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ABSTRACT

This study of three female preservice teachers who took part in a practicum teaching experience in Mexico focused on what the students learned, how they met the challenges of the experience, and how the experience affected their personal and professional lives later. This qualitative study used interviews with each student and observation field notes to investigate the relationships of the preservice teachers with their elementary school students and the Mexican cooperating teachers. Key changes in students' views were identified. The students learned what it means to function in a new culture without language fluency and without familiarity with the standards for behavior. Students also gained significant insight into their own prejudices related to Mexico and Mexican people, and they gained empathy for those who have to function in a new culture. Students left the program thinking that they would use the new insights as they developed ideas for teaching and for advocating for Hispanic children in their classes. Students' comments revealed some profound growth in self-awareness about their own vulnerabilities. Most important to their future as teachers was their discovery that Mexican children were bright, capable, and working at grade level in spite of very limited school, family, and financial circumstances. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

These Kids Are So Bright!
Pre-service Teachers' Insights and Discoveries during a Three-Week Student Teaching Practicum in Mexico

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> *The thing is, knowing that I most likely will never see these children again. I can only hope that this trip had even half the impact on them as it did on me. These students have no idea that they will most likely continue to influence my thinking for the remainder of my career. – Lora*

Introduction

In this time of "leave no child behind" rhetoric, many immigrant children *are* left behind and often because of teachers' lack of knowledge, experience, and empathy with children from diverse cultures. Christine Sleeter notes in her extensive research review of multicultural education efforts, that the

> *... cultural gap between children in the schools and the teachers is large and growing... Thirty nine percent of teachers had students with limited English proficiency in their classrooms, but only one quarter of those teachers had received training for working with them. (Sleeter, 2001, p. 94).*

No one is more aware of this gap than those of us who teach in pre-service education programs. Despite our ever-increasing efforts to provide a multicultural perspective in all of our courses *and* a variety of sensitizing activities in our programs, many pre-service teachers remain completely inexperienced in authentic, personal connections with groups outside their own milieu.

In 1998, Pacific University's School of Education and the World Languages department collaborated to create a "Teach in Mexico" practicum for pre-service teachers in the College of Education's undergraduate and graduate programs. Since 2000, with support from a Hewlett Grant, the program has taken a small group of students each spring to a village in central Mexico to participate in classrooms in rural public schools. In addition, the students take part in a number of community activities. The goal of the program is to help future teachers "...understand the transition which Mexican children must make when they enter the public school system here (Cabello & McClain, 1998)."

This is a study of three young, female pre-service teachers who took part in the practicum in the Spring of 2002. My goal was to discover what the students learned and how they met the teaching and personal challenges, and to examine how the experience impacted their personal and professional lives when they returned. In this paper I will describe the trip, the participants, and key events and activities the group engaged in. Relevant work, theoretical and practical, that defines the behavior and abstract qualities of culturally sensitive teachers is reviewed and other cross-cultural programs that have been conducted with pre-service teachers are briefly presented. To place the study in the context of the Hispanic community, I include basic information on the demographics of Hispanics in America and how Hispanic students fare in our educational system. Further, I will present an analysis of the impact the trip had on these young women's views of Mexican children, Mexican people and their lives, and their own assumptions about the culturally diverse children they could well be teaching in the future.

Conceptual Framework

Miles & Huberman (1984), define a conceptual framework as the element that "explains the main dimensions to be studied" (p. 28). They also stress that these frameworks function as "focusing and bounding devices" that are flexible and can make room for new information and new paradigms as data is

collected, patterns appear, and ideas take shape. Ultimately they are "...simply the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated" (p. 32-33).

There are several leaders whose work on cultural learning and conditioning contributes to the theoretical foundation for this study including Edward T. Hall (1981), James Banks (1988), C.A. Bowers (1987; 1990), Gary Howard (1996), and Ward Goodenough (1981). From these authors and many others, definitions of culture abound and can present a researcher with a cacophony of competing proposals. For my purposes, Ward H. Goodenough's concise view of culture found in his little book *Culture, Language, and Society* provides an efficient and instructive foundation. He defines culture as

> ...standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it." (1981, p. 62)

He elaborates on this definition to explain that the standards provide the foundation for the "forms, propositions, beliefs, values, rules and public values, recipes, routines and customs, systems of customs, meanings and functions" that contribute to our cultural environment. These are the "categories of phenomena" that, with their distinctive features "allow us to distinguish our experiences from others" (p. 65). We all went to Mexico with our own set of cultural "categories of phenomena" and met another system of categories and standards. This study looks at how three individuals responded to their meeting with cultural different standards and categories in a teaching situation.

Literature review

Mexican Education in America

The 2000 census brought home the fact that the Mexican population in this country is a reality that must be recognized. It has been three years since that census counted 32.8 million Hispanics in the U.S. This figure represents twelve percent of the total U.S. population. Of these 32.8 million 66.1 percent are of Mexican descent. The census further revealed that in comparison to Whites, Mexicans were more likely to settle in the West, live in households with the largest families, and have the highest proportion of its population under the age of eighteen (Therrien, 2001). These statistics point to the fact that our area (the western U.S.) has a significant population of Mexican students and that number is going to grow.

Educationally, Mexicans fare worse than Whites and all other Hispanic groups with only 51% graduating from high school and only 6.9% attaining a bachelor's degree. Mexicans are the most likely to be working as laborers and least likely to work in managerial or professional positions (11.9%), they earn less money on average than any other group and they are most likely group to live below the poverty level (Therrien, 2001). There is clearly a need for our educational system to improve its service to this group of students.

In *The Schooling of Latino Children* (in Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002), Luís Moll and Richard Ruiz write about the critical role education has in influencing the future of Latinos in the U.S. and the detrimental effects of long practices that have made up "subtractive schooling" for Latina(o) students: the taking away of their "primary resources" - their language and culture. Moll and Ruiz describe such practice as a "major feature of education of poor and working class Latino students all over this country" and attribute them to past policies of segregation, forbidding Spanish to be spoken in school, and other coercive assimilation practices. They also point out that opposition to bilingual education is a continuance of such discriminatory, subtractive practice. Consequences of these practices for Mexicans include a devaluation of their own knowledge and self-worth, negative influences on children's attitudes toward schooling, the creation of a distance between children and schools, and the belief that others hold the important expertise while their own language and knowledge are inadequate (p. 264).

Jones and Fuller (2003), in *Teachng Hispanic Children* explore the crucial nature of the teachers' relationships to Mexican students. They describe these relationships as "key to improving the education of Hispanic students" (p. 4) Their interviews with Mexican students in the West and Southwest confirm that

the "climate and teachers' caring have a great effect on what *happens to* Hispanics in the classrooms as well as what student *do* in classrooms" (p. 13). They claim that a nurturing environment is :

> *... absolutely critical to the success of most Mexican American students. The impersonal, competitive environments of many schools, particularly secondary schools, appear to be fostering alienation, anger, even violence, or if not fostering, certainly not providing the emotional support many children need to survive. (p. 13)*

These authors point out that teachers who work with these children need to be aware of special characteristics of Hispanic culture that can be addressed within the context of the classroom if teachers take the time to educate themselves about the culture and circumstances of their students. Among other things, teachers need understandings of the "cultural variability" of any minority group and the degree to which an individual child is assimilated into the dominant culture; the nature of poverty and how it may influence a child's performance in a class with students who are of a higher socio-economic status; the transitory existence of migrant children and how it contributes to their alienation in classrooms and schools; the central role of the family, including how age and gender roles effect status in Hispanic communities; the ways Hispanics use personal space (physically closer that most White Americans are comfortable with); differing ways of expressing emotion and affection (they tend to show emotion more quickly and expressively); and how an emphasis on individual competition may clash with values that center on community and cooperation (Jones & Fuller, 2003).

Following these guidelines, a learning environment that is culturally comfortable for Hispanic students is one that offers a strong sense of community, an emphasis on cooperation, and appropriate physical and verbal demonstrations of affection and encouragement. Beyond simply having their differences accepted, these students need explicit acknowledgement and praise for cultural characteristics – they need to *see themselves* in the classroom, in texts and other curriculum materials. And finally, teachers' must clearly and consistently demonstrate a belief system that allows that these children are *competent, intelligent, and valued.*

Yet, when Toni Griego Jones asked students in foundation education courses to describe Hispanics, their responses exposed strong, predominantly negative stereotypes. The list of adjectives most often applied Hispanics were (in descending frequency) poor, lazy, uneducated, hard working, illegal, stupid, family oriented, involved in gangs, beautiful artists, drunk, trouble makers, moochers, religious, drug dealers, irresponsible, and hot tempered (p.23).

Other research reported by Jones and Fuller, shows that pre-service teachers tend to be afraid to teach in schools with high Hispanic populations. Two reasons for this fear predominate: One, anxiety over not being able to speak Spanish; and two, Hispanics seem foreign to them even though there are probably more Hispanic students in the schools than any other minority population. Jones and Fuller attribute this perception to the fact that while there are more Hispanics in the schools, they tend to also be the most segregated. They often attend schools where there are few other minorities and since they usually compose a large segment of the school's student body they stay in their own subgroup. Another common misconception of many pre-service teachers was that the majority of Hispanics are new to the U.S. when actually the opposite is true; the majority were born here.

Because teacher expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Brophy, 1997; Garcia, 2001; Hollins, 1996; Jones & Fuller, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a) the findings noted above do not present a hopeful picture for Mexican children. Not only do the teachers who assume that these children are of lower abilities hold lower expectations for them, those teachers' biases "*become* the students' self perceptions"(Jones & Fuller, 2003) further perpetuating a downward spiral that is contributing to a permanent underclass of citizens. Change in these perceptions should be the goal of every teacher education institution. Designing curricula, immersion experiences, and methods that effectively require pre-service teachers to confront their own biases and to truly see *into* another culture is paramount to preparing teachers who will honestly and effectively create equitable learning environments for all children.

Creating Culturally Responsive Teachers

The attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and sensitivities of teachers toward their students is key to creating a learning environment that either promotes or deters equity, fairness, and congruence for all the students in a classroom. What, then, is a culturally responsive or culturally sensitive teacher? How is cultural sensitivity manifested in the behavior of a teacher? For two views on ways to identify and classify attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors that typify teaches who are genuinely culturally responsive, I turn to Etta R. Hollins (1996), author of *Culture in School Learning: Revealing Deep Meaning,* Villegas and Lucas (2002a) who wrote *Educating Culturally Responsive Teachers: A Coherent Approach.* Each of these authors offer provocative and thoughtful premises for thinking about how teachers' worldviews can be understood with regard to their roles as facilitators of children's learning in a multicultural world.

Etta R. Hollins (1996) suggests that culturally sensitive teachers recognize the centrality of culture in schooling. They understand that they themselves are directed by "invisible scripts" that continually entice them to see the world as an "extension of self," one that pushes them to pressure students to conform to their own system of values and norms. She admonishes teachers to resist the constant tendency to see the world through one lens. Writing for pre-service teachers, Hollins counsels them about the importance of being able to understand this deep connection between culture and learning in schools:

> *The extent to which your teaching behavior will become an extension of your own culture exclusively or will incorporate the cultures of the students you teach may be influenced by your perceptions of the relationship between culture and school practices, political beliefs and conceptualization of school learning. (p. 2)*

The perspectives held by teachers will determine the curriculum content, instructional approaches, and social contexts they will create and apply to their teaching. The typology she has created defines teachers' views according to their definitions of culture, their political beliefs, and their conceptualization of school learning. Any effort to pin down an abstract concept, such as this typology attempts to do, must be, to some extent, contrived and artificial. I look at this as a continuum and find it a useful standard against which to assess an individual's movement toward becoming culturally responsive.

A Type I view of culture is limited to the artifacts and behavior of a group; its dress, rituals, food, arts, and so on. Politically, Type I supports the status quo and a national curriculum, wants to preserve Western traditions, and opposes bilingual education, multiculturalism, and affirmative action. A Type I view assigns responsibility for failure on the learner rather than on the nature of the instruction, regardless of considerations of conditions of environmental deprivation or learning disabilities. Differentiated approaches to instruction are limited to remediation rather than developing different strategies to meet a different cultural learning style.

Type II is more inclusive taking in the "the ever changing values, traditions, social and political relationships and world view shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographical location, language, social class, and/or region." (p. 7). Type II embraces a multicultural perspective, social reconstruction, egalitarianism and pluralism and supports curriculum reform and education for social justice. Cultural differences in learning are accepted by Type II, but not completely. However, someone with this perspective is open to using different approaches, encourages collaboration among students and welcomes student input (p. 7).

For Type III culture goes beyond even values and traditions to see a more "abstract, flexible and encompassing" reality that reflects the central function in human existence affecting an individual's or a group's intellect and affect. Type III views the school as the vehicle for providing students with the tools and cultural values for active social participation. Dewey's proposition that schools should extend a child's home learning and make connections between cultural and ethnic background and school is consistent with a type III view (p. 8).

How curriculum is developed and instruction is designed will also depend upon the perspective of the teacher. Type I teachers will design curriculum that promotes a "common heritage" and brings in the contributions of minorities as if they exist on the sidelines of the larger society. Instructional practices focus on preparing students to fit into the

dominant norms and there may be little awareness of the cultural knowledge ethnic students carry to school. Remedial work rather than challenging culturally appropriate curriculum will be planned for second language learners.

Teachers with a Type II perspective are more likely to want to respond to cultural diversity and will try to fit instruction to students' specific cultural needs. Curriculum designed by type II teachers may be shaped to help students understand injustices that exist to prepare them to live in a diverse world.

Type III teachers engage in a critical analysis of their students' backgrounds and build a curriculum and instruction around their particular needs. They view the cultural knowledge, values, language, behaviors and views as a valid foundation for developing curriculum. Students are encouraged to collaborate and learn from each other (Hollins, 1996).

Another framework, developed by Villegas and Lucas (2002a; 2002b), identifies six characteristics that culturally responsive teachers portray. According to this proposal culturally responsive teachers are socioculturally conscious, they have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, they see themselves as capable of bringing about change, they know about the lives of their students, they understand that learners construct knowledge and they use what they know about students to design instruction that fits them.

To be socioculturally conscious teachers must recognize that as organized currently, schools subversively reinforce social inequality; they must be able to comprehend the stratification of race and ethnicity that exits. Sometimes it may involve a questioning of the reasons for their own success. Without this awareness, Villegas and Lucas say, teachers won't understand students with different backgrounds. The authors suggest that one important factor in developing sociocultural consciousness is through contact with people of different races and ethnicities.

Teachers' attitudes toward students "significantly shape the expectations they hold for student learning, their treatment of students, and what students ultimately learn" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a, p. 37). If teachers lack faith that students are capable they will lower expectations and will treat them in ways that thwart their potential. Teachers who view students through an "affirming lens" on the other hand support a variety of ways of thinking, talking, behaving, and learning.

Cross cultural pre-service studies

There have been a number of other studies that have looked at pre-service teachers in immersion programs including: Stachowski's and Mahan's (1988) study of cultural immersion projects for student teachers on Navajo Reservations and in schools in the British Isles, Australia and New Zealand; McKay and Janey's (1995), research on international student teaching in Department of Defense Schools; and Black and Cutler's (1997) program in which pre-service teachers live with Mexican families and student teach in Mexican schools. All these projects have shown an international experience to be beneficial in giving participants a more global view, increased empathy for other cultures, and an opportunity to examine their own cultural biases.

Most similar to this study, is Black and Cutler's research in Utah (Black and Cutler, 1997). In a sister city program, pre-service teachers from Brigham Young University went to schools in Mexico to live with Mexican families to student teach in Mexican schools. Researchers found that the pre-service teachers confronted language barriers, authoritarian teaching methods, and a severe lack of resources. They also learned that the participants gained empathy for those who find themselves in a new culture, abolished some stereotypes they had about Mexican people, broadened their "cultural vision," and became much more resourceful and flexible. These pre-service teachers were in Mexico for an extended period and over time came to see value in many aspects of Mexican methodologies that at first they rejected.

Research questions

As stated in the introduction, the goal of the study was to follow three pre-service teachers through their experiences teaching and interacting with Mexican educators and students during a three-week practicum.

The research focused on the following questions:
- What do students learn about the intricacies of cultural competence as it applies to themselves and to students they will teach?
- What impact does an immersion experience in a rural Mexican environment have on preservice teachers as they prepare to work with diverse students and families in their classrooms?
- How does this experience influence their thinking about Mexican people and immigrants in general?

Methodology

My method of inquiry is qualitative, participant-observation. As defined by Eisner, (1991), qualitative inquiry is field-focused and nonmanipulative or "naturalistic." It is the researcher's duty to "observe, interview, record, describe, interpret, and appraise settings as they are..." and obligates "inquirers try to *account for* what they have given an *account of*"(p. 6-7). Qualitative work takes time and flexiblity, it is complex, and it is largely dependent on the "sensibilities and good judgement of the researcher" (p. 170).

My role was that of a third party, outside observer. I had no part in the design or implementation of the practicum and had not been a participant in the previous trips with other students. I went into the experience knowing only what the students knew after attending the orientation sessions and the prerequisite spring course. As participant/observer, I engaged in all activities with students while in Mexico - lunches, visits to homes, field trips, workshops, and school activities. We lived and ate together, shared stories, frustrations, and discoveries. I took field notes as they taught in classrooms and I conducted interviews with them.

Data sources include a pre-trip survey, four taped interviews with each student (three in Mexico, one six weeks after returning), observation field notes - three days in each student's classroom, informal conversations, photographs, documents, students' and my own journals.

Transforming data is Harry Woolcott's (Woolcott, 1994, p. 24) expression for the process we go through when trying to make sense of and organize masses of data. It implies an ethnographic approach, allowing for some meandering and experimenting with trial hypotheses and assumptions to be tested and compare against a variety of data sources. All notes, journals, and interview transcriptions were categorized and coded. I went through the data numerous times, categorizing and re-categorizing as my initial assumptions didn't pan out and new and unexpected patterns emerged.

Patterns identified in interviews were compared with those that surfaced from field observations and notes, journals, collected documents, and photographs. At the same time, I returned to the assumptions in my conceptual framework to question the relevancy of the patterns I was discovering and constantly revised and adjusted my own developing theories about what was taking place. The data and discoveries I made from looking at them were also compared with the writings of Villegas and Lucas (2002a; 2002b; Hollins (1996), Jones and Fuller (2003), Hall (1973) and others reviewed in the literature that provides the foundation for this paper.

Limitations

It could be said that I ignored several important aspects that could have added depth and breadth to this study. They would include looking more closely at the original intentions of the practicum, interviewing the developers of the practicum, investigating the motivations and assessments of the CITAC staff and of the teachers whose classrooms students taught in. There is value to this perspective, and perhaps these are good next steps. I chose to focus exclusively on the students and their experience, partly due to time and resource

limitations and partly because I wanted to understand this experience, as much as possible, through the students' eyes. I also do not want to consider this paper an assessment of the program, the practicum, or the design as it was originally conceived.

The group was small and culturally homogenous. All three women are in their mid-twenties, white, and middle class with very similar family, education, and travel histories. The one variation is that one student came from a bi-cultural, Greek-Irish background. While it is not possible to generalize to a large population, the depth and breadth of the data, when thoroughly analyzed should offer reasonable insights into the impact the experience might have on other pre-service teachers of like backgrounds.

The time was short but it was intense. There was no escape from the daily need to function in a completely foreign environment. My role as participant-observer put me in the middle of the research and my own experience on the trip can't be discounted. But my very closeness to the events allowed me to see the experience from the inside out. I listened to students' interactions, talked with them daily, heard their complaints, and witnessed their growing appreciation for the lives and accomplishments of people they met.

Teach in Mexico Program

Pacific University is a small, private liberal arts institution, located in a farming community in Oregon. The school populations in the nearby districts, where many of our students eventually teach, are a mixture of upper middle class children from communities that have grown up around a successful high-tech industry and immigrant children from a variety of countries but largely from Mexican families who come to work in the surrounding farms. Some schools are located in high SES neighborhoods and are nearly exclusively White with a smattering of immigrant students, usually from Asia and SE Asia. In neighboring districts, and even in schools within the same district, there are schools with Hispanic populations of fifty to seventy five percent. In these schools signs are posted in two languages and Spanish is freely spoken. A few of these schools have bilingual immersion programs. Many of the Mexican children in the local schools come from the state of Jalisco in Mexico, where this practicum took place. So, it is possible that the pre-service teachers who went to Mexico might be teaching children from that very area.

A major element of the College of Education's mission is to prepare pre-service teachers who have a deep, "felt" appreciation of the centrality of culture in the lives of all people and the profound influence culture has on the ways students learn and teachers teach. All students are required to take a *Learning Communities* course during the second semester of their program. In this course, students study their own cultural perspectives and unconscious biases, read a wide variety of literature on social justice and equity issues, and participate in many community building activities. The "Teach in Mexico" program is another effort to prepare teachers who are culturally sensitive.

Students who went to Mexico had taken *Learning Communities* course and a second, three-credit course, *Spanish in the Elementary Classroom*. This second course focused on the use and evaluation of Hispanic literature for children and development of curricular activities involving children's literature. Students also became familiar with some of curriculum materials used in Mexican public schools. Course readings on second language learners and Spanish for teachers were assigned.

In late May, 2002 seven of us left for Tapalpa, Mexico. Our group consisted of four MAT students, Anna, who is the Program Director and our interpreter, one other College of Education faculty member, and me. After spending three days in Guadalajara, visiting a number of cultural sites, we were taken by van to Tapalpa, approximately five hours away and up into the mountains. There we spent an intensive three weeks in schools, visiting with local residents, observing a number of work and cultural activities, and learning about the history, life, education, and culture of the Tapalpa and neighboring communities.

Study participants

The three student who agreed to participate in the study are Ellen, Kasey, and Lora. Ellen and Kasey, were in the Elementary/Middle School strand and the third, Lora, was in the Early Childhood strand. They all grew up in middle class suburban neighborhoods near the university and spent their kindergarten through high school years in one school district. Lora and Ellen had enrolled in the MAT program right after college graduation. Kasey worked in public relations and as an ESL instructional aide for a year before entering the program. They are all teaching at local elementary schools now. Lora and Ellen teach in the same districts where they went to school as children.

Ellen

Ellen projects an air of confidence and control. She is very articulate in her speech, has an expressive personality and strong Spanish skills. She is practical in her decision making and can be bold and impatient at times. Ellen had traveled to Mexico previously on a cultural home-stay visit in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. During this experience she lived with a well-to-do Mexican family and her activities were limited to cultural and tourist sightseeing. She saw little of the poorer neighborhoods or villages.

Kasey

Kasey's big smile is open and friendly. She is high achiever and very organized. Kasey had high anticipation before the trip. She felt it would be a lot of fun and she was looking forward to working with students younger than those she had student taught and was anxious to use her Spanish skills. She would be completing an endorsement in early childhood in Mexico where she would teach in a first and second grade classrooms. Kasey had traveled to Italy and Spain as part of her college's international program and had been to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico for vacation three times.

Lora

Lora is quiet, observant, and thoughtful. She is goal oriented and accustomed to being able to plan ahead and predict what and when she will be doing something. Half Greek, second generation, Lora grew up "surrounded by Greek culture" in an upper middle class neighborhood. Growing up in a bi-cultural household, she was the only participant to experience early exposure to cultural contradictions – "Doesn't everybody cook a lamb on a spit in their backyard for Easter?" She doesn't feel that she was any different from her mainstream friends as she grew up, but says that looking back, she can see that her family had some "old country beliefs" and customs that were different. She feels very lucky to have been immersed in two cultures. She doesn't feel she was limited in any way by some of the cultural expectation of Greek culture, especially those traditionally placed upon women as she was always expected to go to college and have a career. Lora traveled to Greece after high school to visit Greek relatives for the first time. Her previous experience in Mexico was a week spent in Puerto Vallarta on vacation. Her expectations for the trip were that "it would be hard, but good for me...like taking medicine. I know I will grow and be better for it."

The Tapalpa Experienc

Mountain Village:Tapalpa

Tapalpa is a small village in the high mountains a three hour drive southwest of Guadalajara. Built on hillsides, the cobblestone streets are steep. Donkeys and horses are tied up in front yards and flowers grow in every kind of container. Opening onto the high sidewalks are doorways that reveal courtyards with flowers, vines, and clotheslines. Small children stand by the doorways and watch the happenings in the street. The main plaza with its trees and benches is always full of people. A bank, a tavern, a few restaurants, tiny grocery stores, and the cathedral surround the plaza. On weekends vendors sell all kinds of food –bright colored fruits, handmade cheeses, candies, confections, pan dulce and entrepreneurs in pickup trucks show up on street corners with jeans, sombreros and sarapes for sale.

Our group stayed in an inn that exists primarily for the wealthy from Guadalajara who visit on weekends to escape from the heat of the lowlands. It is an example of traditional architecture, built around large inner patio with a veranda that looks out over the valley at the mountains in the distance. The inn is comfortable, clean, with the occasional very impressive bug, and all the important amenities are provided. Lunch and dinner were cooked for us by local women and served in communal dining area. We were housed two to a room, though there was a time when the students had to double up for a weekend when the inn was full.

CITAC: Our hosts

All teaching, living, and transportation arrangements were made by the staff at CITAC, the program's Mexican partner. CITAC (Centro de Integración Tapalpa, A.C.) is a non-profit civil outreach program devoted to working with mentally and physically handicapped children in Tapalpa and surrounding rural villages. The group works primarily through the public schools to identify children who need extra attention and support. Once the children are identified, CITAC staff work with them, their teachers, and their families, to develop strategies to enhance their intellectual and social lives. CITAC hopes that through educating the communities they can overcome a common belief that such disadvantaged children "deserve the life that they live." They strive to give the children the "proper tools" that enable them to look forward to a higher quality of life and face the realities of life in that society.

Mexican Education

The Mexican public school system is free for children up to the sixth grade and after that they must pay tuition and buy uniforms. Children who live too far away from the secondary school to walk must also find transportation into town. Since few families own a vehicle in the smaller villages, dependable daily transportation to and from school would be very difficult to find. These obstacles combined with the real economic need for children to be workers and contribute to the family income, make secondary education impossible for most rural children. Consequently, sixth grade is the highest level of education for many children

Since most parents don't have an education beyond elementary school, if that, there is often, but not always, little support in the family for education. Teachers explained to us that there is a high degree of absenteeism, especially in the outlying areas, and special needs children are often kept at home all the time. Ellen's teacher said he would never chastise students who missed school because if they faced sanctions when they came, they would simply stay away altogether. "So," he said, "we just tell them we are glad to see them here" whenever they come no matter how long they have been gone. Since education is not mandatory in Mexico, there is little leverage that faculty could bring to bear anyway.

These were distressing truths for our students and it further concerned them to witness young children working on farms and at other menial and physically demanding jobs, such as a young boy doing hard labor at the adobe factory. The realities of child labor and lack of educational opportunity was a part of life there that was very difficult for our comparatively privileged American bred students to accept and understand.

Teaching in Tapalpa

Our pre-service teachers, accustomed to bright and cheerful, well equipped and well supplied suburban U.S. schools, were saddened and shocked at the woeful state of Mexican classrooms with their striking lack of even the most basic teaching supplies. With the exception of the one room school that Lora worked in, the school buildings we saw conformed to one standard model of construction: long rectangular brick buildings divided into three classrooms. Furniture was minimal and old. The floors were red concrete and against which the metal legs of the chairs scraped and screeched. Books on the shelves were rare. The rooms were all quite dark and children lowered their heads to within inches of their papers and books when they were working. Our group had brought many supplies with them to give to the teachers: drawing paper, notebooks, construction paper, colored pencils and pens, tape, books, and other materials. These were the

only supplies of this kind that we saw there. The children brought their own small notebooks to write in and carried workbooks in book bags with them. There didn't seem to be any texts kept in the classroom.

The student teachers each had a companion when they went to their schools. Anna went with Lora to her school each day, and Kasey and Ellen each had a CITAC staff member to accompany them. I was on a three-day rotation schedule observing in each of the classrooms.

Placements

Kasey was assigned to the school in Tapalpa, the largest of the three schools. La Escuela de Panteon was a fifteen to twenty minute walk from our inn. Kasey worked with one other pre-service teacher who was not a part of this study. They walked to school and after the first week, the children would walk with them so they had a contingent of children following them through the streets of the town before and after school. They split their time between two classes; a first grade with forty two students and a second grade with forty six students. Ellen's school was in Los Espinos, a village named for the spiney plants that abound there. She was driven there each day by a CITAC staff member. The classes Ellen taught were small, fourteen to sixteen students. Sixth graders arrived early in the morning, the fifth graders came later when the sixth graders left for the afternoon. Lora's school was a one room building located in Casa Blanca, a village about a mile up the hill from Tapalpa. The class consisted of twenty-six children, ages six to thirteen.

Impressions of teachers

Before beginning their work in the classrooms, students were taken on a trip to visit all the schools. Their meeting with their teachers and the students were brief and there was little opportunity to interact, ask, questions, or observe the . These first meetings left Kasey and Ellen feeling unsure of their roles. The night before her first day in the school, Ellen told me:

> *I went up and I said, "I'm Emily. I'm gonna be the one who's here," in Spanish, and I stuck out my hand. And he gave me one of those limp wristed, barely a handshake and didn't look me in the eye. And his body language didn't tell me that he was very enthusiastic and excited. And I thought, "Oh my gosh! Does he want me here?" And I thought, "All right Ellen, don't freak out, because maybe it's a cultural difference that you just don't know about."* – Ellen

Kasey's wrote in her journal after first day:

> *At first we didn't feel very welcome because we walked in and weren't introduced at all. The second grade classroom was tiny and had fort- six students. There was hardly enough room for us to sit! The classroom was very sparse and uninviting. There were only a few things on the walls, including the alphabet, sounds of letters, and numbers. I also noticed that there were limited supplies.* – Kasey

Kasey's relationship with the second grade teacher continued to be somewhat awkward though her experience with her first grade teacher was more comfortable.

> *With the first grade class, she integrates us into the lessons even if it's just helping passing out things. But, she calls us by our names. Whereas, he has never even said our names or even called us maestra. So, it's almost better the way she's doing it, because the kids actually see us as teachers. Whereas, I think in the second grade classroom, they're kind of confused; "Who are these people that sit in the back and sometimes teach?"* – Kasey

After her first meeting with her teacher at Casa Blanca, Lora focused on her admiration of the teacher's abilities.

> *I think that she's amazing. This is only her third year at this school, so I think that that's pretty impressive. She seems to fit right in. I'm making all these assumptions already, but her philosophy seems to line up SO closely with all the philosophies that we've been learning about. She seems much more progressive than I thought that anything here would be.* -- Lora

Lora 's view of her of the teacher became more complex as time went on. In a later interview she talked about her ambivalent feelings.

> *I have mixed feelings about the teacher. Sometimes I think wow, she's excellent. She's doing exactly what these kids need. Okay, she's very structured and very authoritarian. She tells the kids to jump and they do! And they seem to be happy about it, so if that seems to be working for them, great! But then I also have the feeling that, wow, that's so different from where I am and from the type of teaching I see myself doing. It's a conflict, I guess, and I don't know if it's cultural (or) like a teaching philosophy conflict.* – Lora

Teaching in a new environment

All the students expressed doubts about their ability to speak Spanish well enough to instruct in the language. In fact, in interviews before they began teaching, they felt this would be their biggest obstacle. However, they all felt they managed the language quite well with the children, but there were other hurdles that proved to be more daunting. Kasey and her partner taught many lessons in the second grade including phonics, math, and simple English vocabulary. After their constructivist training, they wanted to use methods that would get children working together in groups. They felt that it would be good to give the children something new besides a teacher who "just stands in front of the room and reads from a book." Their efforts met with mixed success.

> *I was excited and nervous to try group work with this class. The teacher seems to mainly stand at the front, reading from a workbook. So far, we have not seen any type of cooperative group work. We assigned groups and asked students to count the number of "d's" and "b's" in all the group members' names. This activity was ok, although the room became a bit chaotic. I think they were excited about it though.* -- Kasey

She and her partner persevered in their efforts to involve the second graders in group activities. The day after the "b" and "d" phonics lesson, they grouped the students for a reading comprehension lesson.

> *Our lesson on Spanish (reading comprehension) was chaotic. Both H... and I were so tired and it was one of those "bad" days. The kids were all riled up and they weren't following directions very well. Tomás(from CITAC) was helping us and he really wanted them to work in groups to read the short story and answer the comprehension questions. After the time in groups, we all came back to the room and we asked each group some questions from the story. Overall, I felt that the groups didn't work – it was too much to give them a story and questions... Next week I will stick to class and whole-group instruction!* –Kasey

Lora fit into the daily routine at her school easily. She played hopscotch, soccer, and jacks with the children and they bonded with her immediately. Whenever there was a break, they swarmed around her, vying for her attention. In the classroom, she observed and helped the teacher in small ways the first two days and then was asked by the teacher to teach a math multiplication lesson for the older children. When she tried to introduce a new strategy into the lesson, she suddenly found herself at odds with the teacher.

> *... we kept doing the same thing over and over, and they were getting a little anxious and antsy and I thought, "We need to change things up a bit, cause they're getting bored." So I just thought of a new activity we could do and pulled out a deck of cards from my*

> *backpack and started doing that. About five minutes after I started the game, the teacher walks in and she didn't like what she saw and so she came up and just kind of took over the class for one problem and then left again. All my confidence was shot. I almost started crying because I felt I was trying really hard and doing the best that I could. I thought I was doing what she had asked me to do. And the fact that she didn't even watch me go through one problem... she just came in and thought, "Oh, she doesn't know what she is doing" or at least that's how I perceived it. I felt like she was undermining my authority in front of the kids, and so it was hard to sort of regain that confidence. And the kids knew I'd lost it also, and they were gone.* – Lora

This was an unfortunate development since Lora was actually most sensitive to the need not to appear to be critical or judgmental of her teacher's methods. She had early on expressed some hesitancy about going into the classroom with her own ideas and appearing to try to impose a new way of conducting the class:

> *I don't want to step on anybody's toes. You know, I don't want to come in with some wild and crazy lesson plan... that* ***seems*** *wild and crazy for a more conservative type view.* -- Lora

Lora was not able to discuss with the teacher what she had objected to in the math lesson, but for the remainder of her stay, she was very careful to stick to the teacher's methods.

Ellen taught her classes some basic English vocabulary; greetings, body parts, and colors. The students were eager to learn English words and loved the songs and interactive games she played with them. In spite of his early lack of enthusiasm, her teacher was very supportive of Ellen's lessons and was encouraging and helpful to her in a number of ways. It was my observation, that he was very interested in the strategies she used and watched carefully with an eye to using some of them himself. By the time she left, she had this to say about her experience with the teacher:

> *It's going fine. He's very open. He's very flexible. I think it's just his personality. He's just not real warm, not real inviting. He's just not real sociable. He probably just doesn't have the same kind of social skills that I'm maybe used to. People being able to interact real well. He still doesn't hardly make eye contact and kind of says, "Oh, yeah. Um, okay, bye" when I'm leaving.* – Ellen

Observations of children's academic abilities

Ellen quickly observed that the students in her classes were working at the same level on basic reading and math concepts as the fifth graders she had student taught. She reflected on this observation in an interview a week after her teaching began.

> *I haven't see a whole lot, but as far as math is concerned, the fifth grade was doing fractions, math, almost identically to what I had taught my fifth grade right before I left Oregon, which was surprising to me. They were getting it! Now, I didn't see a whole lot of building of the conceptual or anything like drawings or anything associated with fractions like I had done with my fifth graders. But, they knew... multiplying, dividing, adding. I thought, "How on earth could they go to school four hours a day, four days a week – less than four hours a day really, because these two grades are combined so it's more like three – and still be on the same level? They were quick as a wink - I couldn't believe it. I don't understand how that can happen. I don't know. Maybe it's because they don't have PE and music and lunch.* – Ellen

As Lora worked with the children, she, like Ellen, was surprised at their high academic level and their strong intellectual abilities.

> *This is terrible, and I'm actually ashamed, but I guess we all have stereotypes or preconceptions of what they know. My expectations were lower, just because I thought, "Oh, well, the system isn't as good." I know that I know better than to make those judgments before hand, but I wasn't expecting them to be as advanced as some of their thinking is. They've impressed me. They always do. Some of them came up with wonderful stuff. Well, they all came up with wonderful stuff. Some of it was, WOW!*
> —Lora

Conditions in the schools

The physical and operational conditions that existed in the schools were often a cause of acute discomfort for our students. While Ellen's ease in teaching and her relationship with her teacher grew over time, her feelings about conditions at the school became more negative. At one point she wrote in her journal:

> *I feel like I'm going to get sick in that room because it is so dirty and dusty and there's junk laying around and there's old food parts. Those are the conditions that are like physical sort of conditions he's working with and I don't know, apparently it doesn't bother him too much. And that's an assumption I'm making because it hasn't changed. I don't think the floor's been swept since I've been there. There's like half empty Coke bottles with stuff growing inside of them in the window sill... The bathrooms were horrific! There is one building outside with what looks like toilets but that don't flush and have no backs. There was (sic) feces call over the floors and walls. I was pretty appalled.*
> – Ellen

Kasey's views of her school were colored mostly by the lack of resources and the huge classes she found at La Escuela de Panteon. She felt throughout her experience that chaos reigned in her first grade class. Her first comment upon being introduced to her placement was that is was:

> *Sort of chaotic. I don't know if they were on recess, but it seemed like kids of all ages were everywhere. I don't know what was going on. A little bit dirty, maybe. Or, at least not the standards that we're used to in the United States.*
> --Kasey

The lack of resources was the biggest concern for Lora – especially the absence of books:

> *And I was thinking today, they're lacking books. These kids need to be surrounded by literature and they're not, at all. I don't think I've seen a single kid with their own book. You know, like reading for pleasure book. And they don't have any time to sit and read by themselves... (There is) just the dire lack of supplies. Trying to plan a lesson last night was kind of like, well, we're working with maybe even more supplies than the teacher has, just with the few supplies that we brought down. She has some books in the back of the room, chalk and crayons. And the kids have pencils and erasers and paper, but it's very minimal.* – Lora

Reflections

During her time working in the classroom, Lora commented and wrote often about how she viewed her own purpose for being there. What she saw herself accomplishing, more than teaching, was her own learning about the culture and the students' lives. She described her goals in an interview about halfway through the experience:

Just getting to know the kids on a very basic level, like playing together out on the playground. Just understanding their life and trying to understand them a little more, which is really what I think I came here to do... Not so much to teach. – Lora

One evening, after a dinner conversation with the group in when all the students were sharing stories about the sites they were in, Lora recorded these further reflections on what she wanted to accomplish while there:

Somewhere in the conversation my true purpose for being in these classrooms became strikingly clear to me. While I knew I was here to learn about culture and language and the schools themselves I was unclear about my role as a teacher. Not only was my goal unclear I was very apprehensive about teaching anything because of my limited language skill. I realized that it is not the content that I need to worry about teaching so much but rather the manner in which I choose to teach. We are here for such a relatively short period that it is unlikely that a student will remember the definition of X, but rather I want students to feel empowered and excited about maybe a new way of learning. – Lora

Painful but "*Awe*-Some" Discoveries

It was an intense experience... it was awesome. Not like cool awesome, but very AWE-some. I was in awe a lot. – Ellen

Returning to Goodenough's (1973) definition of culture as standards for ways of thinking, feeling, making decisions and acting upon those decisions, and as a group of categories that defines our ways of behaving, it can be seen from the stories presented so far that there were elements in this environment that clashed with the group's cultural norms. There was constantly new information presented that challenged preconceived notions about how teachers would or *should* teach, how Mexican students would respond and learn, how best to communicate with teachers, what cleanliness standards to expect, what materials are necessary to teach a concept, and so on. There were many instances in which students simply weren't sure how to behave, when to ask questions, when to assert their opinions, and when it was appropriate to act independently. Their routines were upset and their expectations were not always met.

Cultural competence: This is NOT easy!

Questions #1: What do students learn about the intricacies of cultural competence as it applies to themselves and to the students they will teach?

Students discovered that they were confronted daily with ways in which they were not culturally comfortable. In response, there was a good deal of impatience and disequilibrium. Beyond the differences they encountered in the schools, the areas that caused the most distress were living in a different language environment, working within a system with an unfamiliar set of rules regarding time, and coping with standards of cleanliness that were sometimes repugnant to them. There were constant, little, but very disconcerting events – new forms, rules, recipes, that caused confusion and irritations. It could be a miscommunication, a filthy toilet, an inexplicable gesture, a meeting that started late, a new strange tasting food. Things were not as expected so predictability was difficult and that set everyone on edge. And coloring the entire scene was the difficulty with the language.

Language

Concern about language ability and teaching in Spanish came up immediately in my early interviews. In my first interview, conducted the might before the students were to go into the classrooms for the first time, it was a common theme. However, it wasn't teaching in Spanish that gave students the most trouble. All the

students found that it was easy to talk with the children. The kids would simply correct any mistakes and they would all move on. It was with the adults that the problems surfaced.

There was only one person from the CITAC staff who spoke much English at all so it was necessary to either use Spanish or wait until Anna, our Language professor, could interpret for us. The three students were all fairly proficient in Spanish but using the language full-time and being expected to use it well, was wearing on them. The fact that this was such a difficulty surprised them to some extent because they all expressed the idea that they had felt fairly confident about their Spanish competency before going. Among the CITAC staff and teachers there seemed to be an expectation that the students would be quite fluent. This expectation was different from previous experiences they had traveling to tourist areas where proficiency wasn't expected and where any attempt was applauded.

> *It's exhausting, absolutely exhausting listening to someone and feeling so frustrated like, "OK. I'm going to have to ask you again, what did you say? Please tell me a little bit slower." Or what's even more frustrating is understanding what someone is saying and not being able to express what I want to say because I don't have the language for it.-- Lora*

> *And you tune out. After a while my brain just gets too tired of even trying to understand what they're saying, so I totally tune out. And then you're just hearing garble. You know, you don't know what's going on.—Kasey*

In addition to the fatigue of trying to keep up all day, students clearly experienced feelings of isolation as a result of not being able to communicate effectively. Lora tells about an incident that had a significant impact on her when she had been having a conversation with the one person who spoke some English. Things were going well until they were joined by others who didn't speak English:

> *He came over and a couple of other people from CITAC came over and they sat down, and within a minute H... and I were entirely left out of the conversation. And like we were leaning in, you know, trying to act like we were interested, even if we weren't understanding everything that was being said. No one looked at us. They just kept having their own little chat and it was all in Spanish. I zoned out. – Lora*

Besides other frustrations of not being able to explain their thoughts as clearly as they would have liked or to pick up on the finer nuances of conversation, there was the added factor of feeling and being perceived as slow or dim-witted:

> *I don't know why But I just tense up and then the words don't come out right. I know they don't think I know anything. – Kasey*

> *I don't even know who it was specifically ... or if it was any specific person or group of persons that made me feel that way, but I felt dumb. Like they didn't really care if I spoke Spanish or not. I mean, I wasn't going to be included, even if I spoke a decent amount. That's how I felt. Like maybe they were expecting all of us to be fluent. Maybe. I don't know. But it still surprises me. I still think, why did that happen? – Lora*

The inability to effectively communicate also played a part in their relationships with teachers. Only Ellen spoke directly with her teacher, and while she did very well, there were times when she wasn't completely sure they had come away with the same understanding of the conversation. Anna, the Language professor went with Lora each day and provided any needed interpreting and a CITAC staff member interpreted for Kasey and her second grade teacher. The distance created by this mediation most certainly contributed to the seeming disregard, and maybe resentment, Kasey's teacher felt toward her and her partner. Kasey felt that it would have been better if she had been able to talk with him directly to ask him what he would like her to do. It is possible too, that without the language barrier, the students may have felt freer to enter into more personal conversations with their teachers and learn something about who they were and why they had agreed to work with an American student.

Time

> *Well, I call myself linear. I like things in order and I usually plan everything out; I know when I'm leaving, what's going to happen, when I'm going to come back home, when I'm going to eat. Well, eating is pretty regular around her, but that's about it. Everything else is really just up for change at the last minute and it's frustrating that things don't seem to be on time... I would say that's a cultural thing. I think it's part of daily life.—Lora*

Lora's comment is typical of those expressed repeatedly during the three weeks. E. T. Hall (1973) has said that, "The Americans never question the fact that time should be planned and future events fitted into a schedule" (p. 147). We value promptness and penalize those who are late, we don't like to wait, and we view time as a commodity to be earned, spent, saved or wasted. Lora's frustration is a perfect example of how an American conception of time clashes with a Latin American sense of time that is much more relaxed and casual about keeping appointed times and scheduling events. Confronting the time conflict was a constant irritation; scheduled activities didn't begin at the time anticipated and, even more distressing to the students, was the fact that no one ever seemed in a hurry to *end* a gathering. An American conception of a lunch might be that it will last an hour, possibly two. The lunches and other gatherings we were invited to lasted several hours, sometimes a whole day. This difference became a source of serious frustration and brought students into direct confrontation with a completely different standard of behavior. Ellen's words express her feelings of exasperation:

> *The TIME! It drives me crazy. I knew from when I was living in Mexico before there's just not the pressure of time. Something says it's going to happen at 2 o'clock - here it happens at 2:15, 2:25, 2:30. It's irritating to me, but I'm just used to being on the go doing stuff. Moving from one thing to another, like sort of in an orderly fashion and not dragging my heels. And when we sit and we go all these places ... and (here)we'll eat and we'll just sit... and sit. And we'll sit some more and then we'll keep sitting. And I'm thinking, "Okay! What's next?" And, you know, maybe it's better this way. Maybe I would have less stress in my life if I wasn't so schedule oriented, but it drives me ballistic... I'm used to knowing what I'm going to do in the next forty-eight hours. I have a pretty good idea of what the next forty- eight hours is going to look like for me. And nobody knows what the next forty-eight hours is going to look like (here). –Ellen*

As they were in the midst of their angst and turmoil over everything starting late and lasting longer than they expected, they could empathize with the extreme sense of dislocation children moving from a Latin American system of time to one of a completely structured school day, with sanctions for a few minutes' late arrival would have to experience.

> *I think it would be harder to go from a Mexican to ours. It's hard for us to slow down, but I think it would be harder to speed up. In Mexico everything is kind of, "Oh, show up whenever. Leave whenever." I can't even imagine what it would be like to come here, especially to the United States where everything is so scheduled out and regimented.* – Kasey

Physical conditions

Students often were in close contact with the life styles and conditions of poverty and hardship that were completely new, and often quite shocking to them. The outlying villages are extremely poor; on Mexico's poverty scale, one of the villages we visited is rated two out of possible ten. There were many opportunities to see very poor sanitary conditions, young children working, toddlers dirty, and apparently unattended, ragged, undernourished animals. Even in their schools the sanitary standards were much lower than anything they had experienced (as noted earlier by Ellen).

Students struggled with their own responses to these sights because the attitude toward us was so warm and inviting. After a day at the dairy ranch Ellen had this to say:

> *The food was very good but it was difficult to get past the fact that chickens, dogs, horses, and about a zillion flies were sharing my eating space. It makes me lose my appetite and feel very on edge. I have felt so welcomed with open arms. I have felt like people in this community are just SO wanting to welcome us and are appreciative of the fact that we are here. It's HARD though... to be in a place where I feel so completely uncomfortable because of the environment. -- Ellen*

Kasey was conflicted over her desire to be affectionate with the children and her aversion to their lack of good hygiene.

> *Those kids are just DIRTY! That is one thing, I feel dirty all the time. I feel bad, because I go to school and they all want to touch you. I'm kind of backing away. I mean, I want to give them love and everything, but the lice! I come home and I scrub, and I wash my clothes. So it's been hard to get used to that. It's hard to SEE it.—Kasey*

It showed in the students' expressions, spoken and written that they had a growing awareness of the distance from which they were viewing life in Tapalpa. They struggled with their reactions, knowing them to be coming from a sense of superiority and distance and yet they couldn't relate to what it must be like to exchange places with the people they observed. In this journal entry Lora reevaluated the meaning of inconvenience:

> *Anytime I start to feel sorry for my self it's like "Oh, my gosh! This is terrible! The water in the shower is cold." I think, "Yeah, but they have to wash their dishes by hand and outside." You know, it's humbling. It's really humbling, and it make me think about all the times I'm complaining about stuff that really isn't all that bad. You know, if we have to sit in the back of a car on a bouncy road, life goes on. We're in a car. We're not walking the whole way.*

AHA! What Was I Thinking?

•How does a cultural immersion experience influence students' thinking about Mexican people and immigrants in general?

Students had the opportunity to visit with people from many walks of life while in Tapalpa; CITAC staff members, community leaders, their students' parents, the teachers they worked with, the staff at the inn, and the children. We spent a great deal time with CITAC staff visiting their school, traveling on excursions, watching them work with school groups, and interacting at social gatherings. There was one CITAC staff member assigned to accompany the students to their schools each day. By the time we left, they had become quite close with this group and they had learned first hand about the valuable work CITAC was doing for the children and families in the region. They had seen the competence, dedication, and creativity of the group and some of their assumptions about the "backwardness" of Mexico and Mexican people were disassembling.

> *I guess I didn't think about the fact that people were advocates and wanting social justice for kids. Like the people that worked for CITAC - in a country that's so poor. I know those things happen here, but wow, they happen in Mexico too. So now I'm in a grocery store and I see someone from another country and I think... I just don't even have any idea. I have NO idea what they do or what they think or what they believe or how they live. They pick berries during the summer and, gosh, I really like the berries that they*

pick. But that's not what defines them. And I hate myself for having those subconscious thoughts. -- Ellen

I guess we're more similar than I thought we were. Like a lot of progressive thinking. I wasn't expecting that at all. I wasn't expecting the progressive thinking that's going on in CITAC especially, and that they're trying to bring into the schools and into the community. I was very surprised. – Lora

The Mexican government supports a nutrition program that provides breakfast in remote villages if the women in the village agree to fix breakfast at the school each morning for the children. The breakfast costs each child one peso and the women receive training in cooking with nutritional soy products that are provided by the government. Local women invited our group into their homes to let us see how they lived. They answered questions and told us about their lives, their work, their children. Women in Casa Blanca, where Lora's school was, had formed a group to work together to address domestic violence in the community.

Lora was greatly affected by the optimism and moral strength of the women she met, the challenges they faced, and their determination to improve their own lives and the health of their communities. Her sudden insight into her skewed perceptions and stereotyping of Mexican women stunned her:

I was really amazed. I wasn't anticipating women wanting to be empowered. Isn't that terrible? Why would someone never want to be empowered? I guess it goes along with the thinking that, "Well, they're dumb." You know? I just thought they were "simple minded and happy." I can't even say – Oh! I feel terrible that I thought that for a half a second. But I guess, because I was so surprised at what I found, then I had to really ask myself, "Well, what was I expecting to find?" And why was I expecting to find that? These assumptions that I didn't even think that I made. If you were to tell me that's what I was thinking at the time, I would have said, "No way! That's racist."

As was evident in the description of the school experience, students' views on the children's abilities were significantly altered. And the fact that they were surprised to find the children quite capable and functioning at academic levels equal to those of children in the U.S. caused some self examination and a realization that they had some notions about Mexican children that required rethinking.

Well, these kids are smart. They're just as smart as any other kid that is being schooled in the U.S. My assumption, I guess, beforehand, was that they weren't as smart and I feel badly that I thought that. Because you hear that they don't get the same education and so we have this arrogant attitude. Bright kids! Bright kids. And a lot of them, even with disabilities – like they had major eye problems. There were a couple of kids in the class that it was unbelievable that they kids were still functioning reasonably well in a classroom with NO accommodations: none!

And then you think, well, is that just how it developmentally happens? Is everyone going to be there no matter what country they're living in and what they're taught? Maybe so! I'm beginning to think probably. – Lora

Villegas and Fuller (2002b) emphasized the crucial need for teachers to have an "affirming attitude" toward students if students are to be successful. As noted earlier, a teacher's perception will become the child's self-perception. With this in mind, the students' realization that the Mexican children did well in their Mexican schools, in spite of short days, in spite of traditional teaching methods, and in spite of an astounding lack of resources, represents a major shift in their perspectives. If this new insight takes hold and becomes a permanent part of these teachers' perceptions of Mexican children, they will be able to relay genuinely affirming messages to their students.

In MY Classroom...

•What impact does an immersion experience in a rural Mexican environment have on pre-service teachers as they prepare to work with diverse students and families in their classrooms?

The discomfort students felt as they faced their own cultural hurdles in conforming to this environment coupled with their surprise and dismay as they confronted their own biased assumptions had a strong impact on the way they thought about having Mexican children in their own classes. Through it, they developed a strong empathy for those children who would be experiencing the same sense of dislocation.

> *God, my heart just goes out to them! Especially kids who are just brand new from a different experience. And that's not to say that the experience isn't hard for kids who have been here, or even whose parents were immigrants and they were born here, because I know their experience is very different. I felt like I was very much just kind of picked up and placed in a different world, and so these kids who will be coming from that are going to have that same experience of kind of being picked up and placed in a completely different world. And it's SCARY. It is SO scary, and my heart! I just know I'm going to cry for them, because I just feel SO badly about what a shock it is.* – Ellen

> *I felt very dumb and that people thought I was dumb too, and that was really frustrating. So to think that a kid... Going to school where you're expected to learn all day long and, oh, it would be so impossible. And have your peers all the time looking at you – thinking, "Every single one of these kids thinks I'm dumb." And there's such an obvious difference between you and everyone else. That feeling of isolation.* – Lora

Even during the short time students were in Mexico, and in the midst of their anxieties about language and irritations about time differences, they were thinking about ways they how could plan curriculum and instruction to include the experiences of children from diverse backgrounds in their classrooms.

> *I think just doing anything and everything that we can to sort of ease that transition, and do a lot of explaining, as much as possible. And not expecting the same out of them immediately as you'd expect out of a child here. I think you need to start from the beginning with community building and the idea that everyone is unique... Each kid in the classroom brings something unique and special to the room, and that needs to be honored – not ignored. Someone from another culture has a whole other outside world to expose.* – Lora

In the interview after we returned, I asked them if they had thought about ways to balance the demands of meeting standards and benchmarks with the needs of Mexican children or other from different cultural backgrounds. The students were unanimous in their feelings that it was more important to consider the individual child's needs.

> *I know it's easy to say and harder to do, but to work individually with them to meet their needs, rather than the standards. I couldn't go into Mexico and take a state test. That's hard, because the school and the district expect you to have all of your kids at this level* – Kasey

> *I think that as with any other kid, you have to look at them as a student in your classroom with their own unique set of needs. Just like a child with special needs in your classroom, you have different expectations and different requirements for them, different individualized education plans for each student in your classroom, ideally.* – Lora

Students' first hand experience with being thrust into a situation where they were expected to *perform* as an professional in a second language environment proved to be daunting for them. They almost immediately began to see the connection between their level of frustration and the feelings they had about *feeling* and *appearing* "dumb" and "looking like I don't know anything" and how a second language learner would feel

in a classroom. Thinking about how to help a English language learner, Lora explains how her experience made her consider the nonverbal part of communication:

> *I learned a lot about communication in general. Not so much just the language, but how you include someone in a conversation and how you don't include someone in a conversation. All of those little subtleties of body language, which I guess I already knew before or had seen, but it really sunk in... I began to think of my students and especially the ones who never seem to be paying attention. I know I have always tried to include them in class discussions but now I know I haven't been trying hard enough to make them feel included. Wow! This day was hard but what a powerful learning experience for me to take into my classroom.* – Lora

As they were in the midst of their angst and turmoil over everything starting late and lasting longer than they expected, they could empathize with the extreme sense of dislocation children moving from a Latin American system of time to one of a completely structured school day, with sanctions for a few minutes' late arrival would have to experience.

> *I think it would be harder to go from a Mexican to ours. It's hard for us to slow down, but I think it would be harder to speed up. In Mexico everything is kind of, "Oh, show up whenever. Leave whenever." I can't even imagine what it would be like to come here, especially to the United States where everything is so scheduled out and regimented.* – Kasey

Advocacy

Did these students become socioculturally conscious as Villegas and Lucas define the term? Whether or not this experience raised an awareness of the injustices inherent within the structure of the education system is not clear. However, there is evidence that they feel they can be advocates within their schools in that they want to try to share what they have learned with other teachers. Ellen was adamant about helping other teachers understand that there is a need to design curriculum and adapt expectations to meet the children where they are.

> *(Being) an advocate, an adult educator. Helping teachers understand. You know, taking my pictures and then saying, "Gosh, this is where these kids are coming from. Here was what my experience was when I was put into that situation, and so let's try to imagine what their experience is when they're put in this situation."* – Ellen

Kasey's view of Mexicans in general has shifted and she feels a desire to correct prejudicial opinions of others. She told me, "Now if I ever hear anything bad about Mexicans, I get all defensive because the ones that we met were so great."

Hollins Typology

I did not survey or attempt to define the students' views before the trip with regard to where they would fit into the typology described by Hollins. I can only assess their views through what I observed as they lived through the three weeks and what they had to say afterwards. Based on this data, they all show evidence of possessing sensibilities that would place them in the type II category which is characterized by an inclusive view of culture, a multicultural perspective, and a collaborative approach to learning (Hollins, 1996). There was a recognition that conceptions of time, use of language, approaches to education and the role of the family in Mexico were *different* from what they knew in the U.S. and that these factors *do* impact the way a child is going to learn. By observing Mexican children in their own educational system who were thriving intellectually, as deficient as that system was perceived to be, the pre-service teachers began to understand the influence the cultural environment has on a child's ability to learn. They realized they had to look at the context in which the child was functioning. This realization led them consider how they might

create an environment that reflected the child's culture when that culture is not of the mainstream. Through this insight, they showed movement toward a true multicultural and egalitarian position. None of these ideas were new to them. They had been in classes for a year where these ideas were a core feature of the curriculum. But as Lora said in an interview, teachers in her school would understand the Mexican children "the way I understood them before I went to Tapalpa." She understood intellectually but not emotionally or empathically until after she had been in a similar space.

The only student who may have moved further into a type III view is Lora. Many of her statements reveal a deeper, almost innate sense of the significance of culture. She is also the only student whose own cultural background is mixed. Though she grew up very much a part of mainstream society, she was part of a family that also celebrated a Greek culture with strong traditions and belief systems that were different from most of her friends. In Mexico, she was more able to look past the inconveniences and the dirt and the irritations caused by time delays to appreciate the subtle meaning of the interactions and events that she observed. Lora was very perceptive about how the society worked in Mexico. She was the only one to respond to the way the women were working toward their own independence and she became much more quickly and more fully integrated into her school in spite of feeling somewhat intimidated by the teacher. Where Ellen and Kasey are very likely to respond to a students' cultural needs and design curriculum with them in mind, Lora's statements indicate she would be inclined to go further and "engage in a critical analysis of the relationship among approaches to classroom instruction, students' social and cultural backgrounds, and prior school learning" (Hollins, 1996).

Conclusion

There were several ways the trip impacted the students who went to Tapalpa. It is possible that all the effects of the experience won't be manifested for some time to come. At this point, there are three key changes in students' views that relate to my original questions:1) they learned what it means to try to function in a new culture without language fluency and without familiarity with the "standards" for behavior; 2) they gained significant insight into some of their own prejudices relating to Mexico and Mexican people and they gained empathy for those who must function in a new culture; 3) they left thinking about how they would use these new insights as they develop their ideas for teaching and for advocating for their Mexican children as well as other minority or immigrant children in their classes.

The students' comments reveal some profound growth in self-awareness regarding their own vulnerabilities when they were immersed in a new culture. They were literally shoved out of their familiar and comfortable element where they are highly successful into a predicament where many of the rules and routines were new and they couldn't predict or control the timing or nature of their activities. Expectations had to be constantly re-evaluated and they felt at a constant disadvantage because, while they could all "get along" in a basic way, they couldn't express themselves in a sophisticated manner, with their normal grace and fluency. Such difficulties communicating often shut them down and made them feel isolated and "dumb." The practicum wasn't long enough to create a serious loss of self esteem because of these feelings, but they did realize how such experiences could affect the self-esteem and learning potential of children who have to function in a new culture and a new language environment.

Ellen, Kasey, and Lora left Tapalpa with a new way of thinking about Mexico. They can see it now as a country with intelligent, educated people who have progressive, sophisticated ideas and humanitarian values. They were continually impressed by seeing committed educators working effectively to improve the lives of children and their families even in the far reaches of rural areas. They formed friendships with people from a completely different life experience and with whom they had come together as equals with common goals and similar values. It is likely that they will view Mexican parents in a more positive and affirming light as a result.

Possibly most important to their future as teachers, was their discovery that the Mexican children they met were bright, capable and working at grade level in spite of very limited school, family, and financial circumstances. The fact that this was such a revelation to them it cannot be overstated. These students had been through at least one course that focused solely on the need to recognize the impact culture has on

learning and stressed the need to see the potential in all learners. Yet they still held unconscious beliefs that the Mexican children would be slow and far behind average learners in the U.S. There own reactions surprised and dismayed them, but this self discovery led them to more affirming ways of thinking about Mexican children and prompted them to question themselves about other stereotypes and prejudices they might be holding onto. As Lora said many times, "I learned not to make assumptions about anything or anyone."

Students indicated many times that they were prepared to take what they had learned and use it to create welcoming and comfortable classrooms for all their students. Their own discomfort has given them a concrete way of putting themselves in the shoes of children who are coping in a new setting. They have expressed an understanding of the importance of reaching out to families to increase the success of their students. Creating a classroom built on community and collaboration and cooperation is a key goal for each of these teachers. Beyond simply thinking about ways they can best work with the children, they see themselves as advocates for Mexican children and families within their own schools.

In the end, they all acknowledged that they had to encounter the inconveniences, the frustrations, and the challenges in order to grow and gain a deep appreciation for what it means to exist in a different culture. They all realize now how much harder it must be for children who don't see that end of the tunnel in three weeks, but know that they are in it for the long haul. They are aware that it is not only children who are recent immigrants who need special attention and sensitivity – but all children whose culture is different from the mainstream culture in which schools are embedded.

> *I just think that disequilibrium and that discomfort is invaluable. Like you can read about it and you can think about it, but to have just been picked up and placed in something that, gosh, didn't feel very good. You had to be resourceful and you had to just kind of buck up and deal with it. I think that now I know so much better what it must feel like for parents, kids, anyone who has a similar experience. – Ellen*
>
> *I think about the whole trip, I guess, and the school really stands out. The kids in the school. Trying to teach in another language. I know I'll remember that forever and ever. And just feeling so inadequate standing up in front of the kids thinking, oh, my gosh, I don't know what I'm doing here! But then that great feeling of accomplishment. I'm really glad that I went – very glad that I went. – Lora*
>
> *I'd just say that those three weeks in Tapalpa - it wasn't fun. It was educational and quite an experience, but it wasn't really, "Oh, yeah! I'm having a great time!" But sometimes, those are the times that you learn the most - when you're sort of put into a situation where you're not the most comfortable. I wouldn't have traded it for anything. Even though sometimes I was ready to go home. –* Kasey

In this experience, these pre-service teachers lived with new values, rules, and routines, confusing standards for behavior, foreign language codes, and all other aspects of a culture that Goodenough (1973) describes. Consequently, they had the opportunity to not only learn *about* the lifestyles, history, and experiences of students they might teach, but they also, and perhaps more importantly, *experienced* the disquieting role of culturally incompetent outsiders. Maybe they even learned the power of *respeto* as it is described by Gary Howard (1996) in his essay, *Whites in Multicultural Education: Rethinking Our Role:*

> *Respeto acknowledges the full humanness of other people, their right to be who they are, their right to be treated in a good way. When White Americans learn to approach people of different cultures with this kind of deep respect, our own world becomes larger and our embrace of reality is made broader and richer. We are changed by our respect for other perspectives. It is more than just a nice thing to do. In the process of respecting other cultures, we learn to become better people ourselves.* (p. 330)

We can hope, and some of the evidence suggests, this experience did bring these teachers closer to a state of *respeto* not only with their Mexican students but with students of any cultural background different from

their own. It reasonable to say they definitely left with new empathy for others, increased self-awareness, a more enlightened opinion of Mexico and Mexicans, and a commitment to apply these new insights to their teaching in the future.

Epilogue

What this research shows is how students felt during and six weeks following the trip. What the long term effects are, how long the insights, feelings, and sense of commitment remain strong and how they influence long term behavior can't be determined from this study. However, when I conducted one very short interview with each of the women eight months after the trip I found that little had changed in their views. They all looked back on the trip as a very significant event in their lives and with wonderment that they had actually experienced it. "I really did that! Taught in a Mexican school – in Spanish?" was a common comment. The CITAC staff is remembered with great fondness and a wistful regret that they will probably never see them again. They all are still very committed to creating classrooms where equity and cultural understanding thrive. The mixed feelings of anxiety, accomplishment, frustration, and friendship were still fresh and real to them even if the trip itself seemed "surreal."

Only Lora teaches in a school with a high percentage of minority children, but they all have some students from different cultures. Kasey has students from Asia and the Middle East, and Ellen has a six Hispanic students and one from Vietnam. In Lora's class there are seven Hispanic children and one Vietnamese. All these teachers have implemented many of the plans they outlined right after the trip. Each talked about how they had worked to build community that is inclusive of all the children, encouraged students to bring artifacts from home and share cultural customs as part of the curriculum, and they have met with parents and encouraged their participation in their children's education. Lora uses Spanish with her students, even with non-Spanish speakers sometimes just to give the Spanish speaking ESL students a break. Ellen speaks Spanish with her Mexican students even though they all have a high level of English fluency. She and Lora have words posted in Spanish, pictures of the trip, and a poster of Tapalpa on their bulletin boards. All three teachers have shared stories and artifacts from the trip with their students as a way of encouraging students to share their cultural stories.

Future Study

It is not possible to make any claims about what the lasting impact this experience will have on the fundamental choices that these teachers will make regarding how they design curriculum now and instruction in the future. It does seem hopeful, but further research is obviously needed to find out. The next step might be a follow up study of all the students who went to Tapalpa over the last four years and who are now teaching. How do they view the experience after one, two, three years? What have they done with curriculum and instruction to accommodate multicultural children? Who is teaching in a predominantly Mexican or multicultural school? It would be worthwhile to replicate this study with another group and then follow that group for the first two to three years of their teaching. It would be interesting also to investigate the perspectives of the Mexican hosts and teachers. What are their expectations and how have they been met? In what ways can there be more collaboration between the teachers and the student teachers? How might communication between the groups be maintained for perhaps some kind of educational exchange in the future in which CITAC members visit the U.S.?

Beyond just this "Teach in Mexico" program, there needs to be much more research into how pre-service teachers internalize the cultural sensitivity training that teacher education programs now provide and how we can better design experiences that are authentic and have a deep impact on the future teachers' views of their diverse students.

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