English-speaking countries they were considering such as the United States or the United Kingdom. One parent stated, "*Canada's education is ranked as one of the highest in the world.*" In two cases, the quality of education was mentioned in relation to the top higher education institution in the country or province. For example, a parent mentioned, "*The University of Manitoba is a world class university in terms of research and development*". These perceptions seemed to be influenced by the global rankings in the media and also by people whose opinion they trusted (agents, teachers, family friends). Quality of education was not a significant factor for students, and it was mentioned only once. This could be explained by the fact that minor students might have limited overall knowledge on the broader comparison of educational institutions and/or that they were more receptive to other factors.

According to the findings, students tended to link their decision primarily to their perceptions of the overall reputation of Canada and its people. The following comments were shared among several students: *“I heard a lot of things about people [in Canada], that they're super nice”*; *“Canadians are kind, polite and easygoing”*; *“They told me that people were more welcoming (than USA)”*. While largely stereotypes, those perceptions are still very powerful. Canada’s global image as an accepting and tolerant country with beautiful landscapes is heavily promoted in the media, through websites and recruitment materials. Those powerful images have reached students through study abroad materials and have shaped their perceptions of the country, impacting their decisions. The following comment is quite telling: *“I just looked at the pictures in the program, what they were giving to me and I chose Manitoba because it was the best choice for me.”*

Safety of the learning environment

With the increasing number of incidents of terrorism that have jeopardized people’s well-being and security globally, safety emerged as an important factor influencing both parents’ and students’ decisions. When deliberating between North American countries, the final decision came down to the perceived potential safety risks between the United States and Canada. Five interviewees specifically talked about safety as a core factor in choosing Canada over the United States. The following quote from a parent illustrates the point:

In Canada streets and environment are generally safer to raise kids than in the US. It's relatively easier to access weapons of mass destruction in the US than in Canada, thus making the schools and public places safer in Canada.

Students similarly commented: *“I think it's [Canada] safer. I honestly haven't heard about any murders or bad news about Canada”*; *“I choose Canada first of all because it's a peaceful country”*.

Bureaucratic advantage

While it was not a theme that came up often, two parents mentioned bureaucratic barriers when applying for visas. One parent mentioned that difficulties in obtaining student visas for minor children were a deciding factor in choosing Canada over the United States. Another mentioned that their daughter’s medical condition led to a rejection by the United States while Canada’s system was able to provide specific accommodations needed for the student’s health. That was a core factor in reconsidering their initial decision of the United States in favor of Canada.

Cultural diversity

A topic closely related to the previously mentioned theme of safety was cultural diversity, which also influenced parents’ thinking in favor of Canada. Canada has been presenting and promoting its global image as a multicultural country, where differences in cultures and religious views are respected and accommodated. Four parents mentioned multiculturalism and respect for diversity as an advantage of studying in Canada. A parent

reflected, “*There is respect for the human rights. It is multicultural and the people are really friendly*”. While this was only an opinion, there was a comfort level with the Canadian culture because of its familiarity and comparability of values to those parents recognized as their own. According to one parent, “*Canada is a bit more (of a) “European” style country*”. This may have helped to ease the cultural transition of sending their child overseas.

The fact that Canada is a bilingual country with mandatory French classes was seen as an extra benefit, especially for the parents and the students from European countries. A student commented on how he learned French at school at home and how the opportunity to study it in Canada had an impact on his decision. A parent reflected, “*The possibility of improving French language was a plus.*” As there are several highly paid jobs in the European Commission that require the knowledge of both languages, the skill of speaking English and French would add to the likelihood of getting a good job in the future.

Cultural diversity as a distinct advantage was brought up only once among the students. With little exposure to different cultures, the students probably had inadequate understanding of the potential opportunities or challenges that cultural differences may bring. Students rather tended to talk about the Canadian people being perceived as accepting of different peoples and cultures. Interestingly, cultural diversity regarding Canadian Indigenous communities, especially those living in Manitoba, was never mentioned by either parents or students. Emphasizing this significant aspect of Canadian culture when recruiting students might create a deeper level awareness and understanding of the issues and opportunities Canada faces associated with multiculturalism and cultural diversity.

Financial factors

The financial resources involved in short-term study abroad experiences overseas are significant and include tuition fees, living expenses, travel costs, and other expenditures. The total costs can easily come to 20 000 Canadian dollars or more per academic year spent in a Canadian public school that is otherwise covered by the provincial government. Unsurprisingly, the high expenditure related to early study abroad was a topic mentioned by most parents and not by the students. Nevertheless, parents were willing to invest in the future of their children to make sure they do well in life: “*As a parent, you always want the best for their children.*” Parents recognized the privileged position that they were in, being able to support those decisions financially. The following quote is illustrative: “*The whole operation is not cheap, and is definitively reserved to a limited percentage of kids. We could afford it and we consider it worth the expense.*”

The findings demonstrate that, with the considerable costs involved, only parents with financial security can afford this. As parents viewed study abroad as an opportunity to improve their children’s chances to get into university or desirable employment, they were willing to make those investments. This perspective aligns with the previous research, pointing to the idea of maintaining class privilege though international study abroad experience (Waters, 2008; Leung, 2013).

Influencers of early study abroad decisions

In the interviews, it became clear that the study abroad decisions were often impacted by underlying perceptions, if not stereotypes, that were shaped by interacting with trusted influencers. The way a country, its reputation, or its quality of education is imagined is shaped by the opinions and experiences of individuals that have an impact on study abroad decisions. The findings of this study point to three key categories of decision-influencers—*family* (personal experiences, connections with friends and relatives), *recruitment agents*, and *educators at home schools*. Five parents had personal connections with studying in Canada, which significantly influenced their perceptions of the quality of Canadian education and the overall benefits of a study abroad experience. Those personal connections served as the key motivating factor for sending their children overseas. One parent reflected, “*I was fortunate enough to make Grade 12 in Canada many years ago through Rotary Club. So from personal experience Canada was a destination to consider*”. Four parents referred to a historical family connection of emigrating from Europe to Canada as a major factor in choosing a particular study destination. Two parents indicated that they had personal connections through friends living in Canada and that served as an important factor in the decision: “*We had excellent references about the country’s lifestyle from friends and relatives living in Canada.*” Those connections became a major influencer on the study abroad decision.

Another important influencer behind the study abroad decisions, and especially behind choosing to study in Manitoba, was the role of recruitment agents, who tend to promote certain schools or countries. Manitoba, as a study destination, had been quite unfamiliar to many parents and students in the beginning. However, when agents talked highly about Canada, suggesting that “*Canada hosts great high schools with a very high level of education*” and pointing to their experiences with several students who had studied there before, it had a high impact on parents’ decisions. In addition to relying on the information parents received from the local recruitment agents, other trusted individuals (teachers or school administrators) had an impact on their decisions. A parent commented, “*We were thinking about USA as our initial study destination. But following [name of the student’s] school advice, we reconsidered our initial plan in favor of Canadian destination.*” This finding indicates that behind study abroad decisions, there is a network of formal and informal connections, including previous family links that may have a long-lasting impact on study abroad decisions, particularly in terms of choosing one country over another. It also suggests that families with previous personal experiences with studying abroad or those with international connections are potentially more open to the opportunity of sending their children abroad.

Conclusion

This study adds important empirical evidence to the limited research that has been conducted on early study abroad experiences at the K-12 level. The findings suggest that the decision-making involves two distinct considerations—the broader benefits of studying abroad and country-specific factors. The broader benefits influencing study

abroad decisions are future career prospects, changing global environments, and post-secondary education choices. Participating in an early study abroad experience helps children prepare them to build globally valued skillsets that may contribute to their success later in life. The study points out that having international exposure, learning about different cultures, and perfecting English language skills are expected to help students to get access to high quality education and establish a good foundation for their future careers. The findings confirmed that parents belonging to the upper-middle class in society could afford early study abroad opportunities (Waters, 2012). The significant financial expenditures involved in early study abroad decisions were perceived to be an investment in their children's future and worth the expense.

Several distinct findings in relation to country-specific factors emerged from this study that have not been well documented in the previous research. For example, the finding that North America remains a highly popular study destination for school-aged children despite recent geopolitical, social, and global economic events is important. With the increased access of technology, communication between parents and students was not a barrier and this contributed as a decision-making factor. The findings also add unique empirical evidence on early study abroad decisions between the United States and Canada, a perspective absent from the literature. While the study participants were biased towards Canada, they pointed to US-specific factors that influenced their decision—higher tuition fees, visa problems, and overall safety in regards to accommodating cultural differences or accessibility of firearms. This finding points to the fact that study abroad experiences tend to have a spill-over effect, whereby individual experiences with study abroad or living abroad from people of trust can have significant impacts on family decisions in favour of early study abroad. This finding aligns with previous scholarly research in post-secondary context (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

The conceptual framework of “push-pull-plus factors” is relevant to describe the decision-making process in studying abroad, allowing for a more holistic representation of the process. It is important to note that the initial “push-pull” framework might be too narrowly associated with rational decision-making (e.g. to immigrate). In this study, the factors related to the “plus” dimension of the framework, self-preservation and self-development (as per Chirkov *et al.*, 2008), added the additional dimension for a more appropriate approach to analyzing decision-making processes regarding K-12 study abroad.

Further studies on the topic need to focus on a different geographic group of parents and students. As the main sending countries of international students to Canada are China, South Korea, and Japan, which have large communities of settled immigrants, their rationales and dynamics for early study abroad might potentially be different. Other aspects of future research could include the academic and career pathways of K-12 international students after their learning experiences abroad to clarify the impact of studying abroad on their life choices. Also, the conceptual framework of “push-pull-plus factors” needs further research, as it is currently unclear when and why some drivers are more important than others, which factor combinations have more impact, and which are

more susceptible to change through external intervention (Van Hear, Bakewell and Long, 2018).

Overall, this study adds a unique Canada-specific perspective to the literature of early study abroad decisions. Knowledge of the factors influencing these decisions is important not only from a scholarly perspective but can also help school administrators in creating rewarding learning experiences for international students (Leung, 2013; Lee, 2014). Furthermore, this information can contribute to the work of educational managers in program design and recruitment strategies. Several practical recommendations emerge from this study. The findings point to the need for closer collaboration between higher education institutions with local schools, as students are open for post-secondary education options abroad with already familiar settings. Recruitment agents and policy officials could benefit from tracking the students' educational and career paths to be able to illustrate clearly some of the outcomes of study abroad. In provinces where pathway programs with post-secondary institutions are not very common, school boards should consider setting them up to provide further opportunities for higher education in Canada. An aspect that seems to be overlooked in the international student recruitment agenda is a focus on Canadian Indigenous populations. This topic should be regarded as a significant asset of Canada's history, but also an area of continuous work to create enhanced awareness of how Canada deals with the legacy of colonialism regarding Indigenous peoples.

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Article Title Page

Title: School-aged children and decisions for studying abroad in Canada

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to examine parental and students' decisions regarding participating in K-12 level study abroad programs in Manitoba, Canada.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The study reports on data collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 18 international students and 14 parents.

Findings – The findings suggest that the key factors influencing decisions are perceptions of enhanced career prospects, changing global environments, and post-secondary education choices. Country-specific factors include quality and safety of the learning environment, multiculturalism, and reputation associated with the nature and people.

Research limitations – The participants were primarily students and parents from the EU countries associated primarily with horizontal mobility. Experiences of students from the main sending countries (China, South Korea, Japan) might differ.

Practical implications – The results are relevant to educational managers in designing high quality international programs and recruitment agents.

Originality/value – The study adds important empirical evidence to the limited research that has been conducted on early study abroad experiences at the K-12 level. It is one of the first in the Canadian context. It provides unique perspectives in US and Canada comparisons for early study abroad choice.

Keywords: Early study abroad, International education, Student mobility, Canada

Article Classification: Research paper



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