PEACE CORPS SERVICE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY SCHOOL LEADERS

by

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Dedication

To my wife, Paula, whose tremendous love and support made this entire process possible.

To my daughter, Harper, whose own life and academic journeys are boundless.

And to all past, present, and future Peace Corps volunteers, whose service around the world truly makes a difference.
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Abstract

PEACE CORPS SERVICE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY SCHOOL LEADERS

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George Mason University, 2017

Dissertation Director: Dr. Beverly Shaklee

The United States Peace Corps was established by President Kennedy in 1961 to promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals: 1) to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women, 2) to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and 3) to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. (United States Peace Corps, 2012)

Since 1961, The Peace Corps has sent thousands of volunteers to teach in schools around the world. When these volunteers return to America’s schools and classrooms, what characteristics of effective school leadership have they developed? When some of these teachers move into administration, what effect does their service have on their leadership of America’s increasingly diverse schools? The purpose of this study was to understand how Peace Corps service affects Returned Peace Corps Volunteers’ leadership practice in
schools and to determine whether these school leaders developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism while serving in the Peace Corps. Using a qualitative case study design, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with Returned Peace Corps Volunteers who are current or former school leaders. The findings of this study indicate that cultural competence, efficacy, optimism, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships were characteristics of effective school leaders that the participants felt were developed or further developed during their Peace Corps service.

*Key words: Peace Corps, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, cultural competence, leader efficacy, optimism, student performance, school leaders.*
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Background

American classrooms and schools continue to diversify. Between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of White students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools decreased from 59% to 50%, while the proportion of Hispanic students increased from 19% to 25% (Kena et al., 2016). In addition, the percentage of English language learners in public schools in the United States increased from 8.8% in 2004 to 9.3% in 2014. It is projected that, by 2025, 54% of public school students will be non-White students (Kena et al., 2016). A student body this diverse brings a mixture of cultural beliefs, motivations, and learning styles to American classrooms. Therefore, the need for teachers and leaders who are willing, able, and qualified to meet the diversities of the new American classroom and school becomes more important. In this study, I examined three characteristics of successful school leaders and sought to determine whether these characteristics were developed during service in the United States Peace Corps and how the participants applied or continue to apply those characteristics as school leaders.

Cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were three school leader characteristics that were explored in this study. Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) discussed the importance of cross-cultural competencies when working with culturally diverse populations. In their case study, the authors found that culturally competent leaders were
able to set high expectations, were concerned for the disenfranchised, respected students’ perspectives, and were able to politicize the immigrant issue. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) concluded that culturally competent school leaders were able to run effective and high-performing schools because they were able to: (a) identify and implement forms of teaching and learning that were effective and appropriate for the populations they served; (b) build strong communities of students and staff based on mutual respect and appreciation; and, (c) nurture the development of families’ educational culture, which, in turn, supported the learning of the student. Therefore, based on the importance of school leaders’ cultural competence, I wanted to explore whether Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) who are currently school leaders developed this characteristic during their Peace Corps service.

Another characteristic explored in this study was leader efficacy. According to Bandura’s theory (1982, 1986, 1993, 1997a, 1997b), self-efficacy determines people’s choice of activities and how much effort people put forth in the face of failure or difficulty. This is an important characteristic in school leadership due to the stress and workload that is placed on school leaders. As someone who has worked in education for 20 years in both teaching and leadership capacities, I know that difficult situations often arise. Therefore, school leaders must be equipped to work past failure and be confident when dealing with difficult situations. Teachers and students respond to confident leaders. Hallinger and Heck (1996) and Leithwood and Jantzi (2005, 2008) found significant effects of leader efficacy on the proportion of students who reach or exceed proficiency levels, again underscoring the importance of strong, confident leaders.
Therefore, I also wanted to explore whether RPCVs who currently service as school leaders developed this characteristic during their Peace Corps service.

Optimism, defined as the positive outlook that one has on setbacks and victories (Seligman, 1990), was the third school leadership characteristic that was explored. Ciriello (1998) found optimism to be a characteristic of effective school leaders, and Smith (1966) and Theoharis (2010) found it to be an important characteristic when working with disadvantaged students. Seligman (1998) argued that optimism is as important a factor in achievement as talent or motivation and that optimism played a significant role in students’ success and learning. In my own experience as an educator, I have found optimism to be one of the most important characteristics that a teacher can possess. I have found that those teachers who are optimistic are better able to connect with students and build personal relationships with them, which, in turn, helps students to build confidence in their abilities to grasp sometimes difficult information. Who doesn’t want someone optimistic telling them that they can succeed? Although optimism has been studied as an essential characteristic of a good leader (Gallo, 2012; James, 2013; Waters, 2012), it has not been studied in depth as a characteristic of effective school leaders. Therefore, this study adds to the literature regarding optimism as a characteristic of an effective school leader and whether Peace Corps service built optimism in school leaders.

These characteristics are not the most common characteristics or skills mentioned in research regarding effective school leaders; however, I have found that I have relied heavily on these characteristics in my own school leadership capacities. As there has
been limited research regarding these characteristics and out of my own interest, there
was a need for additional research regarding these characteristics and how they are
developed in school leaders. The Peace Corps experience helped me to develop these
characteristics, and I was interested in determining whether it was helpful in building
these characteristics in other school leaders.

Statement of the Problem

Previous researchers suggested that Peace Corps service builds cultural
competence and self-efficacy in teachers (Cross, 1998; Smith, 1966), but there was no
research that I found that investigated how and whether Peace Corps service built those
characteristics in school leaders. In addition, no research was located that links Peace
Corps service to the development of optimism in teachers or school leaders. Therefore,
this study added to the dearth of research regarding Peace Corps service and its effect on
school leaders.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how Peace Corps service affects
RPCVs’ leadership practice in schools and to determine whether these school leaders
developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism while serving in the Peace Corps.
Participants were identified as those who completed the two-year Peace Corps service
and who currently serve or formerly served as school leaders (superintendents, principals,
or vice/assistant principals) in a PK-12 public, private, or charter school in the United
States. Beliefs and perspectives of these selected school leaders were studied to
determine whether Peace Corps service helped to develop these characteristics.
This study can be used to inform the United States Peace Corps of the preparedness of its RPCVs to enter school leadership positions after serving two years in the Peace Corps. The agency could use these findings to demonstrate to potential recruits the benefits of serving and the school leadership characteristics developed and could potentially see an increase of candidates who are seeking to build these particular characteristics to use in their future careers as school leaders. This study could also be used by schools and school districts that are looking for school leaders who have, as research has found, previously developed important characteristics that make them effective school leaders.

Research Questions

The following is a list of research questions that were explored in this study:

1. What leadership characteristics do RPCVs believe were developed during their Peace Corps service that contributed to their effectiveness as school leaders?
2. In what ways do RPCVs believe cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were developed during Peace Corps service?
3. How do these RPCVs use these characteristics as school leaders?

Significance

Understanding how RPCVs perceived the effects of their Peace Corps service on themselves in terms of building cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism has both academic and practical significance. This study’s academic significance is its addition to the knowledge base of cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism as school leadership characteristics and its addition to the dearth of research relating to the Peace Corps
experience. The practical significance of this study is found in how the Peace Corps will be able to use this as a recruitment tool and how it can be used by schools and school districts that are looking for school leaders with certain leadership characteristics.

**Academic Significance.** There is literature that directly connects the importance of cross-cultural experiences and cultural competencies when working in diverse schools and with diverse populations (Glick, 2002; Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). However, there was no literature that I found that shows the direct connection between the importance of cross-cultural experiences and cultural competencies in those in school leadership positions who work in diverse schools with diverse populations. In our increasingly diverse schools (White-Clark, 2005), this study helps to bridge that gap of knowledge and to understand the importance of those experiences in the person or persons who serve as the leader of highly diverse schools. In addition, Robertson and Webber (2000) claimed that school leaders who have a cross-cultural experience during their school leadership program are better able to reflect and ask critical questions about the quality of education being offered at the schools they lead. We do not know how or whether these leaders incorporated that experience successfully into their school leadership practice. Additionally, the Peace Corps experience has not been explored in the sense of a teacher or school leadership preparation program.

Although previous literature showed that cross-cultural experiences build self-efficacy (Cross, 1998; Jordan & Cartwright, 1998) in general, this literature did not specifically discuss leadership efficacy. Through the investigation of RPCVs’
perceptions of their service and the skills and characteristics they developed, this study contributes to the knowledge base of how cross-cultural experiences build self-efficacy in school leaders. Further, Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found a positive link between leader efficacy and student performance. Although cross-cultural experiences were found in that study to build self-efficacy, it is important to discover what, specific to the Peace Corps experience, builds leader efficacy.

As a Peace Corps teacher, I know that volunteers serve in some of the most disadvantaged countries and schools in the world. Optimism, defined as the positive outlook that people have on setbacks and victories (Seligman, 1990), has been found to be an important characteristic when working with disadvantaged students (Smith, 1966; Theoharis, 2010) and is a characteristic of effective school leaders (Ciriello, 1998). Although Smith found that the Peace Corps experience instilled a sense of optimism that helped RPCVs to overcome challenges, he did not indicate whether the sense of optimism was brought back to American classrooms of those RPCVs who transitioned into school leadership positions. My study adds not only to the dearth of Peace Corps research in general, but also to the literature on optimism as an important characteristic of successful school leaders.

**Practical Significance.** This study also serves a practical purpose in two ways. First, it allowed RPCV school leaders to reflect and comment on which experience specifically (e.g., communicating in a foreign language, living by yourself, being the only staff member from one’s own culture) led to the building of efficacy. Secondly, the study informs the Peace Corps organization of the skills developed in their RPCVs that can be
used to determine whether the Peace Corps education sector can train future school leaders and teachers.

In conclusion, there is both academic and practical significance to this study. This study adds to the literature that explores the importance of school leaders of America’s increasingly diverse schools’ being culturally competent, possessing self-efficacy, and being optimistic. Specifically, this study adds to new knowledge and literature that explores these skills and characteristics in RPCVs who currently serve or formerly served as school leaders.

In addition, this study may inform the United States Peace Corps on the effective school leadership characteristics that their education sector RPCVs perceived were developed during their service and how they apply them to their school leadership practice once they return and become leaders in the United States. The results of this study also continue to inform my own personal and professional growth as I reflect on the type of school leader that I am and where the characteristics that I employ in my own practice originated.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions of terms are provided below for aiding readers in understanding the terms relevant to the study:

*Cultural competence*: The ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge respect and build upon ethnic, socio-cultural, and linguistic diversity (Lynch & Hanson, 1998).

*Efficacy*: Belief in one’s own ability (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).
**Leader efficacy:** Belief in one’s own ability as a leader (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

**Optimism:** The positive outlook that one has on setbacks and victories (Seligman, 1990).

**School leaders:** Superintendents, principals, vice/assistant principals, department chairs, directors, or coordinators.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced three school leadership skills and characteristics that were explored: cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism, and the importance of these three skills and characteristics when working with America’s increasingly diverse classrooms. I then identified the purpose of this study, which was to explore whether Peace Corps service developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism in school leaders. I concluded this chapter by discussing both the academic and practical significance of the study as well as the key terms used.

Cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism are important skills and characteristics in America’s school leaders. Chapter Two presents past studies and research regarding these three characteristics.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom’s (2004) broad literature review of school leadership found little doubt that leadership plays a vital role in student achievement. School leaders demonstrate a variety of skills and characteristics when effectively leading diverse schools. When utilized, these skills and characteristics lead to positive student achievement. In fact, leadership is the second most important in-school factor (Leithwood et al., 2004).

In this study, I examined three specific characteristics that have been identified in the research as important to effectively leading diverse schools: cultural competence, leader efficacy, and optimism. Specifically, I looked at the perceptions of RPCVs who have entered school leadership positions to determine whether the Peace Corps experience developed those characteristics. This chapter is organized as an exploration of the literature on each of the three characteristics identified above and on RPCVs in education.

Cultural Competence

There is not a clearly accepted definition of cultural competence. Sue (1998) defined cultural competence as “the belief that people should not only appreciate and recognize other cultural groups but also be able to effectively work with them” (p. 440). Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) stated that cultural competence is “behavior that is
aligned with standards that move an organization or individual toward culturally proficient interactions” (p. 5) and that cultural proficiency is “a way of being that enables both individuals and organizations to respond effectively to people who differ from them” (p. 5). However, for purposes of this research, Lynch and Hanson’s (1998) definition of cultural competence, “the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge respect and build upon ethnic, socio-cultural, and linguistic diversity” (p. 50), was used because it is succinct and best described the actions and attitudes that I explored.

The American public school system has historically been used as a vehicle to integrate and socialize various groups of peoples. At the beginning of the 20th century, the public school system was seen as a place to Americanize immigrants, socialize the young into thinking of themselves as Americans, maintain the social order, teach English, and promote economic development (Clauss-Ehlers, Weist, Gregory, & Hull, 2010; Katz, 1976). The Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision in 1954 opened the public schools to African Americans, an American minority group that had been denied equal education in public schools up to that time. Before that decision, Black students went to schools where they were taught only by Black teachers and Black administrators. After the decision by the Supreme Court to integrate schools, an extraordinary number of Black teachers and administrators were no longer employed. For example, from 1967 to 1971, the number of Black principals in North Carolina fell from 620 to 40. In 11 southern states, researchers estimated that, during the time after the Brown vs. Board decision, 90% of Black principals lost their jobs (Smith & Lemasters, 2010). This bleak
job market may have been one of the reasons that the number of Black college students who were majoring in education decreased by 66% between 1975 to 1985 (Smith & Lemasters, 2010). This set the scene for the need for non-minority persons to be ready and capable of leading diverse schools.

The Importance of Culturally Competent School Leaders. Cultural competencies and skills are important for leaders to possess in any organizational setting. Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) explored the importance of cross-cultural competencies of school leaders when working with culturally diverse populations. In semi-structured interviews, the authors studied two school administrators. The first was a Hispanic male vice-principal at a middle school in an urban district in southern California. The school had a majority Hispanic student body, along with a 20% African American population. Of the total student population, 44% were English language learners, and 8% were students with disabilities. The ethnic breakdown for the teachers was: 66% Caucasian, 16% Hispanic, 10% African American, and 7% Asian. The second administrator was a Latina principal of an adult education program in Los Angeles County. The program’s ethnic student makeup was: 74% Asian, 23% Hispanic, and 3% other. The teacher demographics were: 50% Caucasian, 35% Asian, 10% Hispanic, and 5% other. In addition to the interview, each administrator submitted a professional portfolio, a leadership philosophy statement, and an artifact that reflected their professional growth, dispositions, and skills.

After analyzing the results of the semi-structured interviews, the portfolios, philosophy statements, and their self-selected artifacts, Hansuvadha and Slater (2012)
found that each administrator demonstrated cultural competence. These culturally competent leaders were able to set high expectations, were concerned for the disenfranchised, respected students’ perspectives, and were able to politicize the immigrant issue. As leaders, they were poised and ready to be advocates for their students, families, and staff. However, the researchers found that both school leaders still faced various challenges to leadership beyond dealing with diverse staff and students. Those challenges included financial and personnel issues. Without the support of the personnel, political, and financial resources with their systems or districts, their cultural competence played little part in their overall success. This shows that cultural competence is an important characteristic for school leaders to have, but there must be additional support, such as political and financial resources, that school leaders must be given to ensure overall success.

Glick (2002) tested whether cross-cultural experience and cultural training positively affected a leader’s choice of leadership behavior appropriate to the local cultural environment and, thus, his or her effectiveness. Glick surveyed host country nationals who work in various U.S. foreign services around the world to determine their satisfaction with the supervision that they received from American Foreign Service Officers. The sample used by the author of this study was Foreign Service Nationals, who were supervised by American Foreign Service Officers in the commercial section of the embassy. The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire, developed by the staff of the Personnel Research Board at The Ohio State University (1957), measured the
perceived leader behaviors that 128 Foreign Service Nationals observed in their supervisors.

Glick (2002) also used the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire, developed by Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1967), which measured employee satisfaction with supervision. The results from this study suggested that employees (from various cultural backgrounds) are more satisfied with supervisors who are more relationship oriented than those who are more task oriented. The results indicated that those supervisors who are more relationship oriented will build better relationships with employees from various cultural backgrounds, which would lead to more production. The results reported no statistical correlation between supervisors who received cultural training and employee satisfaction. However, there was a positive correlation between supervisors who had cross-cultural experience and culture training and employee satisfaction.

These results link cross-cultural experience to culture training. “Individuals who have had previous overseas experience may adapt better because they have experience in adjusting to cultural differences” (Weiss et al., 1967, p. 352). Although Glick’s (2002) study was conducted with Foreign Service Officers, the author mentioned that this study relates to other sectors and suggested that school leaders who have cross-cultural experience, along with cultural training, may be more effective in leading multicultural staff and multicultural students. In my study, I examined the Peace Corps as a cross-cultural experience that may have built cultural competency in school leaders that may have led them to be more effective with their own staff.
Relationship building, especially the building of trust, is seen by many as being one of the most important factors when setting a positive school culture that produces wanted results (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Covey, 2006; A. El-Mallawany, personal communication, September 26, 2012; E. Olive, personal communication, September 25, 2012). Culturally competent school leaders are able to run effective and high-performing schools because they are able to: (a) identify and implement forms of teaching and learning that are effective and appropriate for the populations they serve, (b) build strong communities of students and staff based on mutual respect and appreciation, (c) and nurture the development of families’ educational culture, which, in turn, supports the learning of the student (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). All of this enhances engagement of the students because they believe that their school is a place where they are cared for and can learn.

**Cultural Competence in School Leadership Programs.** Robertson and Webber (2000) made a case for cross-cultural leadership development in school leader programs, as they found that future school leaders built cultural competence through a critical reflection on their own experience, which makes them aware of others’ cultural needs. Through their mixed-methods study, the authors examined graduate students from Canada and New Zealand as they participated in a series of classes, meetings, seminars, and school visits in the opposite country as part of their school leadership program. Data collected and analyzed from students’ reflective journals, field notes compiled by the two researchers, and end-of-courses evaluations showed that the graduate school students’ learning focused on the effects of their cross-cultural experiences and that these
experiences fostered the development of critically inquiring leaders who knew that there were still more questions to ask. The authors concluded that these leaders were more likely to be critically reflective about the quality of education in their schools and to demonstrate the belief that they were able to make a difference in the quality of education being offered at their school.

Bustamante, Nelson, and Onwuegbuzie (2009) concluded that school leader preparation programs must do more to prepare leaders to serve in diverse schools. “In an increasingly globally diverse world, school leadership candidates could benefit from great global perspective” (p. 818). Additionally, these programs must prepare school leaders with the knowledge and skills required to work with culturally diverse populations. Their study of 151 school leaders from two western states, using the Schoolwide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (Bustamante & Nelson, 2007), found that: (a) the school leaders’ understanding that policy has emerged as an incentive of focusing on culturally competent practice, but it also a means of justifying inequalities that have emerged in schools; (b) programs were seen as important in carrying out culturally competent practices; (c) an inclusive school climate and school culture were seen as elements of culturally competent practices; and (d) school leaders’ admitted to numerous perceived barriers to building culturally competent schools.

Continuing professional development is another area where school leaders can emphasize the importance of building cultural competence in themselves and their staff. Kochan, Bredeson, and Riehl (2002) advocated for the school leader as being a model learner and having an impact on school culture, teacher development, and student
learning. As leaders in teacher development, school leaders have the power to influence teacher professional development. If they emphasize the importance of building cultural competencies, their staffs will build those skills. As model learners who exhibit the importance of knowing the population that they serve, school leaders can be instrumental in developing cultural competencies within their staff.

**Summary.** Cultural competence is defined as “the ability to effectively interact with people from different cultures and backgrounds” (Bustamante et al., 2009). It is important that culturally competent school leaders work with culturally diverse populations (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012), as they support the learning of the student (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Robertson and Webber (2000) established that this was an important aspect of school leadership programs; however, as Bustamante et al. concluded, school leader preparation programs must do more to prepare leaders to serve in diverse schools. Chapter Five will show how Peace Corps service helps to develop cultural competency in future school leaders. Cultural competence represents just one of the characteristics that will be studied in RPCV school leaders. The second is efficacy.

**Efficacy**

Unlike that of cultural competence, the definition of efficacy is more readily agreed upon. As stated earlier, the definition used for this study is the belief in one’s own ability (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Most leadership efficacy studies have been influenced by Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy (1982, 1986, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 2009). According to this theory, self-efficacy determines people’s choice of activities and how much effort people put forth in the face of failure or difficulty. “Efficacy expectations
are a major determinant of peoples’ choice of activities, how much effort they will expend and how long they will sustain effort in dealing with stressful situations” (Bandura, 1997a, p. 77). While efficacy was found to be important in leaders (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000), I explored how one specific experience (the Peace Corps) affected school leaders.

The Importance of Efficacy in School Leaders. Every major review of the literature on leadership lists self-confidence as an essential characteristic for effective leadership (McCormick, 2001). Locke (1991) stated that self-confidence is undisputable as an essential trait for successful leaders. According to Chemers et al. (2000), confident leaders exude a sense of calm during pressure situations, which leads to better judgments and sound actions and which helps to instill the same characteristics in their followers. In their study, Chemers et al. asked a group of military cadets to rate themselves in terms of perceived leadership ability and compared that to a similar rating done by the same group’s military science instructors at a United States Army advanced leadership summer camp. The study found that leaders who were high in confidence fared much better than did their less positive counterparts in actual performance capabilities observed by instructors and trained observers. McCormick also suggested that leaders who are self-confident and confident in their leadership abilities set higher goals and use their skills more effectively than do those with self-doubt. This leads to better results.

In an educational leadership context, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) explored three studies in an attempt to reliably measure principals’ sense of efficacy. After developing their own measure, the Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale (PSES), the
authors found that the gender and socio-economic status of the students of the school had no significant relationship to principals’ sense of efficacy. In addition, the number of years they had spent as principals either in total or at the current school also did not have a significant relation to efficacy of the leaders. The one factor that the authors did find was that race had a slight effect on efficacy, with White principals’ having a slightly higher sense of efficacy than did Black principals. Further, multiple regression analysis of the data found that perceptions of the quality and utility of their preparation and the interpersonal support received from others played a large role in principals’ sense of efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007).

The effects of collective efficacy of a school’s staff have been studied and have been shown to be a positive effect on student achievement. Cybulski, Hoy, and Sweetland (2005) found that the collective efficacy of teachers in a diverse set of elementary schools in Ohio had a positive direct effect on student reading and mathematics achievement, even after controlling for supplemental educational services (SES) and prior achievement. Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) found that collective efficacy had a positive effect on school mathematics achievement. In fact, the effect of collective efficacy has more of an impact on scores than does SES. Further, Goddard, Logerfo, and Hoy (2004) found that collective efficacy was a significant predictor of student performance across all areas tested by the unnamed Midwestern state in which their study was conducted.

My study differed from these in two important ways. First, I looked solely at individual efficacy of school leaders. Although the importance of collective efficacy is
well understood, I looked at individuals who have developed efficacy through an experience they completed by themselves, such as the Peace Corps. Secondly, I explored school leaders’ perceptions of efficacy through qualitative methods. The studies referenced above were all quantitative studies of school districts in the Midwest. However, I explored how school leaders believed that they were able to build efficacy through their Peace Corps experience by questioning using semi-structured interviews.

**Factors that Affect Leader Efficacy.** There are additional factors that affect leader efficacy. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found that district conditions played a major role in leaders’ efficacy. In their survey of 96 principals and 2,764 teachers from 180 schools in 45 districts from nine states, the researchers found that the explicit focus and concern for student achievement and the quality of instruction passed on to principals from the district were the most important factors that affected efficacy in school leaders.

In general, the more support, vision, and training given to school leaders by the district, the higher school leaders’ efficacy. In their study of 1,543 school leaders (principals and assistant principals) in Virginia, DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found that efficacy is waning because these principals and assistant principals felt that they did not have the authority and resources to get the job done effectively. Of those surveyed, 90% reported the need for more professional development to meet all of the requirements for the job. A large number also reported that the lack of decision-making authority was an issue in leading an effective school. In summary, these school leaders felt that their efficacy was affected by constraints and limitations placed on their authority.
Summary. Efficacy, the belief in one’s own ability (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), was found to be another essential characteristic for effective leadership (Chemers et al., 2000; Locke, 1991; McCormick, 2001). Locke stated that “self-confidence is a necessary trait for successful leadership is undisputed” (p. 26). In fact, successful leaders were able to build collective efficacy among staff, which was shown to have a positive effect on student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004; Hoy et al., 2002). The final characteristic of effective school leaders was leader optimism.

Optimism

Seligman (1990) explained optimism as the way someone looks at setbacks and victories. He stated that an optimistic person views setbacks as temporary and able to be changed, and victories as permanent, something that was the direct result of an action taken by the individual and that will last. An optimist is positive and encouraging. Therefore, I defined optimism as the positive outlook on setbacks and victories.

Optimism, and its study as a leadership characteristic for this research paper, derived from the positive psychology movement, begun in the late 1990s by Martin Seligman (Froh, 2004; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). Positive psychology is the study of how human beings prosper in the face of adversity (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In positive psychology, the goals are to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living and allow individuals and communities to thrive. Seligman has written extensively on the topic of optimism and its use in overcoming obstacles. To make one point clear, my study was not about the closely related topic of academic optimism. Defined by Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006),
academic optimism is the combination of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in clients, parents, and students. Instead, I studied the personality characteristic of optimism and whether Peace Corps service built a positive way to see things in the face of adversity.

The Importance of Optimism. Optimism has often been discussed as a characteristic of successful leaders. One incident tells of the story of Walt Disney’s losing the distribution rights of a hit cartoon character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. After losing the rights and telegramming his brother and partner, Roy Disney, from New York that everything was all right and that he would update him once he got home from the three-day trip back to California, Walt proceeded to create a new character that would hopefully put the Disney brothers back in business. Instead of bemoaning what had happened, he looked optimistically at another chance to create something and set upon creating a new character. The character that he created—Mickey Mouse—became the number one cartoon character within a year (James, 2013). Additionally, Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan, two noted optimists, created confidence and made people believe in a better future due to their positive outlook on things (Gallo, 2012). Waters (2012) noted that optimists are more successful in everything that they pursue because when a positive mindset and expectations for success are maintained, a person is more driven to attain his or her goals.

Optimism is an important characteristic to have when working with disadvantaged students (Smith, 1966; Theoharis, 2010) and is a characteristic of effective school leaders (Ciriello, 1998). Optimists are more likely to improve after failure (Seligman, Nolen-
Hoeksema, Thornton, & Thornton, 1990) and are better able to cope with stress (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). School leaders face stressful situations constantly, and the ability to bounce back after failure is important. Whether it is the stress that comes from dealing with personal stressors; finding and keeping qualified teachers; handling non-instructional responsibilities, such as attending meetings and dealing with discipline; and managing school reforms, many of today’s principals face burnout (Queen & Queen, 2005). Chemers et al. (2000) studied ROTC cadets to determine the effects of efficacy and optimism on leadership and found that optimism contributes “not only to a leader’s image of competency but also to actual performance capability in the role” (p. 273).

Seligman (1998) argued that optimism is as important a factor in achievement as talent or motivation and that optimism plays a significant role in students’ success and learning. Tough (2012) mentioned optimism as one of the skills or character traits that schools like the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and others are realizing that affects student success as much as does academic ability. Tough argued that optimism is something that can be learned regardless of ability and leads to positive actions and results. In short, success can be achieved through positive thinking (optimism).

**Summary.** Derived from the relatively new positive psychology movement, optimism, according to Seligman (1990), is the way someone looks at setbacks and victories. An optimistic person views setbacks as temporary and able to be changed and looks at victories as permanent, something that was the direct result of an action taken by the individual and something that will last. Therefore, I created my own definition of
optimism, taken from Seligman’s explanation, and will use the positive outlook on setbacks and victories as my definition for this research study.

Optimism has not been studied in depth as a characteristic of effective school leaders. It has, however, been studied as an essential characteristic of a good leader (Gallo, 2012; James, 2013; Waters, 2012). Therefore, this study aimed to add to the literature regarding optimism as a characteristic of a school leader, but more importantly, whether Peace Corps service built optimism in school leaders.

**Peace Corps Service Research**

“The toughest job you’ll ever love” is the famous motto of the United States Peace Corps. As an RPCV myself, I can confirm that the job and the assignment were both tough and enjoyable. It was probably the greatest experience of my life in the way that it has taught me about myself. I am not alone in that feeling. There have been numerous conversations that I have had with RPCVs who have expressed the profound influence that Peace Corps service had on their lives.

Although there is a dearth of research concerning the Peace Corps and RPCVs, Cross (1998) and Smith (1966) found that Peace Corps service built cultural competency and self-efficacy in teachers who served with the Peace Corps. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Cross explored how RPCVs viewed their Peace Corps experience and what impact it had on their self-efficacy and cultural awareness. One hundred fifty-four Peace Corps teachers completed a survey that measured self-efficacy and teacher efficacy using the General Self-efficacy scale (Sherer et al., 1982) and the Gibson and Dembo Teacher Efficacy Scale (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Fifteen teachers
were then interviewed by the author to determine the impact and importance of the Peace Corps experience on their teaching. Further, six of the RPCVs were observed for at least one class period, ranging from 40 minutes to two hours. The author’s results indicated that these RPCV teachers had developed high self-efficacy. The surveys also indicated that the RPCV teachers developed a higher sense of cultural awareness. In conclusion, the author found the Peace Corps experience to have influenced the development of self-efficacy and raised cultural awareness of RPCVs.

Smith (1966) sought to determine the personality traits displayed by competent Peace Corps volunteers who served in Ghana from 1961 to 1963. He interviewed 44 RPCVs (27 men and 17 women) who served in Ghana from 1961 to 1963 over a two-year period. During the first year, each participant was interviewed for four hours; the second year, they were interviewed for two-and-a-half. A pre- and post-service survey also was given to the volunteers to measure the change in attitudes from before their Peace Corps service to after. After analyzing the data, Smith concluded that volunteers became more tough-minded and realistic, more autonomous and independent of authority, and much more concerned with the plight of minorities in the United States. As such, they developed efficacy and cultural competence. Although my study was conducted using only qualitative measures and involved school leaders instead of teachers, parallels can be drawn to show that the Peace Corps experience had an impact on building cultural competence and efficacy in both school teachers and school leaders.
Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature on cultural competence, efficacy, optimism, and prior Peace Corps research. Prior research concluded that cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism are important characteristics of successful school leaders. Additionally, previous research found that cultural competence and efficacy were found to naturally exist in RPCVs and in RPCV teachers. My research, therefore, added to the overall Peace Corps research and answered the question of whether the participants in this study felt as though their Peace Corps experience developed these characteristics while serving in their Peace Corps country. The results of my research are found in Chapter Four, and the implications of this are found in Chapter Five.
Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

Research on effective school leadership, in general, suggests that cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism are three important characteristics for school leaders to possess when working with America’s increasingly diverse classrooms (Cybulski et al., 2005; Goddard et al., 2004; Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Seligman, 1998). Research (Cross, 1998; Smith, 1966) also suggests that those who serve as a Peace Corp volunteer develop significant leadership dispositions, skills, and characteristics that may be helpful in subsequent careers as school leaders. What specific leadership attributes or skills are developed during Peace Corps service that carry over to contribute to school leaders’ effectiveness in their subsequent careers as school leaders has not been researched. I sought to understand whether cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were developed during the Peace Corps service of RPCVs who subsequently became school leaders and how it influenced their work as former or current school leaders. This chapter presents the research design, conceptual framework, participants, setting, data collection, and analysis of this study.

Research Design

Patton (2002) acknowledged that qualitative methodologies are naturalistic because the research takes place in real-world settings that facilitate in-depth study of an
issue. Through qualitative research, the researcher is able to “enter the world of the participants, to see the world from their perspective, and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6). Therefore, qualitative methods were appropriate for this study because I wished to understand the perspectives of RPCVs and have them reflect on their experiences in terms of what leadership characteristics they believed they developed during their Peace Corps service that have been beneficial to them, their schools, and students.

This research was a single case study of the experiences of four RPCVs and how they think their experience influenced their current school leadership practices. Elements of case study methodology were combined using the descriptions of case studies by Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (2002). The Peace Corps experience was examined as a phenomenon of interest from which the questions of whether the participants felt as though they developed the leadership skills or characteristics during the experience and how they were applied. This research design follows Yin’s description of inquiry, in which the researcher tries to explain the “how” or “why” of the phenomenon of interest. Stake’s element of flexible design also was employed as the research questions guided the research, but allowed the researcher to make changes while proceeding from design to research. Participants were asked specifically about cultural competency, leader efficacy, and optimism, but time and space were allowed for them to discuss additional characteristics.

**Researcher Lens.** Reflecting on my early classes in my doctoral studies, my ontological beliefs regarding truth are relativist, in that I believe that someone’s truth is
created by his or her experience. In fact, in one of the earliest assignments that I completed for the Ways of Knowing class, I described my belief that, to know something, you must experience something. In collecting and analyzing data, I believe that interaction with the participants is needed to understand their perspectives and beliefs, and my preference is to “enter the world of the participants” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6) to gain an understanding of the participants’ beliefs. This ontological belief led to my conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework. Maxwell (2005) defined the conceptual framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 33). The desire to research the Peace Corps experience came from my own experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bulgaria from 1998 to 2000, and the desire to research characteristics found in effective school leaders came from my work in K–12 educational settings over the last 20 years. Researching the Peace Corps experience and the development of school leadership characteristics evolved from my previous interest and research during my early doctoral studies regarding the Peace Corps, teachers, and school leadership.

During the spring semester of 2011, I completed a research project for an advanced qualitative research methods course, in which I interviewed three RPCVs who were teaching at that time. I asked them whether they felt that their Peace Corps experience influenced them and helped them in their current teaching positions, especially in schools with diverse student populations. My findings from that study indicated that the Peace Corps experience helped these teachers to feel comfortable
teaching in multicultural classrooms and helped them to make teaching culturally relevant. These findings suggest that RPCVs are equipped to teach and work in America’s increasingly diverse classrooms.

I then became interested in discovering whether the Peace Corps experience equipped school leaders to serve in America’s increasingly diverse schools. I originally began to examine this question during the summer of 2012, when I developed an annotated bibliography of leadership characteristic articles in two foundations of educational leadership courses (Cross, 1998; Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Robertson & Webber, 2000). These authors discussed the development of cultural competency in school leaders. At the same time, I discovered Cross’s (1998) study on RPCVs, which stated that RPCVs demonstrated a high level of cultural awareness and showed empathy for people from different cultures. Therefore, I concluded that RPCV teachers who work in highly diverse settings could be successful in these settings because of their experience.

However, a dearth of further research regarding the Peace Corps experience and of research that links the Peace Corps experience and the development of effective school leadership characteristics led me to explore these topics together. Through additional readings and reflections on my own school leadership experiences, I became interested in efficacy and optimism and their importance in leadership and eventually decided to include efficacy and optimism along with cultural competency in my examination of school leadership characteristics.
I believe that my Peace Corps experience was instrumental in helping me to develop an understanding of various people and how their cultural experiences affect the ways that they live, work, and learn. I also feel that my Peace Corps experience further developed in me an attitude that I can get things done and an optimistic way to look at things. There were some specific experiences that I had in Bulgaria during my Peace Corps experience from 1998 to 2000 that I now reflect on and can unquestionably identify as experiences that further developed my cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism.

After reviewing literature on characteristics of effective school leaders, I determined that cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were just a few of the characteristics that come to the forefront as essential for school leaders to possess. I also wanted to examine these specific characteristics because I have come to rely heavily upon them during my own experiences as a school leader. To be clear, these three are not the only characteristics that appear in the literature regarding effective school leaders. However, I did assume that my participants would confirm that they further developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism because I asked them specifically about these three. I also assumed, though, that additional effective school leadership characteristics would appear because I gave my participants the time and space to discuss additional reflections on their Peace Corps experience.

Therefore, I entered the research process with a few assumptions and expectations. I first assumed that participants would say that they believed their Peace Corps experience helped them further develop cultural competence, efficacy, and
optimism. That expectation was borne out of my own belief that I further developed these characteristics during my own experience. I also entered the study with the expectation that I would discover more characteristics that RPCVs believed were developed during their service, though I did not speculate as to what those characteristics would be. Consequently, I first asked the participants what characteristics they feel they developed during their Peace Corps service. This is shown in Research Question #1.

I further assumed that the participants whom I interviewed were effective school leaders due to the number of years that they had served in leadership positions. Each of my participants averaged over 25 years in leadership positions. If they had lasted this long and been promoted to leadership positions, I believe that they were successful and effective. In a further reflection of research theory, my relativist view on what is truth and my need to interact with the research to understand it led me to approach the study as I did. The specific research questions that I developed, based on what I wanted to discover, also led to the framework from which I approached this study.

**Research Questions**

This research study explored the following research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics do RPCVs believe were developed during their Peace Corps service that contributed to their effectiveness as school leaders?

2. In what ways do RPCVs believe cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were developed during Peace Corps service?

3. How do these RPCVs use these characteristics as school leaders?
Participants

To conduct research about how RPCVs perceive the effects of their Peace Corps experience on their school leadership practices, I targeted RPCVs who have served or currently serve as school leaders (superintendents, principals, vice/assistant principals) who completed two years of Peace Corps experience. There were no restrictions as to the time frame in which they served, their age when they served, or the country in which they served. Using Maxwell’s (2005) goals of purposeful selection, I decided that participants must have been Peace Corps volunteers who have served or are currently in one of the school leadership positions previously described. I used network sampling in finding participants for this study. A participant, as described by Glesne (2011), is someone who came “from people who know people who meet research interests” (p. 45).

I first started by sending emails to former Peace Corps volunteers whom I personally knew, those with whom I served and others whom I have met, primarily through my master’s degree program and my time spent in the Washington, D.C., area. I also sent an announcement through the American University listserv and one to the staff of the Peace Corps office in Washington, D.C., asking whether anyone knew any RPCVs who were former or current school administrators. My recruitment of participants through my personal contacts and through the listservs began during November 2012. In December of 2012, I began to receive emails about RPCVs who met these criteria who were school leaders and who may have been interested in participating, along with contact information about them. I suspended my active search for participants for the entirety of 2013 as I finished doctoral courses, refined my study proposal, and adjusted to
life as a new father. As 2014 began, I picked up my active search and recruitment of participants and, by the end of the year, had eight potential participants.

Early in 2015, I reached out to these eight potential participants for this study via email. Five potential participants responded that they would be interested in participating. The Peace Corps narrative was then sent to the five potential participants to complete. The narrative first asked about their Peace Corps placement, such as job description and location, age during service, and years of service. The narrative then asked the participants to describe the school leadership positions they have held here in the United States since their service. Finally, the narrative asked the participants to describe their Peace Corps experience and to give general thoughts on their service. I purposefully did not ask any pointed questions regarding what they may have thought about their service at this point in the data collection process. I wanted to simply see what they would say and use that to formulate individual follow-up questions.

Four participants completed and sent back the narrative along with the consent form (Appendix A). After trying multiple times to reestablish contact with the fifth participant, I continued the study with the four remaining participants. Table 1 displays the participants’ name, school leadership position, Peace Corps continent of service, and years of school leadership in the U.S. A pseudonym was used for each of the participants instead of his real name.
Table 1

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Current or Most Recent School Leadership Position</th>
<th>Years of School Leadership in U.S.</th>
<th>Peace Corps Continent of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floyd</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Floyd currently serves as a superintendent and is in his early 60s. As a Peace Corps volunteer, he served in South America as a teacher and curriculum coordinator. Since returning from Peace Corps service, he has served as a teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent before his current position as a superintendent in the southwest United States. In total, he has over 27 years of school leadership experience.

Although Ray is retired with over 30 years of school leadership experience, he still serves as a short-term and long-term interim principal, replacing principals out on health leave or special assignments. After his Peace Corps service ended in 1970, he was a teacher, English as a Second Language (ESL) program director, vice-principal, and principal in the northwestern United States. During the Peace Corps, Ray taught English to high school students in Asia.

Anthony’s Peace Corps service during the late 1980s took him to Africa to serve as an ESL instructor at a university. Now in his late 50s, Anthony has served as a middle school director and an assistant head of school, and he is currently head of an
independent school in a northwestern U.S. state. He has over 24 years of school leadership experience.

Doug’s U.S. school leadership positions include program director, design specialist, principal, and educational consultant. Currently in his late 60s, Doug now serves as a co-founder and co-president of a global leadership non-profit. As a Peace Corps volunteer, he served in Asia as a teacher and teacher trainer. In total, he has over 30 years of school leadership experience.

**Research Setting**

The research was completed in three stages. First, participants were emailed a narrative, which each completed and sent back, in which they described their Peace Corps experience (Appendix B). The purpose of the first half of the narrative was to gather preliminary information about the participants’ Peace Corps experience, including country of service, years of service, age of the participant during Peace Corps service, their Peace Corps job, and school leadership positions held since service. The second half of the narrative asked participants to describe a few of their general thoughts regarding their Peace Corps experience. Each of the participants expressed how their Peace Corps experience affected their life in a positive way. For example, one participant discussed how the Peace Corps changed the trajectory of his career, and another discussed how the Peace Corps helped him embrace a calling in school leadership. This was the first chance for the participants to reflect on their Peace Corps service and to mention for the first time their beliefs regarding how the Peace Corps affected them and their careers. This narrative was also used to guide the interview with each of the
participants to pinpoint the exact questions that needed to be asked of each participant regarding their beliefs and to get each participant to continue to reflect on their beliefs of their Peace Corps experience.

As participation was not restricted to any geographic area of the country, and participants were mostly from the western and southwestern parts of the United States, telephone interviews were determined to be the best mode of completing the second stage, the participant interview. The purpose of the interview was for the participants to be able to expound on the reflections they briefly mentioned in their narrative and to provide a much more in-depth analysis of the experience. The questions used to guide the discussion are located in Appendix C. The following questions were used with each participant: How do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop cultural competency? How do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop leader efficacy? How do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop optimism? Do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop any other skills that you use as a school leader? Each participant agreed to have the interview recorded on a digital recording device. Table 2 shows the date and length of time spent during the phone interview.
Participants were asked to discuss how they believe the Peace Corps experience helped them develop cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. Participants also had the opportunity to discuss additional school leadership characteristics that they felt were developed during their Peace Corps service. After each interview was conducted, I transcribed it using the Dragon Naturally Speaking software. An additional researcher and I then coded the interviews, looking specifically for responses to the questions of cultural competency, efficacy, and optimism. To be clear, the discussion of these three characteristics was specifically prompted in the interview questions. The additional researcher has a master’s degree in educational leadership. She has worked in public education for 15 years and spent one year working for a research agency in Washington, D.C.

Entering the research, we established three major organizational categories, which Maxwell (2005) described as broad areas or issues that could be anticipated. As the research questions were specifically asking about cultural competence, efficacy, and

### Table 2

*First Interview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Length (minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floyd</td>
<td>4/15/15</td>
<td>37:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>4/15/15</td>
<td>43:23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>7/30/15</td>
<td>39:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>8/11/15</td>
<td>44:18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
optimism, these three organizational categories were established, and we first looked for
responses that fit within these categories. For example, “I came out with much more
competence and ability in Spanish” was categorized by both of us as an example of
developing cultural competency. “And that’s really what it [Peace Corps service] gave
me an optimism about what the world really is about . . . it’s about people, everyday
people that our kids could grow up to have relationships or friendships . . . and see the
world differently.” We both agreed that this statement was an example of developing
optimism during Peace Corps service. However, room was also left open for substantive
categories to be developed during the analysis of the data.

Substantive categories come from the participants’ own descriptions and beliefs.
An example of this type of category was resiliency, a belief mentioned by at least two of
the participants as a characteristic developed during Peace Corps service. Floyd
discussed the idea of developing resiliency in the following anecdote. He stated that
people he knew of who were successful in the Peace Corps “were able to just shrug off
the challenges and laugh them off and take the attitude that we can’t do that but we can
do that.” Maxwell (2005) described both organizational and substantive categories as
important in qualitative research. I used cultural competency, efficacy, and optimism as
organizational categories and used additional characteristics, such as resiliency, as
substantive categories.

These substantive categories emerged from a second analysis of the data. After
initially coding and inputting participant data into the organizational categories, my
fellow researcher and I decided that there were additional rich data that were pertinent to
this study. As those particular data did not fit into any of the organizational categories, we decided to add additional categories.

To use the data for the organization, both of us had to agree that they were examples of said category. Additionally, we had to agree that other examples of leadership characteristics mentioned in the interviews were substantive enough to be mentioned in the Results section of this paper. This was designed to triangulate the data and lower any biases that I brought to the interpretation of the data regarding being a school leader and an RPCV to produce more accurate results in data collection.

The third stage of participation was follow-up questions and/or conversations via email. This opportunity was used to clarify some points that were already made. For example, Floyd stated that one thing he learned about leadership in the Peace Corps was that, as a leader, you do not know everything, and you are forced to lean on the expertise and knowledge of others. This sounded very similar to what Collins (2001) said about humility, so I wanted to ask Floyd about humility as a characteristic of leadership. I also followed up with Anthony and Doug to get another example of when each of them used cultural competence, specifically, in their work. Email was determined to be the best form of communication due to the location of the participants and because the follow-up questions did not require full conversations. Table 3 shows the dates of follow-up email conversations with each participant.
Table 3

Dates of Additional Email Conversations with Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Dates of Email Conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floyd</td>
<td>1/23/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8/4/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/4/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>2/5/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7/28/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>2/16/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/3/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>2/26/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3/7/16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Building Relationships

Tolman and Brydon-Miller (2001) believe that qualitative research should be participatory, with the research participants and researcher’s working together to generate knowledge and information that is useful to both parties, leading to personal and social transformation. Additionally, instead of simply treating my relationship with my participants as a means of getting information, I strived to create a relationship that allowed more in-depth data to come out, a strategy mentioned by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) as a way to achieve deeper data. I believed that my previous experience as a Peace Corps volunteer helped me to build a trusting relationship with all of my participants. Although we all served in different countries, RPCVs share a common sense of experience due to the strong commitment to service and the general knowledge that comes with serving in the Peace Corps. We like to share stories and,
although I cannot directly relate to an experience a former volunteer had in another country, I understand the daily ups and downs experienced by a volunteer in working with the Peace Corps in any country or situation. One of the purposes of the narrative sent first to participants was a chance for them to briefly talk about their experiences and their beliefs on how that experience influenced their lives.

Although I had met only one of my participants before conducting this study, sharing a common experience made it very comfortable to ask each participant about his experience, and I believe that I was perceived as trustworthy by the participants as a result our shared experiences. I also made a concerted effort to actively listen to what was said by merely acknowledging what I heard, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. For example, there was at least one time in each of the interviews that the participants said something about their experience in and how it helped them to begin to develop leadership characteristics and how that instance has stayed with them for years. Instead of telling them my instance or story about developing cultural competence, I had to simply not do that and listen to their story. These actions are important for the researcher to do for a successful interview (Samaras, 2011). I believe that I was able to build trusting relationships with my participants to be able to probe deeper into their experiences and beliefs.

**Data Collection**

My source for data collection consisted of three stages: a narrative, an interview, and follow-up questions via email. The data collection took place between February 2015 and January 2017. Each participant was asked to complete a Peace Corps
experience narrative, agree to be interviewed via phone, and be available via phone or email for follow-up questions. Prior to conducting the research, I received permission for this study by the Human Subjects Review Board at George Mason University. I created a pseudonym for each participant, and each participant signed an informed consent document (Appendix A), as approved by the Institutional Review Board of George Mason University. As listed in Tables 2 and 3, each phone interview lasted from 35 to 45 minutes, and each participant was contacted at least once for a follow-up question or clarification.

I followed a semi-structured format during the interview, according to the questions outlined in Appendix C. I was prepared to ask follow-up questions to get further explanation or to clarify answers. Special attention was paid to a multitude of interviewing techniques, such as asking participants to tell stories, avoiding reinforcing my participants’ responses, following up but not interrupting, and asking open-ended questions. For example, instead of asking simply, “Did your Peace Corps experience help you in developing cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism?” questions were posed as, “How do you feel your experience helped you to develop cultural competency, efficacy, and optimism?” This allowed participants space to provide more in-depth reflection on their experience. Additionally, the question, “Do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop any other skills that you use as a school leader?” allowed the participants to further reflect on skills other than cultural competency, efficacy, and optimism. These are all good interviewer techniques discussed by Siedman
(2006). One important technique that I purposely avoided was telling of my own experiences, something that happens quite often when I talk to another RPCV.

**Data Analysis**

Using the single case study design, I analyzed each participant’s beliefs and thoughts of their Peace Corps experience to find similarities and differences with each of the other participants’ beliefs and thoughts. Most of the similarities were found in the examination of the development of cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. A few differences were found in regard to the additional characteristics that each reported developing during the Peace Corps. Those differences are reported in Chapter Four. The sources for this analysis were the narrative, the interviews, and the follow-up communications.

The first step was to analyze the second part of the narrative, in which participants wrote initial thoughts and beliefs of their Peace Corps experience. These thoughts and beliefs were incorporated into the individual interviews that followed. The first step in analyzing the interviews was to transcribe each interview, which I completed. The next step was to read through each interview, underlining, highlighting, and circling information in the data and coding it, a strategy described by Maxwell (2005), into a priori categories. These categories included cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. This was completed by my colleague and me, as described in the Research Setting section of this chapter. Additionally, my colleague and I developed other categories about the other characteristics that participants mentioned they developed in Peace Corps service. This was done by first picking out what we separately thought of as additional
leadership characteristics built during Peace Corps service. We then discussed each and agreed that these were leadership characteristics. It was not a difficult process, as we agreed on most as being significant characteristics. We agreed on the following characteristics to include in the study: resiliency, patience, and the ability to build credibility with the people whom you serve. These additional characteristics will be described in more detail and elaborated upon in the Results section.

**Boundaries/Parameters**

Finding RPCVs who fit the criteria of this study was not easy. Because there was no central database or records kept that identified RPCVs who are former or current school leaders, it took time to find them on my own. I did identify a few additional potential participants, but they were unresponsive to my many inquiries regarding their willingness to participate. Additional participants would have given me more data to use in my findings, possibly finding even more school leadership characteristics developed during Peace Corps service. Further, the geographic locations of the four participants did not allow me to collect the data in-person or to observe the participants in their leadership roles. This may have provided another way to triangulate the data collected to get a further, richer set of data.

**Validity Issues**

Considering this is a study of how RPCVs perceive the effects of their service on their practice as a school leader, it is important to acknowledge my own background as an RPCV and career educator. I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bansko, Bulgaria, from 1998 to 2000. I went to Bulgaria as a licensed teacher with two years’ teaching
experience after college. My assignment was to teach English to grades 9–12. Since returning from Bulgaria in 2000, I have taught and served as a school leader in Indianapolis, Indiana; Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia; Washington, D.C.; and Fairfax, Virginia.

Some of the characteristics and skills that I use and have used as a school leader were built during my experiences while teaching overseas. I value cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism and believe that student outcomes are a result of these characteristics and skills in school leaders. At the same time, I am aware that RPCVs bring their own set of unique characteristics, skills, and beliefs to their leadership positions. Being aware of my own lens, I carefully considered the points of view of each of my participants when making decisions about the data. Instead of asking direct and leading questions about the Peace Corps experience, I asked more open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to give a variety of answers and potentially discuss their experiences more openly. By doing so, I did my best to mitigate my researcher bias and allow the data to speak for themselves.

Becker (1970) described rich data as coming from long-term involvement and intensive interviews. Although I did not develop a long-term involvement in the study, characterized by repeated observations and interviews in each participant’s setting, I did transcribe the participants’ interviews verbatim, and my colleague and I pulled data directly from the interviews. This is important because it helped to limit preconceived thoughts and expectations.
Summary

The research design, research questions, participants, data collection, and data analysis were explained in this chapter. Four RPCVs were interviewed to determine their perspectives on how they believe their service contributed to their effectiveness as school leaders and whether they believe cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were characteristics they developed during their Peace Corps service. Data were collected through a narrative, an interview, and follow up emails. The participants’ responses were then coded by one additional researcher and me to determine their responses, looking specifically for cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. I also considered the boundaries and validity issues associated with the study. The results from the research are discussed in Chapter Four.
Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This study was conceptualized and designed to give RPCV school leaders a space to reflect and discuss their beliefs on the development of school leadership characteristics. Participants were first asked what leadership characteristics they believe were developed during their Peace Corps service. Secondly, the participants were asked about their development of cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. Finally, the participants were asked how they use these characteristics in their leadership. The findings from the study are presented in this chapter. An analysis of similarities from the four participants’ responses is presented question by question, using the single case study design with coding techniques described in Chapter Three. Participant responses are presented first in chart form, which allows the reader to see congruence among the responses. A narrative explanation of direct quotes follows to provide the reader with additional explanation and context.

Research Question #1

What leadership characteristics do RPCVs believe were developed during their Peace Corps service that contributed to their effectiveness as school leaders?

Information collected from this first question represent substantive data, as I did not prompt any of the participants. They were free to begin telling their story without my
leading them or asking specifically about certain characteristics. I looked for characteristics that were mentioned separately by at least two of the participants. Table 4 shows a sampling of direct quotes by the participants regarding leadership characteristics they felt were developed during Peace Corps service.

Table 4

*Participants’ Leadership Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Characteristic</th>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Credibility               | *Floyd:* “Learning the native language and trying to communicate with people earned me some credibility with them (the natives of his country of Peace Corps service) because they saw me struggle and try.”  
  *Anthony:* “One of the ways in which I had some credibility with the teachers in that area is that I spent two years teaching in a foreign place... I was very familiar with their challenges.” |
| Resiliency/Tenacity       | *Doug:* “There was a certain amount of tenacity that was required and developed during Peace Corps.”  
  *Floyd:* “I don’t think I went into Peace Corps realizing it but I just think that people in this tough situation develop that resiliency of spirit and I certainly came out of this experience with a very different attitude about my capacity to control my attitude.” |
| Relationship Building     | *Doug:* “Peace Corps was so powerful for me in teaching me how to get to know people” and that getting to know people “was based on relationships.”  
  *Anthony:* “In terms of being effective as a leader and in schools in particular... you can’t go anywhere (in terms of success) unless you forge relationships with people.” |
The first characteristic that was mentioned by two of the participants was the ability to build credibility with the people you serve. Floyd mentioned that one thing Peace Corps volunteers must be aware of during service was the idea of being a young American coming into a foreign situation and acting as if you know everything and not taking a different perspective or point of view into consideration. “I think being in that setting where I was trying to tell somebody who was teaching for thirty years how to do their job. . . . I couldn’t do that until they trusted me and until I showed them something that I could do.” He also said, “Learning the native language and trying to communicate with people [and trying to learn himself] earned me some credibility with them because they saw me struggle and try.” Anthony also felt as though he developed credibility by trying to fit into the local culture and speak the native language. “One of the ways in which I had some credibility with the teachers in that area is that I spent two years teaching in a foreign place. . . I was very familiar with their challenges. I spoke their language in a sense, and that allowed me to exercise some leverage when I needed to push towards change.”

In discussing the importance of leadership credibility, Kouzes and Posner (2007, 2011) drew the correlation between the characteristics of good leaders and what communications experts refer to as “source credibility.” These experts assessed the believability of sources of communication using three criteria: their perceived trustworthiness, their expertise, and their dynamism. From politicians to priests, those who rated more highly were considered more credible sources of information. These characteristics are similar to leadership qualities in that both indicate that people prefer to
follow leaders who are credible, which strongly supports the idea that credibility is the foundation of leadership. “Above all else, we as constituents must be able to believe in our leaders. We must believe that their word can be trusted, that they’re personally passionate and enthusiastic . . . and that they have the knowledge and skill to lead” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 37).

Resiliency and tenacity (henceforth referred to only as resiliency) were also developed during Peace Corps service. Floyd stated:

There’s just something about that experience [the Peace Corps] in making you realize . . . you kind of choose what attitude to have, and I saw that a lot of people who managed well in the Peace Corps were people who were able to just shrug off the challenges and laugh them off. . . . I don’t think I went into Peace Corps realizing it, but I just think that people in this tough situation develop that resiliency of spirit and I certainly came out of this experience with a very different attitude about my capacity to control my attitude.

Doug mentioned, “There was a certain amount of tenacity that was required and developed during Peace Corps.” It was required, he said, “to feel like you are doing something, accomplishing something that had some sort of value.”

Bandura (2009) discussed the importance of resiliency when developing efficacy. “If people experience only easy successes they come to expect quick results and are easily discouraged by failure” (p. 185). Resiliency, Bandura said, can be built in training programs, but it requires experience in overcoming obstacles. Patel’s (2010) qualitative study of 20 leaders in the social sector found that resiliency was built by an experience
before their careers had begun. For instance, many of the participants reported a single experience, usually in their childhood or early adulthood, from which they learned how to be resilient. Patel’s conclusions, much like Bandura’s, focused on the development of resiliency through experience. The results of my study add to the knowledge base of the importance of resiliency as it relates to school leadership and leadership as a whole.

Another characteristic mentioned by at least two of the participants was the ability to build relationships. Doug said, “Peace Corps was so powerful for me in teaching me how to get to know people” and that getting to know people “was based on relationships.” Anthony stated that, “in terms of being effective as a leader and in schools in particular... you can’t go anywhere (in terms of success) unless you forge relationships with people.”

The ability to build relationships has been identified as a characteristic of effective leaders. Lewin and Regine (2000) concluded that leadership in successful companies focuses on the development of relationships between its people and is important for getting results. Kouzes and Posner (1998) stated that the extent to which leaders showed that they “really care about the people they lead” (p. 149) separates effective leaders from ineffective leaders. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found that successful school leaders fostered a strong sense of belonging and caring among students and adults, which is critical in engaging and motivating students to learn. The findings in this study support previous findings that relationship building is an important characteristic in effective leaders.
In summary, there were multiple characteristics of effective school leaders that the participants felt were developed or further developed during their Peace Corps service. At least two of the participants mentioned that they developed credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships during their Peace Corps experience. The importance of possessing these characteristics as a leader is consistent with prior research. Therefore, we can conclude that the Peace Corps experience helps to develop and further develop three important leadership characteristics: credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships. The next section turns to three characteristics I asked about specifically: cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism.

**Research Question #2**

In what ways do RPCVs believe cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were developed during Peace Corps service?

As opposed to the method I used in Research Question #1, I prompted my participants regarding these characteristics. I entered this research looking specifically for responses in these organizational categories due to my previously stated interest in researching these particular characteristics.

**Cultural Competence.** The first of these three specific leadership characteristics was cultural competence. Although there are many definitions of cultural competency, I chose to use the following definition: “The ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, socio-cultural, and linguistic diversity.” (Lynch & Hanson, 1998, p. 50).
Previous studies, discussed in Chapter Two, found that it was important for school leaders to be culturally competent when working with culturally diverse populations (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Each of the participants believed that his Peace Corps service helped him to develop cultural competence. Table 5 shows direct quotes by each participant regarding cultural competence.

Table 5

Cultural Competence Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floyd</td>
<td>“When they have concerns or problems that they try and get resolved, and it means a lot to them, I think, that I can speak Spanish.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>“To be successful and happy in that setting (working with others different from you), you’ve got to have respect for and enjoy the new culture and values.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think that the Peace Corps experience has to have a profound influence on you and a positive effect [on you] and allows you to be sensitive and empathize and relate with parents that are ethnically and economically different from you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>“The learning for me that has really stuck with me to this day is the importance of suspending judgment when going into [or coming into contact with] a new culture.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>“Peace Corps helped me understand what was necessary for developing cultural competence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My Peace Corps training and my assignment could not have provided any better personal integration of cross-cultural competence than this experiential learning before and on the job.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Peace Corps experience provided Floyd a chance to learn and communicate in the native language of a large group constituents that he now serves. Floyd, serving in
South America, learned Spanish. His Peace Corps experience led to his being much more competent in speaking Spanish by having the chance to learn it and speak it every day. In his current position, 65% of his district’s approximately 7,000 students speak Spanish as their home language, and learning Spanish in the Peace Corps has provided him with the chance to communicate with students and parents in their home language. This has been especially important “when they have concerns or problems that they try and get resolved, and it means a lot to them, I think, that I can speak Spanish.” Floyd also stated that to be able to communicate in their own language provides a level of “trust and credibility” between Floyd and those he currently serves. Although the other participants did not mention that the language they learned while serving in the Peace Corps contributed to their cultural competence, Floyd felt that his Spanish language skills learned while in the Peace Corps contributes to his cultural competence currently.

Ray discussed the importance of cultural competence when working with others who are different from you. “To be successful and happy in that setting (working with others different from you), you’ve got to have respect for and enjoy the new culture and values” in others. He attributed his Peace Corps experience in helping him build that characteristic. “I think that the Peace Corps experience has to have a profound influence on you and a positive effect [on you] and allows you to be sensitive and empathize and relate with parents that are ethnically and economically different from you.”

Anthony reported that his cross-cultural learning came in a different form. “The learning for me that has really stuck with me to this day is the importance of suspending judgment when going into [or coming into contact with] a new culture.” Further, says
Anthony, you can “integrate much more gracefully” if you do not come in with certain, predisposed prejudices. By doing so, there is the “reality that you can connect with all kinds of people on some basic levels” and, as a school leader, “you can bring people together, regardless of culture.”

Doug stated that the “Peace Corps helped me understand what was necessary for developing cultural competence,” and that he felt that it was helpful in developing the course structure that he developed when starting an international studies program for his school district. “Peace Corps understood that you are coming from a culture that is different from the culture that you are going to,” and so the training was designed to “develop some confidence and start to overcome some of the fear of making mistakes” in the country where you would serve. “My Peace Corps training and ‘trial by fire’ in my assignment in Afghanistan could not have provided any better personal integration of cross-cultural competence than this experiential learning before and on the job.” This helped Doug later as a school leader when he was tasked with creating the international studies program for his school district. The intent of this program was to give students who did not already have the exposure or experiences of a multicultural education those experiences in which global issues and conflict resolution were studied in helping kids to work together. According to Doug, experiencing it himself in the Peace Corps also led him to be able to coach his teachers and other staff members in developing cultural competence in them to implement the program for the students.

Research has found that culturally competent school leaders are able to run effective and high-performing schools because they are able to identify and implement
forms of teaching and learning that are effective and appropriate for the populations they serve and build strong communities of students and staff based on mutual respect and appreciation (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Using direct quotes from the interviews conducted with each of the participants, I found that all of the participants believed that their Peace Corps service helped them to develop or further develop cultural competence. Table 4 shows the congruence of the participants and their beliefs regarding the development of cultural competence during their Peace Corps service. Therefore, we can conclude from the data collected from each of the participants that they believe cultural competence was developed or further developed during their Peace Corps service and was used or is currently being used as a characteristic in their leadership practice.

**Efficacy.** Another characteristic that participants in this study developed during their Peace Corps service was leadership efficacy. Defined as a belief in one’s own ability as a leader (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), review of the literature in Chapter Two on leadership found that self-confidence is an essential characteristic for effective leadership (Chemers et al., 2000; Locke, 1991; McCormick, 2001). Each of the participants believed that his Peace Corps service helped him to develop or further develop efficacy. Table 6 shows direct quotes by each participant regarding efficacy.
**Table 6**

*Efficacy Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floyd</td>
<td>“Peace Corps service gave me the notion that I could influence the nature and quality of my life, and that I could work with and through others to influence the nature and quality of others’ lives.” “I certainly came out of this experience with a very different attitude about my capacity to control my attitude.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>The Peace Corps built “efficacy that there was a positive result possible.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>The Peace Corps experience “definitely solidified [my confidence] and it was an experience and gave me the confidence that I could use that same facility in lots of different situations and meeting faculties here in the United States.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>The Peace Corps helps you “feel like you are doing something, accomplishing something that had some sort of value.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anthony stated that his Peace Corps service “definitely solidified [his confidence] and it was an experience and gave me the confidence that I could use that same facility in lots of different situations [as it pertains to school leadership] and meeting faculties here in the United States.” Ray saw his Peace Corps experience as developing efficacy in terms of having a confidence in his abilities, first as a teacher and then as a leader. He remembered that his training as a Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TEF) “was very specific and taught us how to do multiple lesson plans and how to come up with something that works . . . and that knowledge and that skill with learning how to deal with that every day” was helpful when becoming a school leader because there was an
“efficacy that there was a positive result possible . . . and then the knowledge that it works.”

Doug felt that the experience made him “feel like you are doing something, accomplishing something that had some sort of value.” He also felt as though the Peace Corps developed the knowledge and confidence “that I’m a lifelong learner,” which, he states, is another important piece of his leadership.

Perhaps the participant who thinks that Peace Corps service developed leader efficacy most was Floyd. Mentioning his own work and knowledge of Bandura’s notion of self-efficacy, Floyd stated that his Peace Corps service gave him the “notion that I could influence the nature and quality of my life, and that I could work with and through others to influence the nature and quality of others’ lives.” He went on to say that “this is very important and often times leaders lose sight of this when they don’t see the immediate impact of their labor.” While working in tough situations, as many school leaders do, “it can be difficult to see meaning in your work.” Floyd, however, stated that his Peace Corps service “developed that resiliency of spirit, and I certainly came out of this experience with a very different attitude about my capacity to control my attitude.” The Peace Corps experience gave him the ability to “just shrug off the challenges and laugh them off and take the attitude the maybe we can do that and can control that.” Finally, Floyd says that “I can see the impact of personal goals and the belief in one’s capacity to shape individuals and organizations.”

The development of self-efficacy, the belief in one’s own ability (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), was found to be another essential characteristic for effective leadership
(Chemers et al., 2000; McCormick, 2001), and that “self-confidence is a necessary trait for successful leadership is undisputed” (Locke, 1991, p. 26). Additionally, successful leaders are able to build collective efficacy among staff, which was shown in the Review of Literature in Chapter Two to have a positive effect on student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004; Hoy et al., 2002). Using direct quotes from each of the participants, I found that all believed that their Peace Corps service helped them to develop efficacy. Table 5 showed the similarities of the participants and their beliefs regarding the development of efficacy during their Peace Corps service. Therefore, we can conclude from the data collected from all of the participants that they believe that efficacy was another leadership characteristic developed or further developed during Peace Corps service.

**Optimism.** Optimism was the third characteristic that the participants were specifically asked about, one that all four participants stated they believe they developed or further developed during service. Defined as the way someone looks at setbacks and victories (Seligman, 1990), optimism has been studied as an important characteristic when working with disadvantaged students (Smith, 1966; Theoharis, 2010). Previous research, discussed in Chapter Two, found that optimism is an essential characteristic of effective school leaders (Ciriello, 1998; Gallo, 2012; James, 2013; Waters, 2012), but it has not been studied in depth as a characteristic of effective school leaders. The data collected showed that Peace Corps service developed a sense of optimism in selected future school leaders. Seligman (1998) found that optimism is as important a factor in achievement as talent or motivation and that optimism plays a significant role in students’ success and learning. I have seen this in my own experience. Students who fail a test are
much more responsive to encouragement than they are to embarrassment. Students respond positively to a teacher or administrator who sets a tone for achievement.

Therefore, the case can be made that RPCV school leaders are prepared to lead and able to make significant progress toward improvements in teaching and learning due to the optimism they develop during the Peace Corps experience. Table 7 shows direct quotes by each participant regarding optimism.

Table 7

Optimism Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floyd</td>
<td>“I think that I left [Peace Corps] with a much greater sense of hope about myself, about life in general, and the world itself.” “Something I learned from Peace Corps was that I can’t do this but I can do this... that’s what I see in school leaders that are really successful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>“John Kennedy said that there are positive things we can do and we [people who joined the Peace Corps] were attracted to that value.” “And having this experience [Peace Corps] gives you the credibility and the passion and the understanding and the certainty and the optimism that it will get better.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>“That optimism certainly didn’t fade it was strengthened in many respects [during Peace Corps service] because I had experiences when I realized even the obstacles in my path I could still do good work and I could still have an impact on both my students and colleagues.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>“That’s really what it [the Peace Corps experience] gave me was an optimism about what the world really is about. It’s about everyday people that our kids could grow up to have relationships or friendships [with] if they had a chance to travel they would see the world differently than they would get from a history class.”</td>
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</table>
“The optimism that I have about people because of that experience [the Peace Corps] drives how the nature of the learning of an international studies program is and what a global program should be about.”

Ray stated that optimism is “critical, and I’m really glad that you’re focusing on that” and harkened back to the idealism of President John Kennedy when he established the Peace Corps. He stated, “John Kennedy said that there are positive things we can do and we [people who joined the Peace Corps] were attracted to that value.” Therefore, he thought that the Peace Corps may have attracted people with a certain optimistic point of view. “I think Peace Corps attracts people with a hope or a view that some of us can make a difference.” However, Ray thinks that Peace Corps service increases that optimism even more. He noted that there were hardships while serving in a Southeast Asian country during the time of the Vietnam War. There were some “scary and tough times” because there was some “fighting going on in our area,” but volunteers begin to build the idea that things will get better, even if it takes time. “Progress will come,” he said, “and having this experience [Peace Corps] gives you the credibility and the passion and the understanding and the certainty and the optimism that it will get better.”

Floyd also believes in the power of optimism and that they gained a better sense of optimism through Peace Corps service. “I went into the Peace Corps even though I was an idealist and I think that I left with a much greater sense of hope about myself, about life in general, and the world itself,” he said. Being a school leader who has worked and mentored principals, Floyd sees optimism as an essential characteristic for successful school leaders. “Something I learned from Peace Corps,” he said, “was that I
can’t do this but I can do this. . . . That’s what I see in school leaders that are really successful.” When I asked Floyd to elaborate, he said that, of the principals whom he supervises, the successful ones are those who have a clear sense of purpose and maintain a disciplined focus on their organization’s mission and goals. They have the ability to shield themselves and their staff from the distractions of a minor crisis or fad and know not to take on too many projects that end up sacrificing quality.

Anthony stated:

Early on in my life, for whatever reasons, I had a pretty fundamentally optimistic view about things . . . and that optimism certainly didn’t fade; it was strengthened in many respects [during Peace Corps service] because I had experiences when I realized, even [with] the obstacles in my path, I could still do good work, and I could still have an impact on both my students and colleagues.

He explained that those obstacles to successful leadership were navigating culture and building trusting relationships with people. Therefore, as a school leader, he has spent considerable time in learning the particular culture of his schools and focusing on building positive relationships with his employees. Expressing what he thought is the importance of optimism, Anthony even went so far as to say, “If you’re going to be a school leader, you have to be optimistic. If you’re not optimistic, get out!”

Doug also felt as though his Peace Corps service developed in him more optimism in terms of how he saw the world and our relationships in it:

That’s really what it gave me was an optimism about what the world really is about. It’s about everyday people that our kids could grow up to have
relationships or friendships [with] if they had a chance to travel they would see the world differently than they would get from a history class.

That knowledge and optimism developed during service also helped Doug as he went on to develop international studies programs for the schools he worked at as a school leader. “The optimism that I have about people because of that experience [Peace Corps] drives how the nature of the learning of an international studies program is and what a global program should be about.”

Optimism, defined as the way someone looks at setbacks and victories (Seligman, 1990), was the third characteristic that I specifically asked about in this study. The results of prior research, discussed in Chapter Two, showed that optimism was an essential characteristic of a good leader (Gallo, 2012; James, 2013; Waters, 2012) and a characteristic of effective school leaders (Ciriello, 1998). Although two of the participants believed that they were fundamentally optimistic beforehand, we can conclude from the data collected that all believe that their Peace Corps service developed a greater degree of optimism, which has served them well in their career as a school leader.

In summary, all of the participants believe that their Peace Corps experience helped them to develop or further develop cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. Using direct quotes from the interviews, I show how each of the participants feel that they developed these leadership characteristics from their own specific experience. Previous findings also indicate that cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism are characteristics of successful school leaders. Therefore, these findings not only conclude
that these characteristics were developed or further developed in future school leaders during Peace Corps service, but they also add to the knowledge base of the importance and relevance of cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism as characteristics of successful school leaders. The next section focuses on how RPCVs use these characteristics in their positions as school leaders.

**Research Question #3**

How do these RPCVs use these characteristics as school leaders?

The last portion of the interview had the participants reflect on how they use these characteristics during their time as school leaders. As I did with Research Question #1, I did not prompt or lead the participants regarding their responses to this question. In this section, I used specific instances from the data collected from the participants to show how they thought they used these characteristics in their work as school leaders.

Floyd stated that he felt he developed optimism because “I think that I left [the Peace Corps] with a much greater sense of hope about myself, about life in general, and the world itself.” He also felt as though he developed optimism because “something I learned from Peace Corps was that I can’t do this but I can do this . . . that’s what I see in school leaders that are really successful.” This connects directly to Ciriello’s (1998) study, which found optimism to be a characteristic of effective school leaders. Using optimism in his role as a school leader, said Floyd, was very important. “I have to talk to them a lot about that [optimism] and what they can do.” Floyd is an ardent believer in optimism, even writing professionally on the topic himself. He sees it as one secret to
creating a positive work culture that ultimately has a powerful positive influence on school culture for both students and adults.

Another characteristic that Floyd discussed as being developed during his Peace Corps service was resiliency:

I don’t think I went into Peace Corps realizing it, but I just think that people in this tough situation develop that resiliency of spirit, and I certainly came out of this experience with a very different attitude about my capacity to control my attitude.

One specific time he was called upon to use this sense of resiliency was during a very difficult time, in which the district he was leading lost one of their principals right before the beginning of the school year. Everyone turned to him, as the superintendent of the district, during this time for guidance and direction after the principal’s unexpected death. Using that resiliency, Floyd had to push through and lead his district through finding a new principal and comforting a community that just suffered a huge loss. What made it even more difficult was that the principal had grown up in the district as a student, Floyd had known her as a teacher, and he had mentored her personally as she became a principal. He has attributed his Peace Corps experience to developing a sense of resiliency and ultimately helping him lead his district through this terrible loss.

Finally, Floyd sees himself using his cultural competency characteristics every day as superintendent. After serving in South America, he became fluent in Spanish and understands the inherent perceptions of power when speaking in a language that one participant may have been using as a second language. “I know how much it means to
them to give them the gift of speaking in their native language, especially when they have concerns or problems that they try and get resolved.” Additionally, he said, “When they have concerns or problems that they try and get resolved and it means a lot to them, I think, that I can speak Spanish.”

Ray also felt that he had developed a few of these characteristics during his Peace Corps service, including optimism. “Having this experience [Peace Corps] gives you the credibility and the passion and the understanding and the certainty and the optimism that it will get better.” He also shared a few examples of times in which he used these characteristics in his role of school leader. Ray told of a situation in 1980, when the school district suddenly had an influx of Southeast Asian refugee children who arrived unexpectedly. Suddenly, the schools had 365 non-English speaking kids, when, previously, there was practically none. Being just about the only teacher with ESL experience, Ray became the ESL Director. After about a year, the local newspaper visited the program, interviewed teachers and students, and published an extensive article on the ESL program.

As the ESL Director, Ray shared his belief that the community was responding effectively and supportively, and shared his hope and belief that the refugee students would become successful and contributing members of that community. Shortly after the article was published, which also included the larger community’s response to the refugees’ impact on the community, school board members were so positively affected by the work and potential of the program that financial and central administrative support
to the ESL program increased greatly. The optimism shown by Ray that the program was working and would continue to work helped build the ESL program in those early years.

Ray also gave an example of developing efficacy during his Peace Corps experience and using that later as a school leader. As a Peace Corps volunteer, Ray discussed the benefits of learning how to create lesson plans and collect the needed materials and delivering that lesson plan with confidence. That development of efficacy was used later as a school leader. Ray spoke of the skill or characteristic needed in school leaders when meeting with individual staff members or the entire faculty, i.e., the ability to teach or demonstrate to the faculty how to plan properly. “I credit Peace Corps with some real skill development and then the knowledge that it works,” said Ray.

After living in a foreign culture for two years, Anthony developed a sense of what immigrant students and parents face when dealing with American schools and has been better able to serve that group due to his experience in the Peace Corps. “The learning for me that has really stuck with me to this day is the importance of suspending judgment when going into [or coming into contact with] a new culture.” When asked specifically about how he used cultural competence as a school leader in a follow-up conversation via email on February 16, 2016, Anthony described it more as “cross-cultural agility.” This, he said, “better captures the need for a responsive, flexible approach to complicated situations. From my Peace Corps experience, I learned . . . [to] be more comfortable in ambiguous situations.” He continued:

As a school leader, when I've handled a situation poorly, more often than not it’s because I rushed to judgment and I interpreted a situation as more clear-cut than it
actually was. Even in a school that doesn't have a whole lot of cultural diversity, I find that being aware of cultural differences—or—socio-economic or ethnic differences—can allow me to be more responsive to different reactions from parents and children.

Therefore, Anthony still calls upon his Peace Corps service and the cultural competence, or “cross-cultural agility,” in his current work as a school leader.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) explored the importance of cultural competence. Their study concluded that cultural competence was an important characteristic for a school leader to possess. Anthony also stated that the Peace Corps experience “definitely solidified [my confidence], and it was an experience and gave me the confidence that I could use that same facility in lots of different situations and meeting faculties here in the United States.” Locke (1991) and McCormick (2001) stated that self-confidence is an essential trait of effective and successful leaders. When asked what that meant and how he uses that in his leadership role, Anthony stated that this confidence or efficacy gives him the ability to allow discussions within the faculty on issues of concern to the school and to use those discussions and differing insights to build consensus and solutions to issues or problems.

Anthony also acknowledged that his Peace Corps experience helped him to develop a sense of credibility with some of the teachers whom he supervised. While working as a leader in a school with a very successful ESL program that attracted students from around the world, Anthony was able to connect with teachers who needed some extra help integrating non-native speaking students into the classroom. He felt that
his experience teaching in another country during his Peace Corps experience had given him the experience of working and integrating students from various backgrounds into the classroom. He also was able to help teachers without that experience integrate their foreign students into classrooms.

Doug also discussed using these characteristics developed during Peace Corps service in his work as a school leader. Cultural competence has given him the “ability to communicate across many cultures, ethnicities, and personalities” and “is of absolute necessity to accomplish anything.” He further stated, “In program and school development, where voice of these constituencies is essential for their buy-in, the ability to listen and absorb different perspectives and weigh them with my own has been integral to the work I have done and do.” Knowing how important cultural competence is to the success of a teacher, Doug has implemented cultural competence training for staff members in the schools and international programs that he has founded.

In addition, Doug discussed efficacy, resiliency, and patience in his post-Peace Corps work:

My PC [Peace Corps] experience certainly was fundamental in my vision, ability to structure and implement my vision, and my resiliency for perseverance in continuing to move towards my vision for developing pre-collegiate international studies schools. The PC experience provided both the personal skills as well as the passion for the content of my work back in [the United States] after Peace Corps.
Doug spoke specifically about being efficacious and resilient with his vision in building an international studies program. He has used those characteristics in his executive coaching with teachers and leaders and instilling in them a sense and appreciation of the students in the international studies program.

In addition to using these skills built during Peace Corps service in their current work as school leaders, Ray and Floyd believe that their Peace Corps service directly helped them acquire leadership positions. Ray stated, “My Peace Corps experience in Northern Thailand gave me the language and cultural understanding that served me and my community well in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the influx of South East Asian refugees.” He went on to say that his:

language ability and cultural understanding, along with the ESL training I had received in the Peace Corps, propelled me from being a special education resource room teacher into the lead ESL teacher of the refugee children and later to ESL Director for the entire school district.

This led to his being appointed by the Superintendent of Public Instruction in his state to conduct cultural and ESL methodology seminars to school districts throughout the state. This was instrumental to his becoming a school leader, as Ray believes these experiences were “instrumental in my appointment as an elementary school principal for the district.”

Floyd remembers speaking with the superintendent who hired him for his first principal position. He pointed out that he had just served in a teacher residency program where he mentored teachers and felt that experience was valuable in preparing him for a principal position. The superintendent responded that being in that residency mentoring
program did not factor into the decision to hire him. He explained, “The reason why I hired you is because you had been in the Peace Corps.” Therefore, not only was the Peace Corps experience beneficial for building the necessary school leadership characteristics, it was also directly responsible for Ray and Floyd’s being hired for specific leadership jobs.

**Summary**

Prior research has shown that cultural competence, efficacy, optimism, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships are important characteristics of successful school leaders. This study concluded that RPCVs who currently serve or served as school leaders did, in fact, believe that they developed or further developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism during their Peace Corps service. The development of these characteristics has, in turn, benefitted their work as school leaders. They also believe that they developed or further developed credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships during the Peace Corps experience, which have also contributed to their effective school leader practice. In addition, the participants in this study believe that they use these characteristics in their work as school leaders. They reported using cultural competence when interacting with parents and students, optimism in their beliefs that students can achieve at a high level, efficacy in knowing how to handle difficult situations, and resiliency with facing difficult situations. Consequently, this study further concluded that the participants’ leadership effectiveness has been enhanced due to the development or further development of these characteristics during their Peace Corps service. This conclusion is grounded in the activities, experiences, and strategies used in
their schools. Chapter Five now follows with an in-depth discussion of these findings and conclusions that can be drawn from these findings.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

This study was conceived and conducted out of my own curiosity. As I reflected on my own experience as a Peace Corps volunteer and my work as a school leader, I wanted to explore whether Peace Corps service affected RPCVs’ leadership practice in schools by examining RPCVs’ beliefs and reflections on their service. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how Peace Corps service affects RPCVs’ leadership practice in schools and to determine whether these school leaders developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism while serving in the Peace Corps. Blending prior research with the findings of this study, I focus in this chapter on the perceptions of the participants of the importance of the Peace Corps experience in their lives in developing these leadership characteristics. A brief summary of the findings is followed by the conclusions made from each of the research questions. The final part of this chapter presents an examination of the implications of the study on various stakeholder groups, the limitations of this study, and future research suggestions.

Summary of Findings

The review of the literature provided in Chapter Two of this study indicated that school leadership plays a vital role in student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Therefore, if the Peace Corps experience did have an effect on the development of school
leadership characteristics, this study could provide a strategy on how those leadership characteristics could be developed in potential school leaders. The data that emerged from the semi-structured interviews and presented in the previous chapter indicated that the Peace Corps did, in fact, develop or further develop school leadership characteristics in the four participants of this study, specifically, cultural competence, efficacy, optimism, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships.

**Research Question #1.** What leadership characteristics do RPCVs believe were developed during their Peace Corps service that contributed to their effectiveness as school leaders?

According to the data collected, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships were leadership characteristics developed or further developed by the participants during their Peace Corps experience. Prior research supports these characteristics as important for leaders to possess (Bandura, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Lewin & Regine, 2000). Therefore, we can conclude that Peace Corps service develops or further develops the important leadership characteristics of credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships.

**Research Question #2.** In what ways do RPCVs believe cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were developed during Peace Corps service?

These specific characteristics were foregrounded for a variety of reasons. First, I assumed that each RPCV, no matter in which sector he or she served, developed some degree of cultural competence. Therefore, knowing the diverse communities that school leaders now serve, I wanted to confirm this. Secondly, efficacy or leader efficacy was a
characteristic that appeared in much of the literature regarding effective school leaders. Therefore, I wanted to examine this to determine whether the Peace Corps experience helped to develop it. Lastly, optimism was a characteristic that I happened upon during the examination of effective school leadership characteristics that I wanted to learn more about, so I decided to examine this characteristic as part of this study.

According to the data, cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism were leadership characteristics developed or further developed during the Peace Corps experience. All of the participants gave specific examples of how they developed or further developed each of these characteristics, which was reported in Chapter Four. Prior research, discussed in Chapter Two, also showed the importance of these specific characteristics. Cultural competence is important when working with culturally diverse populations and supporting student learning (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), efficacy is an important characteristic for effective leadership (Chemers et al., 2000; McCormick, 2001), and optimism is an important characteristic when working with disadvantaged students (Theoharis, 2010). Participant responses also support the notion that cultural competence is not just a singular instance that you can relate to one specific culture or group, but, rather, a mindset that can be applied to many cultural interactions. Said another way, if you learn cultural competence because you spent time in South America, you can most likely apply those skills in relating to a cultural group from somewhere else. Therefore, this study concludes that the Peace Corps experience develops and further develops the important leadership characteristics of cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism.
**Research Question #3.** How do these RPCVs use these characteristics as school leaders?

According to the data, this study also concludes that the Peace Corps experience develops lifelong, positive characteristics in its volunteers. The data show that the participants in this study use cultural competence, efficacy, optimism, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships in their current jobs as school leaders. Prior research, discussed in the previous chapters, have shown these characteristics to have a positive impact on student learning. This is meaningful because it shows that the Peace Corps develops some concrete, positive characteristics that RPCVs are still using in their current jobs, sometimes decades after their Peace Corps service.

**Implications**

Due to the fact that RPCVs develop or further develop these characteristics during their Peace Corps service, there are multiple implications to consider. The results of this study indicate that there are implications for RPCV school leaders, for schools and school districts, and for the Peace Corps. These implications are discussed below.

**Implications for RPCV School Leaders.** The data show that RPCV school leaders develop or further develop cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism during their Peace Corps service. Each participant had multiple examples from his experience in which he developed these characteristics. In addition to these, the four RPCV participants separately mentioned other characteristics believed to have been acquired through service, such as credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships. Therefore, one powerful implication that is derived from the findings of this study is that
RPCVs who enter school leadership are likely to have a high degree of cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism and are likely to have developed a high degree of at least one of the characteristics of credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships.

**Implications for Schools and School Districts.** According to the data collected in this study, the Peace Corps experience develops or further develops certain school leadership characteristics in volunteers. These characteristics include cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism. Credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships were mentioned by at least two of the participants as well. The Peace Corps experience has been found to provide numerous opportunities for developing these characteristics of effective school leaders. Therefore, a second powerful implication that is derived from the findings of this study is that schools or school districts that are searching for effective leaders are likely to find effective leaders among RPCVs due to the characteristics that they have developed or further developed as a result of their Peace Corps service.

**Implications for the United States Peace Corps.** The results of this study also have implications for the Peace Corps. Data collected show that volunteers who serve in the education sector and go on to attain leadership positions later in their careers in the United States are likely to have developed certain characteristics of effective leaders. Therefore, another powerful implication of this study is that RPCVs who enter into school leadership positions after serving two years in the Peace Corps have developed or further developed certain characteristics of effective school leaders. The agency could
use these findings to demonstrate to potential recruits the benefits of serving, which could potentially result in an increase of candidates who are seeking to develop or further develop leadership characteristics to use in their future careers as school leaders.

**Limitations**

Despite what the findings add to the literature on effective school leadership characteristics, the United States Peace Corps, and preparing effective school leaders, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. First, due to a nonexistent travel budget and lack of time, I was not able to travel to meet and observe these participants in their roles as school leaders. Although each participant reported feeling that they were effective school leaders (personal communications, April 15, 2015–August 11, 2015), I would like to have observed that and recorded data and specific examples. Additional interviews could have been conducted with staff members of the schools or districts that they lead, and data from those interviews could have been analyzed to gauge the effectiveness of the participants’ leadership. Additionally, observational data could be included in which I observe the leader in action and correlate that data with previous research as to the actions of effective leaders. Therefore, specific data that explain the effectiveness of these school leaders are one limitation.

The fact that I suspended my search for participants during 2013 could have influenced the number of participants in this study. If I would have continued the search for participants and followed up on a few more leads, one or two additional participants may have been able to participate in the study. This may have resulted in additional participants, which would have made for a larger sample size. Finally, I was unable to
locate any female RPCVs who have entered school leadership and fit the criteria for this study. That does not mean that none exists; it simply means that I was unable to find any through the process of finding participants described earlier. I believe that female RPCVs who have completed Peace Corps service and entered into school leadership have a different perspective and additional views that I was unable to include, which would add an additional viewpoint to these findings that are lacking. Future research on this topic should include data collected from additional leaders, including female leaders.

**Future Research**

Perceptions and information gained from this study led to a greater understanding of the leadership characteristics developed and further developed by selected volunteers during their Peace Corps service and led to the conclusion that RPCVs develop or further develop such leadership characteristics as cultural competence, efficacy, optimism, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships. As a result, there are various implications of these findings that were discussed previously.

Future research on this topic should include observational data regarding effective school leaders. As mentioned in the Limitations section, a nonexistent travel budget did not allow me to visit and observe these leaders in action in their current schools. Observations would allow me to add another element to the data. Another future area of research informed by the results of this study include an exploration of the effect of Peace Corps service on teachers. This would be an extension of a previous research project that I completed for a qualitative methods course, for which I would examine teachers instead of school leaders. Do RPCV teachers enter the classroom with the same characteristics,
and if so, are cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism characteristics of effective teachers? A comparison then could be made between the characteristics that current or former teachers believe were developed or further developed during service with the characteristics that current or former school leaders said were developed or further developed, as discussed in my study.

I am also interested to know the short-term and long-term effect on the schools and communities in which the Peace Corps education sector volunteers serve. Are the education programs in these communities improved after hosting a Peace Corps volunteer? Are there additional resources and pedagogies that are adopted by the host country that improve the educational standards of the communities? If so, how is this measured? Further, although optimism has been studied as an essential characteristic of a good leader (Gallo, 2012; James, 2013; Waters, 2012), it has not been studied in depth as a characteristic of effective school leaders. As this study discovered that optimism was not only developed or further developed during Peace Corps service, but also is considered an essential characteristic of effective school leadership by school leaders, further research regarding optimism as an essential characteristic for school leaders is suggested as well.

These characteristics, shown here to be characteristics of effective school leaders, could be studied as they relate to volunteers in other sectors, such as business, the environment, and others. The results of that study could indicate whether the Peace Corps develops or further develops these characteristics in just the education sector, or this experience, no matter which sector a volunteer serves in, is instrumental in
developing these characteristics in a broader sense. This is important in understanding the possible benefits of Peace Corps service.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation research was to understand how Peace Corps service affects RPCVs’ leadership practice in schools and to determine whether these school leaders developed cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism while serving in the Peace Corps. The research was a single case study of the experiences of four RPCVs and how they believe their experience influenced their current school leadership practices. Using elements of Yin’s (2002) description of inquiry in which the researcher tries to explain the “how” or “why” of an experience and Stake’s (1995) element of flexible design, I found that current and former school leaders who served in the Peace Corps did develop or did further develop cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism while serving in the Peace Corps. In addition, they reported that they developed or further developed other characteristics of effective school leaders, namely, credibility, resiliency, and the ability to build relationships.

This dissertation research has contributed to the literature on cultural competence, efficacy, and optimism, specifically, how or when those characteristics are developed or further developed. The study also adds to the dearth of research on the Peace Corps and, specifically, to the effects that Peace Corps service has on those who complete two years of service. In conclusion, this research can be used to show the positive effects of Peace Corps service on education volunteers who return to the United States and matriculate.
into school leadership positions and their positive effects on the communities in which they serve.
Appendix A
DATE: February 20, 2015

TO: Bev Shaklee, PhD
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [713857-1] Peace Corps Service and the Development of Quality School Leaders

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: February 20, 2015

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA) has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be submitted to the ORIA prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Lorna Richards at (703) 993-4121 or lricha22@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.
Informed Consent

Peace Corps Service and the Development of Quality School Leaders

Informed Consent Form

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research is being conducted to explore whether Peace Corps service promotes cultural competency, leader efficacy, and optimism in school leaders. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be first asked to complete a narrative that asks about your Peace Corps experience. The narrative will be sent via email and should take approximately thirty minutes to complete. You will also be asked to participate in an interview for approximately one hour. This will either be in-person or over the phone, depending on your geographic location. The interview will be audio recorded. You will also be asked to remain available for a second interview (in-person or over the phone) to follow up with additional questions to verify information or meanings of answers.

RISKS
There is no foreseeable risk for participating in this research.

BENEFITS
If you agree to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefits to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY
All notes and recordings of the interviews must be kept for five years, during which they will be in sole possession of the researcher, John Bordenkoscher, at all times. At the conclusion of five years, this information will be destroyed. Interviewees will not be asked to identify themselves at any time during the interview. Data will be coded according to categories that develop through analysis of the data. The researcher, John Bordenkoscher, will be in sole possession of the coding key as well. You will not be identified in any reports or publications resulting from this study.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. The inclusion criteria will be that all participants have had to serve two years as a Peace Corps volunteer and currently or formerly have served as a PKeC 12 school leader.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted by John Bordenkoscher, from the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. He can be reached at 703-993-3849 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact his advisor, Dr. Ben Shakeslee, from the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University at 703-993-2388. Additionally, you may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT
I HAVE READ THIS FORM, ALL OF MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED BY THE RESEARCH STAFF, AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE. I AGREE TO BE AUDIO-TAPED.

Signature                                      Date

IRB: For Official Use Only

George Mason University
Office of Research Integrity & Assurance

Project Number: 713857-1

Page 1 of 1

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Peace Corps Service and the Development of Quality School Leaders

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Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party. The exclusion criteria will be that all participants will have had to serve two years as a Peace Corps volunteer and currently or formerly have served as a PreK-12 school leader.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted by John Bordenkecher, from the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. He can be reached at 703-965-5849 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact his advisor, Dr. Bev Shaklee, from the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University at 703-993-2388. Additionally, you may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT
I HAVE READ THIS FORM, ALL OF MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED BY THE RESEARCH STAFF, AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE. I AGREE TO BE AUDIO-TAPED.

______________________________  ________________
Signature                                Date
Appendix B

Peace Corps Narrative

Research Narrative

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. Please answer the following questions about your Peace Corps service and your current position. You can either insert your responses on this sheet or respond in an email.

Name: 
Age during service: 

Country of service: 
Years of service: 

Peace Corps job title and brief description: 

PK-12 U.S. school leadership position(s) you have held: (title, years, and brief description)

In no more than half a page, please describe your Peace Corps experience and your general thoughts on your Peace Corps experience.
Appendix C

School Leader Interview Guide

1. How long have you been in the education profession? How long have you served as an administrator? Do you enjoy it? Why or why not?

2. How long have you been an administrator in this school? Were you an administrator someplace else?

3. Describe the diversity of your school? What is the percentage of White/Black/Hispanic/Asian/other students?

4. Do you attribute any challenges or benefits in your school to the diversity of your school?

5. How do you feel your school would be if it were more/less diverse?

6. (I will have reviewed their Peace Corps narrative). I noticed that you said ________ in your Peace Corps narrative. Talk about that a little bit more.

7. How do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop cultural competency?

8. How do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop leader efficacy?

9. How do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop optimism?

10. Do you feel your Peace Corps experience helped you to develop any other skills that you use as a school leader?
11. As a school leader, how has the Peace Corps experience led you to be interested and competent in dealing with cultural diversity?

12. As a school leader, how has the Peace Corps experience helped you develop confidence as a school leader?

13. As a school leader, how has the Peace Corps experience helped you develop optimistic goal setting and being optimistic in regards to students’ high expectations and achieving high standards?
References


Biography

John Bordenkecher, a native of Indianapolis, Indiana, graduated from Wabash College in 1996 with a Bachelor of Arts in History and Education. After teaching at his former school, John entered the Peace Corps and served as an English teacher in Bulgaria from 1998 to 2000. He went on to earn his Master of Arts in the International Teaching and Education Program from American University in 2006. During his over 20-year career in education, John has worked in private, international, charter, and public schools in Indiana, Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia, Honduras, the District of Columbia, and Virginia in a variety of capacities. He completed his Doctor of Philosophy from George Mason University in 2017.