

Service Learning & Teaching: A Cross-Cultural Experience: Analysis of Languages in a Private School in Nicaragua

*Delphina Hopkins-Gillispie, Ph.D.
Valparaiso University*

The service learning immersion experience in Central America benefitted preservice teachers, which resulted in a collaborative project on the analysis of languages spoken at the primary to middle school level. This study researches, collects data, and analyzes results from one school system in the country of Nicaragua in hopes of acquiring sufficient data to share and compare with school systems in the United States. The purpose of this study is to determine the number of students in a private primary- intermediate school who are bilingual or trilingual, investigate the various languages spoken within the school, study how the school system accommodates non-Spanish speaking students, and to learn as much as possible about teaching on the international level.

Preparing teachers for the nation's public and private K-12 schools is an important part of this Midwestern University's mission. One of the key issues in education and teacher preparation in the 21st century is the preparation of preservice teachers to work with students from diverse backgrounds in K-12 schools (Banks, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2006). As globalization grows and various cultures in the world continue to integrate and work together, cultural sensitivity and responsiveness to students from diverse backgrounds continues to become a necessary and helpful skill to attain. In an attempt to address the need to prepare preservice teachers to teach in culturally diverse settings, scholars recommend multiple approaches. Wlodowski (1995) suggested that preservice teachers must acquire experiences with students from backgrounds different from theirs. Buckley-Van Hoek, Kasten, Keenan, and Adeeb (1998) found that a field placement in a community service agency, combined with systematic reflection as part of a course on teaching in diverse classrooms, caused a significant change in students' perceptions of themselves as capable teachers in culturally diverse classrooms. Tatum (1992) suggested the importance of cross-cultural experiences when she explained the stages of White racial identity development. Whites begin at the state of Contact, which "is characterized by a lack of awareness of cultural and institutional racism, and of one's own White privilege . . . [and] often includes fear of people of color, based on stereotypes" (p. 13). In addition, Gomez (1996) states that when prospective teachers are able to interact with people different from themselves, "positive personal relationships and investments in the lives of 'others' and their future can occur" (p. 127). Cross-cultural experiences on a global level will help preservice teachers make the connection to students in the classroom. This paper addresses the benefits of cross-cultural experiences in Nicaragua, Central America of 12 White preservice teachers—this service learning trip equipped

this institution's preservice teachers to meet the challenges in the classroom of the 21st century.

Literature Review

American schools have become increasingly diverse in the past decade (Banks, 2008). Students from non-English speaking countries comprise the fastest growing American K-12 student population, and the number of students identified as having limited-English proficiency (LEP) has reached 10 million (Smith-Davis, 2004). Regardless of these staggering numbers, however, research demonstrates that preservice teachers are not adequately prepared to teach these students, especially when the students' ethnic and culturally backgrounds differ from that of the preservice teachers' (Gay, 2002; Howard, 1999; Merryfield, 2000).

What experiences are colleges and universities providing future educators, so that they can not only collaborate with but also appreciate and value the many students, families, administrations, environments, systems and so forth with whom they will work? How are world-minded perspectives being developed and nurtured? In the United States, since university students rarely go abroad, methods instructors are limited to indirect teaching strategies such as 'playing' what-if games in class: What if you need to communicate with a non-English speaking parent and you don't know their language? Or What if a student from another country refers to you as "teacher" instead of "Mrs. Searcher"?

Cross-cultural immersion experiences have been considered an effective way to help preservice teachers achieve the goal of a broader and more global perspective (Cushner, 2007; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Nieto, 2006). I believe cross-cultural immersion experiences inevitably facilitate the development of a culturally responsive pedagogy. Wilson (1982) claimed that cross-cultural experiential learning assists

in the development of global and cross-cultural perspectives, which leads to improvements in self-development, appropriate attitudes and dispositions, knowledge and skills for practitioners when teaching in diverse educational environments. Therefore, cross-cultural experiential learning requires that teachers not only immerse themselves in unfamiliar cultures, but also reflect upon those experiences in order to broaden their pedagogical approaches and beliefs to become successful culturally responsive change agents. Many multi experiential learning with people different from themselves will help preservice teachers develop cross-cultural awareness that, in turn, will influence these preservice teachers' pedagogical stances (Cushner, 2007; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Deering & Stanutz, 1995; Merryfield, 2000; Nieto, 2006).

Sleeter (2001) and Wiest (2004) offered a review of various cross-cultural immersion programs. Examining the impact of these various immersion programs on preservice teachers, researchers consented that cross-cultural immersion programs, especially overseas teaching experiences, have enabled preservice teachers to experience their future students' culture on a personal level and to develop a cross-cultural understanding and global perspective. This experience, in turn, has positively affected preservice teachers' instructional practices (Aguilar & Pohan, 1998; Bryan & Marsha, 1997; Cooper, Beare & Thorman, 1990; Ference & Bell, 2004; Malewski & Phillion, 2009; Pence & Macquillivray, 2008; Sleeter, 1996; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007; Stanitski & Fuelhcart, 2003; Wiest, 2004; Zhao, 2007). These goals hold true today when developing globally-minded educators. Thus, this study discusses the benefits of preservice teachers' cross-cultural immersion experiences in a Latin American country.

Theoretical Framework

This study is positioned within the theoretical framework of culturally responsive pedagogy and cross-cultural immersion experiences. Proponents of culturally responsive pedagogy recognize and value the salient cultural reference points of each student within the learning community and use that knowledge to engage all students in daily instructional practices (Ladson-billings, 1994; 1995). In fact, practitioners who seek to bridge the gap(s) between school culture and home/community cultures within their classroom are following this notion of culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that educators begin a culturally responsive approach by questioning the nature of the student-teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling and society, therefore maintaining an overall focus of 'problematizing' teaching—teaching by presenting problematic scenarios on a cultural level (p. 483). Noticing, addressing and valuing the impact of small social differences on children's interactions, behaviors and choices affect young students' engagement with the curricula and classroom community. In order for preservice teachers to initiate a culturally responsive stance and awareness, unique field experiences are a must. These kinds of field experiences, however, can be difficult

to arrange in a traditional school field placement. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests the need to 'present more robust portraits of teaching' (p. 484), therefore ensuring a richer and more authentic depiction of the various cultures around us.

Methods

Context of Study

This study was initiated at a private Midwestern university and received ethical approval from the institution's human research board. During the university's two-week spring break trip, a group of twelve White preservice teachers traveled with me to Nicaragua to gain a global perspective on teaching and learning and work with elementary and middle school students. This was my sixth service learning trip to Central America with preservice teachers.

Preservice teachers were required to register during winter term for my course entitled *Cross Cultural Learning in Central America*. This three- credit course recognizes student volunteer service work on an international level. The course specifically focused on teaching and service learning in diverse settings with an emphasis on cultural and socioeconomic issues. Activities included field experiences focusing on educators' interpersonal relationships within global communities. Students also earned credit by completing a specific project and making a presentation at a conference/event to a group of students/educators/community. Specific course assignments are listed in Appendix A.

The School

The primary/middle school that was the principal site of this study is located in Bluefields, Nicaragua and houses a student population of over 350, which includes grades K-6; only grades one through six, however, are included in this research study. Most classrooms at this school consist of 40-45 students and one classroom teacher—a common size for most schools in Nicaragua. There are no classroom aides or volunteers to assist the teacher. All students are required to wear uniforms—the females: navy skirts or pants and white blouses and socks with black shoes; the males: navy trousers with white shirts, socks with black shoes. Also, the teachers and administrators follow a similar dress code/uniform.

Classroom Environment

All classrooms contain desks arranged in rows located in a 100 square foot room, with no windows, only block walls with openings at the top, similar to lattice, in the concrete structure. There are no air-conditioners during the summer months, just an occasional breeze from the winds off the river bank. Students are crowded amid book bags on the floor. The teachers use a chalkboard and dry wall board on which they write all assignments during the day. A lot of time is devoted to students copying assignments from the board, since no copy machine is available to produce photocopies. There are not enough books

for each student—only five to ten books per class—and small groups of students have to share. This practice of sharing seems to be commonplace in the school and community.

Study Participants

Twelve White middle-class preservice teachers from a private Midwestern, Liberal Arts University participated in this study abroad service-learning project. Six students were juniors majoring in elementary education; six were sophomores with majors in the following: two Spanish education majors, one social studies education major, and three students majoring in mathematics education. The ages of the preservice teachers ranged from 19-21 years, including 10 females and two males. Preservice teachers were not seeking a licensure endorsement in English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or any other additional licensure endorsement—they simply wanted to travel abroad and participate in service learning by teaching in a multilanguage school. None of the participants had ever traveled outside of the United States prior to this trip.

All participants stayed at a hotel located within the community within only five minutes walking distance from the school. The hotel was centrally located in Bluefields, which overlooked the town. Each of the twelve preservice teachers were involved in teaching English, reading, mathematics, science, social studies (grades first to sixth) during this two-week period. Occasionally, preservice teachers were invited to teach and/or assist in English activities (practical English classes or workshops with classroom teachers) and help the physical education teacher. Also, some of the lessons were taught in both Spanish and English. All preservice teachers had taken at least one or two Spanish classes. Note: Being able to speak Spanish fluently was not a requirement for this study abroad experience.

While in Nicaragua, participants' two-week cross-cultural immersion experience was developed to include a variety of factors, such as: a) participation in students' families and community activities (e.g. Miss Bluefields beauty pageant; cultural dance competition, etc.); b) teaching Nicaraguan students from first to sixth grades in a multilingual classroom seven hours per day to visiting schools and places of historical or cultural significance; attending several educational and cultural events sponsored by schools and the teachers' university; c) facilitating English as Second language seminars/workshops with area teachers; d) developing academic Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2009) unit/lesson plans with Nicaraguan teachers and administrators; e) making presentations of cross-cultural learning and teaching experiences to community folks; and f) reflections on cross-cultural experiences through journal writings, group discussions, and meetings with the professor on preservice teachers' personal and professional growth.

Supervision

The university faculty member (i.e., the author of this study) traveled with the preservice teachers to Central America. Prior to leaving the United States, the university faculty member oriented students to the Nicaraguan culture; upon arriving at the destination, preservice teachers were oriented to cultural norms and, the principal gave them a tour of the school. The faculty member, along with the school principal, supervised the preservice teachers during the two-week service learning trip.

Project Goals and Objectives

The specific goals and objectives of the service learning project to Nicaragua were:

1. To explore the vocation of teaching beyond the traditional classroom setting; this includes interactions with diverse students, parents, and teachers on an international level;
2. To prepare preservice teachers for the vocation of teaching and to emphasize reflection, service to others, and prayer, which may be considered a component of the vocation of teaching;
3. To investigate how factors in the students' environment outside of school influence students' lives and learning and thus affect teachers' vocation; and
4. To demonstrate an understanding of cultural and socioeconomic community factors in the education of youth.

Data sources and data collection

Interview and observations

A variety of data sources were used to examine participants' perception of their cross-cultural teaching and learning experiences. These included preservice teachers' journal log entries (see appendix A, Class requirements) and classroom notes; semi-structured interviews with each of the participants before and after this service learning experience; classroom teaching videotapes; collaborative research project about languages spoken in the school; culminating reflection presentations at the university sponsored undergraduate research celebration; researchers' formal and informal classroom observations; and focus groups with teachers, administrators and staff, community folks and students. Individual semi-structured open, in-depth interviews conducted before and after the cultural immersion experience lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length and were audio taped to produce accurate transcriptions. The purpose of in-depth interviewing is to make meaning of the cultural experiences, to understand teaching and learning from a global perspective (Seidman, 1998) and to enter into the perspective of the interviewee (Patton, 2002) in this school in Nicaragua. Interview questions were based upon

preservice teachers' cross-cultural experiential learning, as indicated above. Prior to the study abroad trip, participants' interview sample questions included:

- (1) Why do you want to participate in this study abroad trip?;
- (2) What do you expect to learn from this experience?;
- (3) Have you traveled abroad before? If so, tell me about your experiences; and
- (4) Do you have major concerns or questions about the trip?

Upon returning to the United States, sample post-interview questions included four open-ended questions:

- (1) Tell me about your cross-cultural experiences in Nicaragua;
- (2) What was the most rewarding part of this experience, and were your expectations met/not met?
- (3) How might your cross-cultural experiences transfer into the classroom?; and
- (4) What advice do you have for other preservice teachers planning to teach abroad?

Focus Group Interviews

Two focus groups were held in the school library/resource room after school. Each group consisted of six participants. The principal, assistant principal, English language teacher, librarian, secretary/office manager and one parent volunteered to participate in the focus group. The other group consisted of one teacher from each grade level (grades one through six). Focus groups lasted approximately ninety minutes. This time frame allowed each participant to state feelings and reactions to each question. The rationale for using the above composition of interviewees was to assemble a heterogeneous group and to provide representatives from a variety of positions in the school, and to include a parent. (See Appendix B for the complete interview protocol).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis of Interviews/Focus Groups

Data from the interviews (pre and post), daily journal reflective logs, group meetings, and culminating presentation reports/paper were analyzed using constant comparative methodology (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). First, the researcher read and reread all interview transcripts, journals, field notes, papers and presentations (PowerPoint/poster), and then put them into identifiable tables framed by the purpose of this research study. Thus, all data were transcribed, and transcripts were read while listening to tapes in order to verify information. Each transcript was analyzed using the process of open coding (for conceptualization and categorizing data), followed by axial coding for making assumptions and developing emergent themes. Data were organized according to emergent ideas, and Patton's coding system for content analysis was used (Patton, 2002). Line-by-line open coding generated numerous categories resulting in several themes as benefits to preservice teachers.

For example, during the pre-trip interviews and application essays, students indicated a concern for being able to communicate with students and teachers in Nicaragua (language barriers), being accepted in the schools, phobia of being the minority or outsiders in the community, and fear of being rejected and not liking the food. Findings from the data sources were triangulated, resulting in common themes representing preservice teachers' experiential understandings, changes and growth on an individual and collective level as future educators.

Trustworthiness

I used several methods to increase "trustworthiness" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) and to minimize common threats to validity. Trustworthiness comes through providing credibility through the procedures followed in data collection and analysis; as Patton (2002) mentions, "a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness" (p. 494). Developing interviews, focus groups and protocols that give participants the opportunity to address and represent all sides of the issue provided a solid foundation for believability, along with collecting very rich, detailed descriptive data from participants. This provided strength of trust in the research. A member check of the data was performed, asking participants to read through the data after transcription, checking for accuracy. This validated participants' voices as they were represented in the data.

Trustworthiness of the study was also achieved by using multiple data sources (e.g. preservice teacher videotapes, researcher's classroom observations, field notes, journal entries), use of constant comparison methods (e.g. triangulation across data sets), and the creation of an audit trail documenting all stages of the study (e.g. researcher log entries). Thus, data and findings were triangulated to establish validity. Several types of triangulations were used in this study: methodological triangulation, data triangulation, theory triangulation, and investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002). The additional data sources included: participant observations in the classroom, informal interviews, and semi-structured focus group interviews. Functioning as a participant observer (Bernard, 2002; Patton, 2002) in classrooms allowed me to obtain information about preservice teachers' cross cultural immersion experiences.

Findings and Interpretations

Data analysis indicated that the service learning and teaching cross-cultural study abroad experience had a notable impact on the participants in terms of their understanding of a different culture and knowledge of how to work with students on an international level. Thus, my analysis of the multiple data sets collected throughout the two-week spring break period indicated that these twelve preservice teachers' culturally responsive pedagogical knowledge had grown since leaving the United States for Nicaragua. Six themes emerged from the data analysis: Change agents, Communication (language), Cultural knowledge (awareness), Cultural responsiveness, Empathy and respect, and Growth (personal and professional).

Data from the interviews, focus groups, reflection journals, teaching observations, conversations with all participants and teachers/administrators revealed that proactive attitudes and approaches led to a richer cross-cultural learning experience. Therefore, an obstacle became a learning opportunity for participants. The preservice teachers expressed that they learned profoundly from the Nicaraguan students, staff, and community folks, Nicaraguan culture, perceptions of American people, and about the world. All participants acknowledged their own personal growth and development. However, close examination of the data sets suggested that participants who shared their thoughts, questions and time with families, collaborated with teaching colleagues, and explored the many components of Nicaraguan culture gained knowledge from the cross cultural experience.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss a collection of pedagogical concepts on the cultural immersion experiences of preservice teachers' learning and understanding of another culture, as well as the benefits they gained from teaching in a Latin American classroom. I provide a description of themes with an analysis for identification and illumination of preservice teachers' thoughts on international classroom teaching and interaction with the community. I relied upon participants' interviews, focus groups, journal entries, field notes, and classroom observations to illustrate, as honestly as possible, their personal meanings in reference to benefits and learning about this global experience. As I began to sort through data, I found it helpful to present participants' principal cross-cultural pedagogical concepts as a collection, as a whole, in order to look for connections among the concepts. Table 1 lists overlapping themes presented by participants in this study.

Table 1

Pedagogical Concepts: Cross-Cultural Benefits for Preservice Teachers
<i>Change Agents</i>
<i>Communication (language)</i>
<i>Cultural Knowledge (awareness)</i>
<i>Cultural Responsiveness</i>
<i>Differences & Respect</i>
<i>Growth (Personal & Professional)</i>

The most prevalent and prominent pedagogical concept for cross-cultural benefits for preservice teachers is being culturally responsive to students in the classroom. This concept permeated all data sets presented in this study. Being culturally responsive and possessing cultural knowledge is a key theme for future educators' success in the classroom. Cultural responsive teaching is a new way of addressing the roles of teachers and students in the classroom. *Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them* (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Preservice teachers attempted to incorporate many of the components of Gay's model, such as: using a variety of instructional strategies, addressing different learning styles and multiple intelligences, making learning authentic, and building connections between home and school while acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritage of students. Preservice teachers seemed committed to valuing the experiences of their students and working toward a more just society, far more profound goals than simply a collection of lesson plans, teaching strategies, or pedagogical methods.

A key assumption from this cross-cultural immersion experience is that students learn in different ways and that effective teachers recognize and respond to these differences. As participants were preparing to teach, they had to broaden their view of what it takes to be a successful teacher in the classroom. To become competent, participants had to acquire skills, attitudes, and knowledge. Preservice teachers had learned to focus on the learning strengths of students in the classroom, to diagnose different student needs, and to adjust for learning styles; they had developed cultural competence and critical consciousness to actively challenge social justice. Thus, these preservice teachers had grown personally, as well as professionally.

As I reviewed the transcripts and other participants' documents, cultural knowledge and awareness emerged as the strongest driving concept; furthermore, which relates to the participants' ideas about teaching and working with diverse students. Cultural knowledge (awareness) can be defined and explained as a concept or principle with attributes described by preservice teachers—a concept that delineates dispositions of teachers in the classroom; these dispositions include the following: educators' acceptance of others by acknowledging differences, similarities, and demonstrating an appreciation of differences. This acceptance and acknowledgement can be accomplished through cultural experiences, developing an open mind, stepping out of one's comfort zone in order to understand differences, celebrating differences, embracing all cultures, respecting students from all walks of life, learning to communicate in various ways by breaking through those communication barriers, and demonstrating an appreciation of differences, and a change agent and advocate for social justice and equity.

During the focus group interview process, the teachers were quick to state that non-Spanish speaking students were put in special classes (pull-out) for assistance with Spanish, and a part-time bilingual teacher worked with students who needed additional help with English. All teachers at the school spoke multiple languages, too. Students in the classroom are only permitted to speak Spanish and English when instructed by the teacher.

Respecting different cultures

A predominant theme that emerged from the data analysis was participants' new understanding and respect for a culture with which they were unfamiliar. This finding affirms the central tenet of culturally relevant practice, which underscores the need for educators to not only recognize but also infuse students' cultural connections within the classroom environment (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995). Nevertheless, I learned that this transformation was slow to develop even though, prior to the exchange experience, all participants stated on their applications and pre-trip interviews that they expected to grow by becoming more open and socially aware.

Communication/language

Preservice teachers' close interactions with teachers, staff members, community folks, and indigenous people for two weeks enabled them to learn about a different culture from casual and personal encounters, as well as from professional encounters. One of the participants, a junior, stated, "I learned a great deal about the culture of Nicaragua, not only the school culture but the home and community culture." These first-hand immersion experiences helped preservice teachers learn to communicate, not only through language but also through body movements and hand gestures. Stated one of the sophomore preservice students:

Before long I was able to pick up the language and understand certain phrases. The Spanish language skills that I learned in high school seemed to resurface, and they seemed to understand slang words some of us used in the states.

These students began to develop a new understanding of how one's behavior and thinking is shaped by the culture he/she grows up with and how important it is to respect individual cultures. This type of knowledge was hard to grasp and understand by reading a textbook or from information provided by a professor. "Our challenges and differences become opportunities," as one student wrote in her journal during the two-week experience. Other preservice teachers made similar comments that indicated personal and professional growth prior to leaving for Nicaragua. Although participants encountered language barriers and were exposed to a new environment, participants were grateful that they were treated well and their American culture respected. It is likely that this respect helped them become more appreciative of Nicaraguan culture. One of the main reasons the community folks and students in the

classrooms were able to understand these preservice teachers is the multilanguage community where English and several other languages are spoken (**Figures 1 and 2**).

The focus group interviews confirmed that bilingualism is highly encouraged in this school system in Nicaragua. There is a wide range of languages spoken within the school, including Spanish, English, Creole, Miskito, and French (Figures 1 and 2). Many of the students at the school are bilingual, some even trilingual. There was one student in the school who spoke four different languages. Also, the school offers English classes to encourage all students to become bilingual. Overall, the culture in this area of Nicaragua highly encourages bilingualism, and this school system is working hard to give all students the chance to learn multiple languages.

Personal and Professional Growth

Preservice teachers struggled with their own identities; they compared personal and professional cultural experiences in Nicaragua to those experiences in the United States. During this two-week period, participants examined the various meanings of being 'the other.' Often being 'the other' involves being invisible, unnoticeable. Yet, this concept of otherness is a 'contradictory phenomenon'—one may 'stick out like a sore thumb' (Madrid, 2001).

Each American preservice teachers' cultural boundaries and experiences were broadened and authenticated by their exposure and participation in Nicaraguan culture; however, each preservice teacher grew at his or her own pace, not noticing the struggles that community folks or students were having adjusting to them. I noticed that this realization became evident initially; however, near the end of the first week of the cross-cultural experience, we could all see each other's challenges, which become opportunities.

This experience gave participants the opportunity and the confidence to collaborate with professionals in the Nicaraguan schools and community. All participants stated in their journals that they learned new teaching strategies from their cooperating teachers/mentor teacher. And, their perspectives on international education were broadened, connections were made with other professionals, which resulted in special, professional relationships that will allow them to collaborate with other teachers from around the globe and make a positive contribution to the lives of students. Participants felt strongly that they learned and could continually learn from each other and exchange ideas in the future.

Culturally responsive change agents

What Did Preservice Teachers Gain from this Experience? After completion of this two-week study abroad experience, preservice teachers were able to: a) Reflect on prior knowledge and link new ideas to already familiar ideas, and make connections to experiences; b) Understand how students' learning is influenced by individual experiences, talents, and prior learning, as well as language, culture, family, and community

Figure 1. Number of Languages Spoken in Grade 2-Grade 6 (note: Data for Grade 1 were not available)

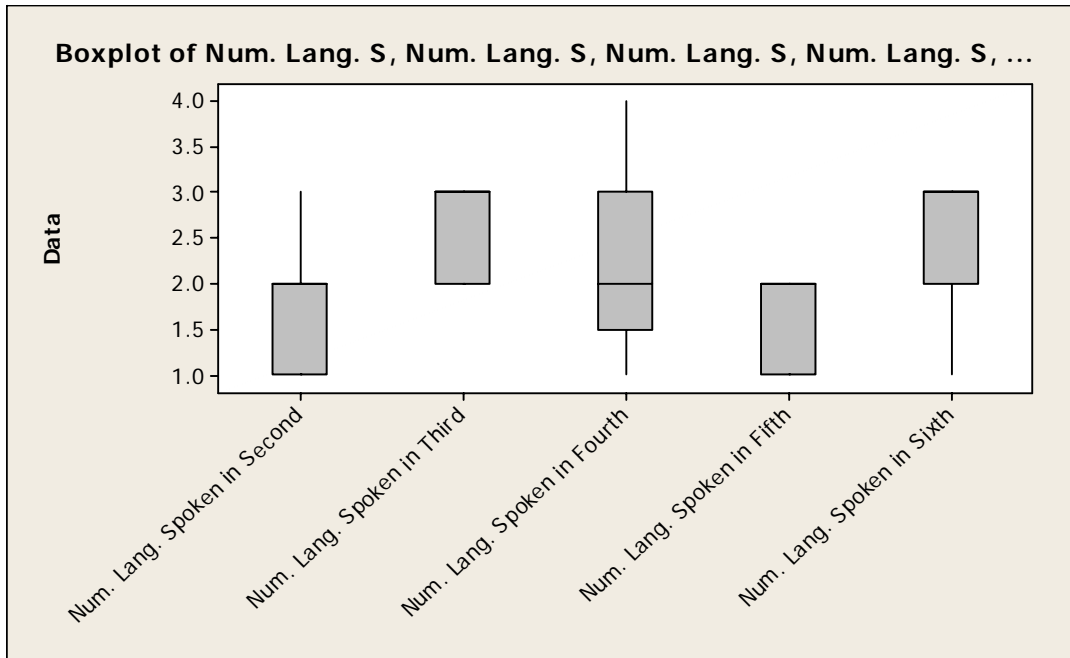
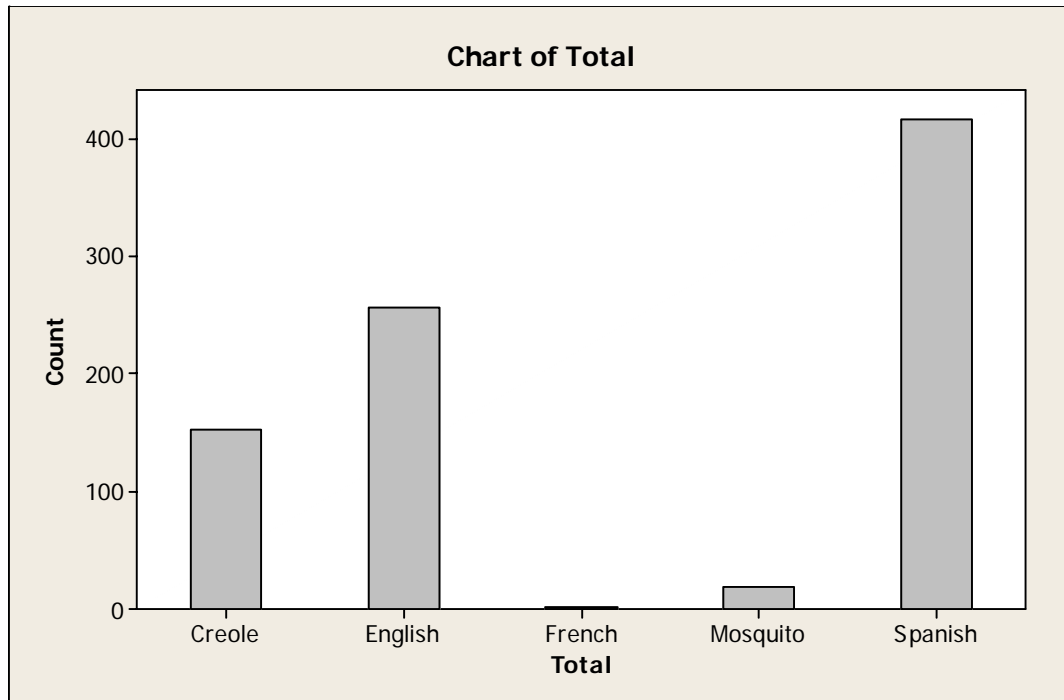


Figure 2. Total Number of Languages Spoken School-Wide



values; c) Help people work productively and cooperatively with each other in complex social settings; d) Demonstrate how factors in the students' environment outside of school (e.g. family circumstances, community environments, health and economic conditions) may influence students' life and learning; e) Experience culture in the classroom as well as culture outside of the classroom; and f) Witness/visualize/experience their faith through service to others, reflection, and prayer.

Benefits to Preservice Teachers. A culturally responsive stance can be nurtured through a cross-cultural immersion experience, and opportunities for preservice teachers to go abroad have become feasible in recent years. However, caution needs to be taken as to how participants can benefit from their overseas experience; that is, they are not just learning about others but also learning from and with others. The goal for this study abroad program was to consciously step outside of the 'tourist perspective' while studying abroad, since 'exploring' as a tourist can potentially limit participants' learning (Quezada, 2005). The findings of this study indicated that preservice teachers experienced several benefits from this study abroad service learning project. The benefits included the following components: students taught lessons, tutored, developed lesson plans and unit plans, performed assessments/evaluations, and assisted the classroom teacher as needed; gained an orientation to the educational system and its structure in Central America; they understood the roles and functions of teachers and other school personnel; they explored multicultural and global concerns as they relate to the purposes of education; they explored the vocation of teaching and service to others; they developed the skills of a reflective educator/practitioner; they examined personal belief systems as they relate to human diversity; they examined the range of alternatives involved in human choice by exploring conflicting viewpoints and values concerning the problems and issues that schools face; they investigated how factors in students' environments outside of school might influence students' lives and learning; and they examined cultural and community diversity and learned how to incorporate students' experiences, cultures, and community resources into instruction. A culturally responsive perspective can be seen through the lens of preservice teacher's cross-cultural immersion experiences. These preservice teachers benefitted from their overseas experience; that is, they were not just learning about others, but also learning from and with others. Thus, a cross-cultural immersion itself does not promote a better understanding of the 'other' culture and equip preservice teachers with better skills to work with people of different cultures; rather, it requires that these teachers take an active role and a positive attitude when immersed in the culture.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings from this study indicated that preservice teachers' cross-cultural immersion experiences in Nicaragua were beneficial to their personal and professional development; and they felt a study abroad experience will assist in their future

teaching profession. Each participant encountered unexpected obstacles and challenges such as: language barriers, food choices that were limited to rice and beans, and thoughts of home and luxuries that are taken for granted. Overall, the positive experiences overshadowed the negative comments, and challenges became positives.

The findings also indicate that each participant grew professionally after having experienced Latin American culture and became cultural change agents and advocates for social justice and equity issues. Preservice teachers' experiential learning made them more culturally responsive practitioners as a result of this cross-cultural experience. According to Bryan and Marsha (1997), overseas student teaching can be a rewarding experience and dramatically changes the perspectives of emerging teachers. Preservice teachers in this study developed new knowledge and understandings, respect for different cultures and multiculturalism, which increased empathetic dispositions toward immigrant students. Rodriguez (2000) argues that, although there are many goals and structures for cultural immersion programs, gaining empathy is necessary for achieving what she terms an 'elusive perspective shift.'

Overall, the twelve preservice teachers reported that they learned new and effective teaching strategies for Latin American students. Thus, preservice teachers learned to be more creative, innovative, collaborative and flexible in teaching with limited resources as compared to resources and tools available in American classrooms. This cross-cultural immersion experience afforded preservice teachers the unique opportunity to broaden their mindset to collaborate with people from a third-world country and to grow professionally as future educators.

Teachers in the United States work with students of a wide range of cultural, language, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Understanding diversity, embracing it, and being effective with all students is thus an important goal of teacher preparation at this Midwestern university. Research shows that growth in intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness occurs as a result of experiences and cognitive meaning-making from those experiences. The service learning immersion experience in Central America benefitted preservice teachers. Thus, the spring break mission and service learning trip to Central America provided students with opportunities to broaden their perspective on the vocation of teaching. Preservice teachers were very enthusiastic about their experiences, citing increased understanding of the culture, languages, student learning, and teaching confidence. Moreover, cross-cultural experience provided students with opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of another culture and skills to work effectively with diverse students on an international level. Teacher education programs should provide study abroad opportunities for preservice teachers to develop the attitudes, skills and dispositions, and competencies to work effectively with culturally diverse students. The findings of this study demonstrated the value of a cross-cultural experiential practicum, as well as its impact upon emerging teachers' lives. Teacher education

programs should provide preservice teachers with similar opportunities to help them develop as culturally responsive practitioners and change agents.

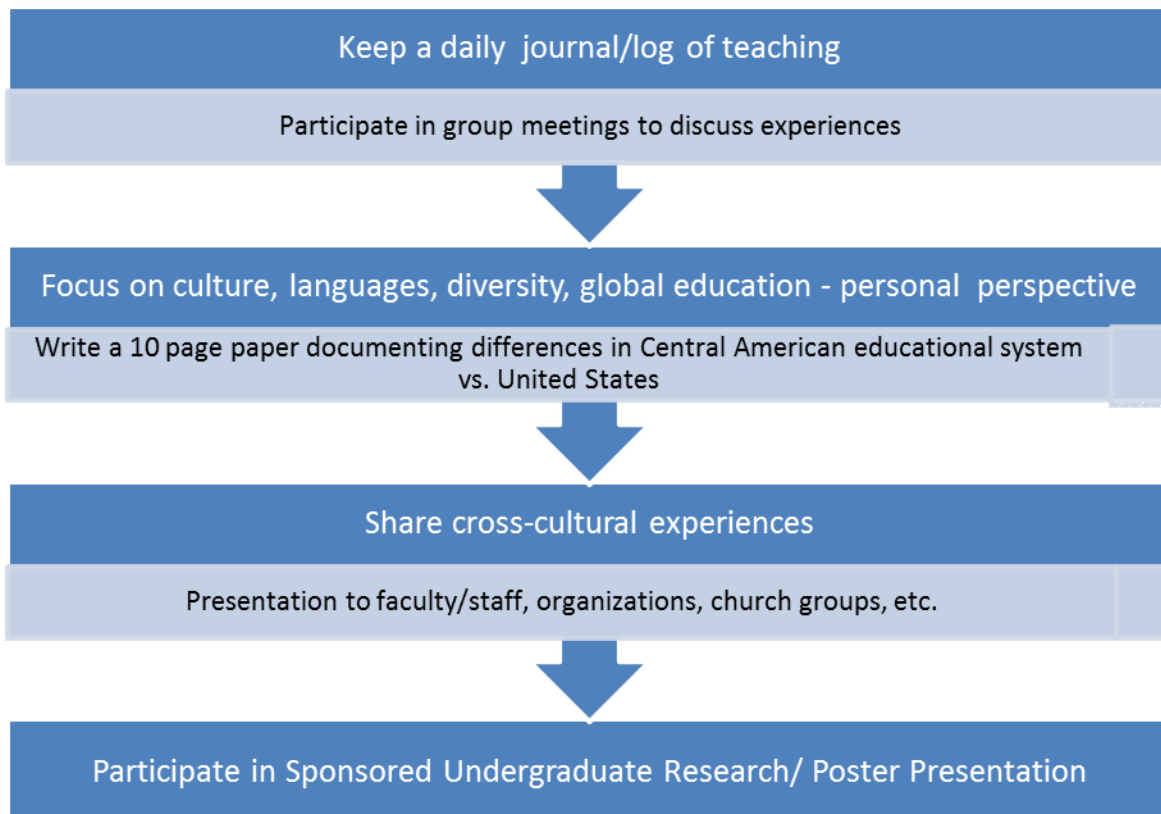
References

- Aguilar, T., & Pohan, C. (1998). A cultural immersion experience to enhance cross-cultural competence. *Sociotam*, 8(1), 29-49.
- Banks, J.A. (2008). *An introduction to multicultural education* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bernard, H. (2002). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (3rd ed). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Bryan, S., & Marsha, S. (1997). The effect of overseas internships on early teaching experiences. *Clearing House*, 70(4), 199-203.
- Buckley-Van Hoek, S., Kasten, K., Keenan, D., & Adeeb, P. (1998, February). *The school and beyond: The efficacy of early professional courses with field experiences for changing attitudes and beliefs*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, New Orleans, LA.
- Cooper, A., Beare, P., & Thorman, J. (1990). Preparing teachers for diversity: A comparison of student teaching experiences in Minnesota and South Texas. *Action in Teacher Education*, 12(3), 1-4.
- Cushner, K. (2007). The role of experience in the making of internationally-minded teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(1), 27-39.
- Cushner, K., & Brislin, R.W. (1996). *Intercultural interactions: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). *Powerful teacher education: Lessons from exemplary programs*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Deering, T.E., & Stanutz, A. (1995). Preservice field experience as a multicultural component of a teacher education program. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 46, 390-4.
- Ference, R., & Bell, S. (2004). A cross-cultural immersion in the US: Changing preservice teacher attitudes toward Latino ESOL students. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37(4), 343-50.
- Foster, M. (1995). African-American teachers and culturally relevant pedagogy. In J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 570- 81). New York: Macmillan.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teach College Press.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-16.
- Glazer, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gomez, M.L. (1996). Prospective teachers' perspectives on teaching "other people's children." In K. Zeichner, S. Melnick, & M.L. Gomez (Eds.), *Currents of reform in preservice teacher education* (pp. 109-132). New York: Teachers College.
- Howard, G. (1999). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multicultural schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream keepers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159-65.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (2000). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Madrid, A. (2001). Missing people and others: Joining together to expand the circle. In M.L. Anderson & P. Hill Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (4th ed.) (pp. 23-28). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Malewski, E., & Phillion, J. (2009). International field experiences: The impact of class, gender, race on the perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 52-60.
- McAllister, G., & Irvine, I. (2002). The role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students: A qualitative study of teachers' beliefs. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(5), 433-43.
- Merryfield, M.M. (2000). Why aren't American teachers being prepared to teach for diversity, equity, and interconnectedness? A study of lived experiences in the making of multicultural and global educators. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16(4), 429-43.
- Nieto, J. (2006). Cultural plunge: Cultural immersion as a means of promoting self-awareness and cultural sensitivity among student teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, (Winter), 75-84.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pence, H.M., & Macgillivray, I.K. (2008). The impact of an international field experience on preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 14-25.
- Quezada, R.L. (2005). Beyond educational tourism: Lessons learned while student teaching abroad. *International Education Journal*, 5(4), 458-65.
- Rodriguez, K. (2000, May/June). Cultural immersion: Achieving the elusive perspective shift. *Transitions Abroad Magazine*. Retrieved October 27, 2011, from http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0005/cultural_immersion.shtml
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Sleeter, C. (1996). *Multicultural education as social activism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sleeter, C. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94-106.
- Smith-Davis, J. (2004). The new immigrant students need more than ESL. *The Education Digest*, 69(8), 21-6.
- Stachowski, L., & Sparks, T. (2007). Thirty years and 2, 000 student teachers later: An overseas student teaching project that is popular, successful, and replicable. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(1), 115-32.
- Stanitski, D., & Fuellhart, K. (2003). Tools for developing short-term study abroad classes for geography studies. *Journal of Geography*, 102, 202-15.
- Tatum, B.D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: An application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62, 1-24.
- Wiest, L. (2004). Using immersion experiences to shake up preservice teachers' views of cultural differences. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 49(5), 358-65.
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2004). *Understanding by Design*. New York: Merrill/ACSD.
- Wilson, A.H. (1982). Cross-cultural experiential learning for teachers. *Theory into Practice*, 21(13), 184-92.
- Wlodkowski, R.J. (1995, April). *Understanding multicultural perspectives: Implications for new teacher roles and professional development experiences*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Zhao, Y. (2007). Impact of immersion experience in an immigrant community on pre-service teachers' cross-cultural and global awareness. *Education and Human Development*, 1(2), 1-10.

Appendix A. Project Requirements

In order to access students' learning and understanding of cross-cultural experiences, students were required to:



Appendix B. Interview/Focus Group Questions

Research Questions included but were not limited to the following:

- a) Tell me something about yourself and why you majored in education.
- b) How long have you been teaching at this school?
- c) What types of teaching strategies do you implement with large class sizes?
- d) Do you find classroom management a challenge?
- e) Specifically, what role do families play in the education of their students?
- f) How do you balance teaching and home life?
- g) How does the school system /teacher manage bilingualism and/or trilingualism in the
- h) classroom?
- i) How does the school system accommodate students who do not speak Spanish?
- j) Are foreign language classes offered by the school system?
- k) Do you offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes? Explain
- l) Tell me about yourself (e.g., education, major, hobbies, etc.).
Tell me about your experiences at this school.
- m) Discuss how language is managed at this school. Which languages are permitted to be spoken in class? Outside of class? Policies? Rules
- n) What are your major challenges in the classroom? school?