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This study investigated pre-service and credentialed teachers at 2 universities in the Southwestern United States (N = 24), who participated in education-abroad programs in Mexico over 1 summer. This study examined the literature within a framework for developing cultural competence to describe and understand students’ experiences. Following a discussion of research methodology, emergent themes are reported and discussed within the frameworks presented. The study concludes with a discussion of changes in teacher preparation programs required or recommended to improve academic achievement among English language learners of Mexican descent in U.S. schools.

The purpose of this inquiry is to document the process that in-service and pre-service teachers in two U.S. Southwestern universities undergo as they engage in self-exploration while immersed in a foreign country. Specifically, this process is associated with these teachers’ journeys as they explore cultural competency. Readers should keep in mind that the study is meant to describe processes for developing cultural competence, not for measuring cultural competence. The participants completed two graduate teacher preparation programs in which in-service (special education) and pre-service (multiple elementary-level subjects) teachers are prepared to address the needs of English language learners (ELLs) and culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners in Arizona and California classrooms, where more than one half of the students in public schools are classified as ELLs (NCES, 2005).

We situate the literature review within a culturally responsive teaching framework that features cultural competence as one of five components and provides the overall conceptual basis for this work (Ladd-Billing, 1995, 2000). A brief discussion of the research method is presented followed by findings, emergent themes, and implications for in-service and pre-service graduate teacher preparation programs. Special consideration is given to ways in which graduate teacher preparation programs can be adapted to improve achievement for kindergarten through Grade-12 (K–12) students of Mexican descent.

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SITUATING THE STUDY

Relevant literature in the area of developing cultural competence includes such topics as (a) the prevalence of cultural and linguistic disparities among students and classroom teachers, (b) the value of multicultural and linguistic immersion experiences for pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs, (c) the importance of teacher reflection as a tool for creating culturally responsive teaching practices, and (d) the complexities of conceptual and methodological issues in studies designed to measure the effectiveness of multicultural teacher education programs—in this case, specifically in the United States (Artiles, Trent, Hoffman-Kipp, & Lopez-Torres, 2000; Santoro & Allard, 2006). Because ELLs are also CLD and often overrepresented in special education programs in the United States, multicultural and special education literature has been included (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

The relation between teacher preparation and the cultural and linguistic diversity of students in pre-K–12 classrooms in the United States has become more prominent in the educational literature on cultural competence (Artiles & McClafferty, 1998). Prominent scholars in the area of multicultural education have found correlations between teacher preparation and the preponderance of achievement gaps separating ELLs from native English speaking peers (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billing, 2000; Nieto, 1999). Teacher educators have grappled with the best ways to prepare the teaching force for student differences—in particular, for students with high-incidence disabilities and English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education needs, in the face of contrasting cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers and students. Some researchers recommend that teachers immerse themselves in their prospective students’ cultures and languages to gain fundamental knowledge about their students’ lives, families, or communities (Kleinfeld, 1998; Kosnick & Beck, 2003).

Contributions in the field of multicultural teacher preparation include discussions of teachers’ critical reflections and cultural responsiveness toward students (Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003; Howard, 2003) and how constructs from cultural-historical theory can be used to assess teacher learning in multicultural contexts. Little is empirically known about what components of teacher education programs improve learning outcomes for ELLs and children with culturally diverse backgrounds; however, cultural-historical theory can inform research designs as teacher educators attempt to assess and improve pre-service teacher education programs. Peo, Johnson, and Tond (1998) asserted that in culturally relevant research, multiculturally minded investigators need to develop assessments that provide more opportunities for reflection, attitude change, and the organization of new knowledge on the part of pre-service teachers. They asserted that components leading to efficacious practices and improved student outcomes need to be identified.

Other researchers have documented the conceptual and methodological issues in studies that assess the effectiveness of multicultural teacher education programs (Jennings & Smith, 2002; Keim, Warring, & Ray, 2001). Furthermore, many researchers encourage collaborative efforts between different colleges and universities within and across states (Bunnefe, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ray, 2000). Studies of this type need more rigorous and generalizable findings to assess the depth and longevity of the success of the multicultural teacher education programs they describe. Mixed-study methods combining both qualitative and quantitative paradigms enhance the strength of related studies (Artiles et al., 2000). Qualitative researchers should provide thorough descriptions of settings and observations, as well as triangulation of data sources to
enhance the credibility of findings. Similarly, the rigor of quantitative studies is enhanced by the extent to which instruments and measures used and sampling procedures are reliable and valid. We situate these bodies of literature in the study as contextual guidelines. The theoretical framework and methods sections follow.

RESEARCH METHOD

Conceptual Base for the Study

To situate this study, we integrate a culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) framework with a conceptual model drawn from the field of multicultural teacher preparation. A CRP framework includes cultural competence as one of five elements (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000) we utilize to layer and organize the model, which is formed, in part, through the emergent themes from data collected in this study. CRP is also an important descriptor for discussing students’ journeys toward cultural competence.

CRP. In the literature reviewed, the most important goal of CRP is to increase the academic achievement of CLD students. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), one lead scholar in this discipline, conceptualizes CRP in terms of five interrelated categories: sociopolitical context, cultural competency, honoring families, academic achievement, and English language development (ELD) strategies. We chose to use Ladson-Billings’s (2000) model of CRP as a framework for this inquiry, as it is global in application while at the same time specific and inclusive of the notion of teachers’ developing cultural competency.

The consideration of a sociopolitical context in teacher preparation is key because such contexts frame the educational climate experienced by every learner involved. For example, in the United States, bilingual education exists on an historical sociopolitical pendulum that swings between antibilingual education legislation (i.e., English-only laws in California and Arizona) and highly supported, pro-bilingual education legislation (e.g., The Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968). For example, ELLs attending K-12 schools offering bilingual education programs during the 1970s and the 1990s had profoundly different educational experiences of bilingual education and English language learning methods. During the 1970s, children were provided opportunities to attend schools with bilingual, transitional, maintenance, or dual immersion programs rather than the submersion “sink or swim” programs of the 1960s in which the curriculum was delivered in English with few supports for ELL or bilingual learners. Then, during the 1990s under Proposition 203, most ELLs did not qualify under the established set of waivers to attend bilingual programs in which Spanish was used to help children acquire English and to provide content support. Cultural competency is a prominent feature of CRP because pre-service and in-service teachers need to be aware of cultural differences in the United States and, increasingly, in the global context. Some of these differences arise from cultural preferences, and some from historical and unjust legacies such as slavery, segregation, and discrimination. In both cases, these U.S. citizens have been historically marginalized from mainstream culture, and their marginalization can be addressed through more socially just and equitable educational practices. Being inclusive of, and honoring, families in educational settings is one way educators can begin to practice cultural competence. As related to the educational practice of honoring families, pre-service and in-service teachers need to be made aware that academic achievement is valued by all cultures; however, families from CLD backgrounds may manifest their support for their children’s academic success in ways not generally acknowledged by mainstream U.S. culture (Harry, 2002). For this reason, teachers’ exposure to families’ home life and values is an integral part to developing both cultural competence and an appreciation of the unique attributes all families contribute to the classroom and school environment. Because a U.S. education holds the key to increased societal access and, for many, an improved quality of life, CLD families understand the necessity of acquiring English as a means to obtain greater resources and opportunities within U.S. society.

Ladson-Billings (1995, 2000) posited that CRP provides a framework for incorporating language, culture, and education for ELLs to enhance their academic success. Like-minded researchers have described CRP as pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Banks et al., 2001). Gay (2000) asserted that CRP uses “the cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of (CLD learners) to make learning more relevant to and effective for students. . . . It teaches to and through strengths of these students and is culturally validating and affirming” (p. 29). Banks et al. explored how professional development for pre-service and credentialed teachers could provide deeper understanding for educators about the complex nature within and between various CLD groups in the United States and how interaction between race, ethnicity, language, and social class influence student performance.

Another important aspect of CRP is to increase knowledge and understanding among school administrators, teachers, and staff about their students’ cultural backgrounds (Reyes Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2004; Love, Henderson, & Hanshaw, 1996). These recommendations can be extended to include pre-service teachers. When teacher preparation programs focus on meaningful instruction for ELLs that is culturally relevant, context embedded, and authentic, researchers expect that, regardless of state-imposed English-only policies, these students can overcome academic difficulties related to language and cultural differences and be successful in school. To attain and to practice the skills associated with cultural competence, educators need opportunities and support to become proficient in working successfully with students from diverse CLD backgrounds. One way that participants in teacher preparation programs can respond to the needs of ELLs of Mexican descent is to commit themselves to professional journeys toward cultural competence.

In Table 1, cultural competence is operationalized in CRP definitional terms to provide classroom applications of the construct. Characteristics of cultural competence are placed beside those of CRP to understand how teachers’ emerging cultural competence is related to CRP practices in classrooms and, ultimately, to the academic performance of ELLs and CLD learners.

Conceptualizing developing cultural competency. Those who have pioneered studies in cultural competency conclude that cultural competency is not a skill automatically or intrinsically acquired. Health care professions and child mental health agencies have been developing norms for cultural competency for more than 15 years (Hogan-Garcia, 2003). According to these professions and agencies, cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over an extended period of time. In other words, cultural competence is the integration and transformation of preconceived knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase accessibility and the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</th>
<th>Characteristics of Cultural Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching with cultural</td>
<td>Being self-reflective and honest about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competence (Understanding)</td>
<td>one’s intentions and motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sociopolitical context</td>
<td>Understanding race, ethnicity,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>language, social class, and so forth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are underlying factors to students’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Creating opportunities)</td>
<td>Learning about students’ backgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to honor students’ families</td>
<td>and experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Supporting and expecting)</td>
<td>Recognizing students’ academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic achievement</td>
<td>difficulties may be related to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>environment and teacher attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rather than inherent deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Applying) English language</td>
<td>Using context-embedded and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development strategies</td>
<td>comprehensible constructivist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


linguistic differences that influence and impact educators in the United States. The independent but concurrent programs consist of academic work, cultural activities, and experiences working with children, their families, and teachers. Site visits to educational agencies in Guadalajara, Michoacán, Querétaro, and San Miguel de Allende were also conducted.

The majority of the immersion experience was in the city of Guanajuato in central Mexico. Surrounded by mountains and situated in the highlands, Guanajuato City is known for its silver mines and beautiful Spanish colonial architecture. The population of Guanajuato City is approaching 80,000 people, but the city itself has the charm and atmosphere of a small, yet thriving, town. It is an ideal location for students to learn Spanish, for it is home to the Cervantino (a Shakespeare-like festival honoring Miguel Sávareda de Cervantes occurring in October), hosts a myriad of cultural and artistic events, and boasts of an eclectic mix of international visitors year round.

Participants

The first group of students (Group A) who participated in the Mexico Abroad Program (a pseudonym) included 1 undergraduate student, 2 educational specialists, 10 master’s students, and 2 doctoral candidates. Of these 15 students, 12 were included in this study (1 undergraduate, 2 educational specialists, 7 master’s students, and 2 doctoral students). The undergraduate student was an Art History major of Mexican descent. She was not interested in becoming a teacher, but she wanted to live in Mexico and become more proficient in Spanish. The educational specialists were both from Mexico and were studying at the university to learn advanced skills and methods in speech and language. They planned to return to Mexico to work as speech and language pathologists to assist children with speech and language impairments. The majority of the masters’ students were in Bilingual Special Education, and 6 of the 7 were of Mexican descent. Three of the 7 were born in Mexico. All were interested in experiencing life in Guanajuato City and having the opportunity to work with Mexican students in regular and special education settings. The doctoral student joined the Mexico Abroad Program from a major public university in the central United States, and she wanted to learn more about the Mexican culture through a first-hand experience. Although her Spanish was limited, she consistently communicated through gestures, broken Spanish, and sign language to express herself to both Mexican teachers and students. These 12 student participants volunteered to submit their journals for analysis to the researchers. The self-selected student participants were mostly women (11; men = 1) ranging in age, race, ethnicity, language proficiency in English and Spanish, and teaching experience.

Fifteen participants from the Group B university were originally considered for the study. Group B participants included 4 undergraduate students, 10 graduate Bilingual Cross-Cultural Language Academic Development (BCLAD) pre-service teachers, and 1 master’s student. Of the 15, 12 were included (1 graduate, 3 undergraduate, and 8 graduate BCLAD pre-service teachers). The master’s level student was of Korean descent and spoke Spanish; this participant was employed in California as a special education resource specialist teacher. The 3 undergraduate students were in a pre-service program that offered a degree with primary school teaching credentials in California. Two were of Mexican descent—not 1 of whom spoke Spanish fluently. The Spanish speaker had family in Guanajuato. The third undergraduate student was a native English speaker, not of Mexican descent. Two of the BCLAD students were Spanish-speaking Mexicans born U.S. citizens, and 1 other was a trilingual (English, Farsi,
The Mexico Abroad Program founder, selected the five sites, which include our schools in C.D. The rest were non-U.S. students. As in the case of the students from the Group A, the U.S. sites, the participants were non-U.S. students. The study was conducted at a site dedicated to global and family development. The research sites were located in four countries or in their respective regions (i.e., Mexico, United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom). The researchers were aware that a detailed description of their characteristics and attributes would require extra attention and analysis. They were aware that the data contained both demographic and qualitative information. A brief description of each of the participants is included in Tables 2 and 3.

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Type</th>
<th>Experience Abroad</th>
<th>No. of Years Teaching</th>
<th>Student Identity</th>
<th>Primary Language</th>
<th>Spanish Level</th>
<th>Reported Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish/Intermediate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service</td>
<td>Mexican born; In U.S. 10 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Spanish &amp; English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Spanish &amp; English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Pass corps, South America</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>White/Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Frequent family trips to Mexico</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service</td>
<td>Multiple summers abroad internationally</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>English &amp; Spanish</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Persian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>English &amp; Spanish</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Persian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service</td>
<td>Mexican border travel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>English &amp; Farsi</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Persian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
research site was a public institution established by the national government that provided a plethora of social services to support and serve needy families: DIF (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, or The Integral Development of the Family). The DIF center and staff provided resources and assistance to children with specific developmental challenges.

Goals for Each Program

Students from both Southwestern universities participated together in the Mexico Abroad Program. These universities in two different states provide alternative certification for teachers seeking bilingual endorsement. In Mexico, student participants take university coursework and have special seminars on topics ranging from accommodating learners with disabilities in Mexico to working with students’ families. Students from both institutions are placed in practicum-like settings in Mexican classrooms working with teachers. Students are provided with opportunities to work in regular or special education settings, as well as with regular or special education students. To make the immersion experience more complete, students live with families for the duration of their experience.

Group B students are required to pass oral and written Spanish language exams within 1 year of the completion of their coursework to be eligible for BCLAD certification. Coursework completed in Mexico is focused on improving their teaching methodology, skills, and practice specifically related to Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English strategies for teaching ELLs. These courses are taught by the Group B professor. Group A students are enrolled in two courses during the immersion program. These courses focus on teaching CLD children with and without learning disabilities. These courses are taught by the Group A professor and doctoral student, respectively.

Data Collection

The data presented in Figure 1 was generated from the authors’ and the students’ work. Authors include instructors (N = 1) and professors (N = 2), as well as student participants (N = 24) from both universities. The data were collected during the summer of 2005. The program began in early spring on both campuses and ended in early July. During this period, researchers conducted 3-hour class sessions (30 days), observed students teaching in Mexican classrooms for 30 min intervals (5 days each student), collected student journals (N = 24), and conducted individual semistructured student interviews with 6 students (n = 3, Group A students; n = 3, Group B students). Formal class sessions were held in Mexico from May 25 until June 24. Follow-up interviews focused on evidence of developing culturally competent participants (Figure 1), the needs of students, the types of classroom practices implemented, and participant perception of their own progression toward cultural competence. Researcher field notes, student assignments, and culminating projects were also collected. We examined these artifacts to further define who students were, to view their progression toward cultural competence, and to triangulate the primary data sources.

Data Analysis

The analysis of student journals, semistructured interviews, teacher-researcher observations, and assignments relied on thematic analysis and elements of qualitative grounded theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and a systematic coding procedure described by Glesne (2005) to triangulate the data. Data analysis relied on “a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description” (Glesne, 2005, p. 147). We began by generating numerous codes as we read through responses identifying data related to developing cultural competency and culturally responsive pedagogy (Table 1). Then we began focused coding by reviewing initial codes, eliminating the most unrelated responses, combining smaller categories into larger ones, and subdividing categories when appropriate. At the subdivision stage, patterns emerged that helped us to further organize codes into themes related to the characteristics of developing cultural competency (as related to CRP). These codes provided categories for analysis (see Table 1). We identified emergent themes within these categories in addition to classifying, synthesizing, and interpreting data to identify themes that emerged outside of the categories.

We documented whether participants in either group exhibited the characteristics of cultural competence via the practice of CRP, as defined in Table 1. Originally, we categorized developing cultural competency into binary codes (present or non-present), signifying that a student displayed developing cultural competency characteristics or that a student did not; however, binary codes were problematic because we understood developing cultural competency to be an evolving, continual progression rather than a static or fixed state. Therefore, instead of documenting that cultural competency characteristics were “not present,” we describe it as a developmental process occurring at individual levels that evolve and are sustained over time. Findings from each data
source were juxtaposed to determine data saliency, points of convergence, and divergence—
including ways in which responses differed between programs and within student level of study (e.g., doctoral candidate vs. master's student vs. BCLAD pre-service teacher).

FINDINGS: DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE, PASO A PASO

Findings focus on the U.S. pre-service teachers' journeys toward learning about the lives, languages, and experiences of their distant neighbors from central Mexico. Figure 1 captures an overview of these findings in terms of evidence supporting Group A and Group B participants' practices of cultural competence. In this representation, the letter "X" indicates at least one instance where the participant reported practice or was observed practicing the described component of cultural competence. No mark indicates zero instances reported or observed. The narrative paragraphs described later, offer some additional emergent themes, as well as participant quotes supporting these important ideas. We use the six CRP categories identified in Table 1 to discuss some of the findings and themes.

Practicing Cultural Competence

Some journal entries focused on more global intercultural experiences and self-doubts. For example, I student feared that questioning a waiter about the poor service in a restaurant may have caused the waiter and other Mexican staff to perceive her as "the ugly American." Yet, another student described her hesitance in providing "appropriate" educational suggestions and strategies to Mexican teachers without seeming "arrogant." Other focused on language immersion experiences, as in this candid account from a graduate student in Group B’s journal regarding her experience as a second language learner:

I get a strange tightening in my stomach when trying to listen to someone speak to me in Spanish—such a gripping feeling, and them repeating what they said doesn’t usually help because it’s just as fast and the phrases are just as unfamiliar, self-inflicting pressure to understand. I wonder if that’s help because they still don’t understand my words.

Participants who showed evidence of developing cultural competence also struggled with their preconceived notions of Guanajuato and Mexico. Non-Mexican-born participants, in particular, struggled with these preconceptions. One student born in Cuba was particularly anxious and worried about kidnapping, robbery, and violence in Mexico. She repeatedly stated how surprised she was when, instead of experiencing hostility and aggression from Mexican people, she found safety and warmth. She explained, “Sometimes we let others influence our perspective about a person, place, or situation, but it is not until we experience it on our own, that we can truly understand the situation.”

Similarly, each native English speaker of European descent, with the exception of one who had traveled in Spain, began their journals with negative descriptions of the physical descriptions of Mexico. One wrote, "I've never smelled anything so foul in all of my life." Another began, "The buildings are old and decrepit." Another wrote, "There are scorpions everywhere," coupled with accounts of sincere homesickness. As the students became more exposed to the people and culture of Mexico, their journal topics became more focused on people and culture. All but one student changed their perspective from negative to positive.

During the first week of the program, some students exhibited superficial reactions to the culture in which they were newly immersed, as reflected in their journal entries through statements such as, "Everybody here keeps staring at our flip-flops, they are so rude!" "The same food is served at every restaurant!" "There are a lot of churches, but they are empty most of the time!" and "Someone should really do something about the smell of sewage system and pollution in the tunnels." Conversely, other students' journal entries and remarks illustrated a more thoughtful and reflective outlook: "People here are so family oriented. On Sundays EVERYONE comes out. Little kids are playing in the street until midnight!" "There is art and music everywhere!" "There are so many schools in this town. People here take education very seriously!" and "Guanajuato is a beautiful city. Everybody tries to pitch in keeping it clean."

Through increased interpersonal interactions with Mexican families, students, and teachers, the majority of student participants made explicit the internal changes reshaping their views of Mexico. One student, for example, described the changes as a result of her experience by stating:

As an educator, I will always put my children’s needs and best interest first. . . I will support ELLs with primary language support and validate their backgrounds and traditions. I will do this through my interactions and by incorporating multicultural education . . . teaching tolerance and modeling social justice and equity.

Understanding Sociopolitical Context and Student Identity

All Group A students explored students’ identities related to race, ethnicity, language, and social class. Researchers from the Group A university witnessed this emerging understanding through classroom discussions on cultural awareness, second language acquisition, and inappropriate referral and misidentification resulting in misdiagnosis and placement of ELLs in special education. One student, a native of Mexico City, expressed her concerns about challenges special education students of Mexican descent face in both the United States and Mexico. In the following quotation, she describes the complexity facing special education teachers in both countries:

En los Estados Unidos tienen un gran problema con identificar o diagnosticar a niños con problemas de aprendizaje con aquellos que les cuesta aprender por el idioma (niños bilingües). En México la desventaja cultural es un problema fuerte porque también causa una confusión diagnosticar niños con un problema de aprendizaje con aquellos que tan solo tienen un problema para aprender. (One of the biggest problems in the United States is the identification and diagnosis of learning disabled children who have difficulty learning because of language (bilingual children). In Mexico, a large problem is cultural deprivation (i.e., low socioeconomic status) because it causes confusion among those who are diagnosing children who have learning disabilities and those who only have a problem with learning).

Nine of the 12 Group B students provided evidence of understanding that race, ethnicity, and social class are factors to students’ identities. A student of Mexican descent shared this:

I feel all students in the classroom should share with their classmates what their ethnic background is. To facilitate these kinds of opportunities teachers should (1) establish a safe setting where students will feel ashamed for telling about their ancestors, (2) make time for all students to share, and (3) as the teacher I will research the various histories of my students—so they all know they come from capable people.
Another California student of Mexican descent described in her journal, numerous times, her sense of pride in witnessing the ways in which her people value one another, their cultures, and the ways in which culture is celebrated in Mexican schools on a daily basis. "I wish," she stated in one entry, "my culture was celebrating like this when I attended grade school. I think if it was, I would have been a better student." As researchers, we concluded that the sociopolitical context students' experienced first hand in the classrooms directly influenced their learning and understanding of Mexican schools at both the micro- and macrolevels. These conclusions were made through detailed analysis of the coding schemes generated from primary data sources.

Three Group B students, who were not observed to show evidence of developing cultural competence in this area, were each self-described White pre-service teachers with limited Spanish ability levels and little travel outside of the United States. All 3 expressed interest in multicultural education and learning about Mexican people and culture to enhance their teaching skills, yet they each had a considerable amount of resistance to adjusting to Guanajuato’s people, culture, and school system. "I think this is harder on me than on them (her children at home)! I am exhausted each day. I am already looking forward to going home," one student stated in her journal. Another wrote:

This is really difficult. Waking up and getting out of bed is difficult. Walking everywhere is difficult. I don't understand anyone, not even my Spanish teacher speaks English. I know I need to stick this out though, because I will be a better teacher for it. Things have to get better because there is no way they can be any worse.

One school invited more reflections on sociopolitical contextual issues affecting culture and student performance. This K-6 school had a distinctive morning and afternoon program; the morning program catered to more affluent Mexican families and children, and the afternoon program to poorer families. As one student commented, "It was a big stress for me today to realize that the socioeconomic status of the afternoon children means they are not expected to excel, so they don’t." Another stated, upon hearing about the unequal opportunities for students at this school and at other schools, "Education is free for everyone except for those who can’t afford it." Another added:

Wow, there is real segregation in Mexico. Because of the two school day system it is easy to see classism, tracking, and the “haves” separating their children from the “have-nots.” I wonder if the teachers teach differently in the afternoon?

Having plenty to say on this topic, another student added:

I have also noted a discrepancy in the availability of facilities and materials for students and teachers. In the morning the school I observed had nice restrooms available to students and their access was only limited by the appropriate timing and teacher permission. In the afternoon those bathrooms are locked and there do not seem to be others available to students.

In a follow-up, semistructured interview, a student with multiple international travel experiences offered the following:

You have to pay here (Mexico) to get educationally ahead. So maybe families who come to the U.S. may come with the assumption that if they don’t have money their children won’t have a chance in my classroom. I need to deconstruct that idea with them.

This student realized the importance of working with parents and her own understanding of socioeconomic factors that can impact students who may enter her classroom. Other journal entries described the apparent discrepancies in social equity in the educational system by illustrating how parents with more resources would proudly announce which school and which session their children attended.

The overall sentiment was compassion for teachers and students and the desire to assist more in schools during their limited stay. As researchers and instructors, we witnessed all students consciously supporting teachers and students in any manner possible. In one instance, 2 students stayed overtime to help a teacher construct several placemats that needed to be completed before an evening event. In another case, we observed 1 of the students doing somersaults on a floor mat to help multiply-disabled students improve their gross motor skills. At another school, we watched 5 students volunteering to work with Mexican students in an afternoon English as a foreign language (or ESL) class and a sewing class. In each example, these students went beyond course requirements because they simply wanted to be involved. These students demonstrated a developing understanding of the sociopolitical realities of the schools and students of which they were temporarily a part.

Creating Opportunities to Honor Students' Families

Group B students were taught Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez’s (1992) approach to ELD methodologies to increase the academic achievement of ELLs. Therefore, all 12 Group B students exhibited evidence of developing cultural competence in this area. Students were observed comfortably interacting with the families with whom they lived, even if students’ Spanish was limited. Some interactions were more clinical, as demonstrated by the following Group B student commentary:

Families can provide an abundant resource to my classroom, and by living with a family, I have been able to observe the artifacts in the house, mannerisms/interactions between family members, and listening and hearing from them.

Other reactions were more organic and captured the true spirit of honoring students’ families and experiences:

The first night in Guanajuato, we walked around the plaza and saw the monthly celebration: There were children out at 12 o'clock midnight participating in every aspect of the celebration; eating, listening, playing, etc. This is learning and it starts at a very early age.

In Group A, each student was observed creating opportunities to honor students’ families by actively learning about students’ backgrounds; however, of the 12 participants, only 3 had consistent contact with parents. One of these students taught in an early intervention room, and so the student in this classroom had direct involvement with the parents of the students with whom he interacted. The other 2 student participants worked at a national center dedicated to the health, education, and social development of children and their families. Parents of these children attended these sessions; therefore, the 2 students had several intensive interactions working with children and their families.

Although not all of the students had immediate contact with students’ parents, all aspired to learn about their students’ talents, wishes, backgrounds, and goals. One student created an
early-morning art therapy project for students with severe and profound disabilities. This project’s goal was to build each child’s self-esteem through expressive art. Through this project, she visually learned what could not be communicated well verbally. One Mexican student presented her with a watercolor of La Llorona. She explained:

(This student’s) interest in expressing narrative has really taken hold in his style. Today he painted a picture of a house with crying woman, which is apparently a well-understood analogy in Guanajuato.

It appeared to be a very powerful image given how [this student] depicted it.

Another Group A student sent disposable cameras home with the students in her classroom so that they could share their home, family, animals, and friends with the class visually. Because the students in this class were cognitively challenged, the photos served as an important communication tool. Other students developed significant bonds with some of their students by talking to them about their families and pets, finding out about their favorite television shows, discussing sports—such as soccer—sharing lunch with them, telling jokes, conversing about music and art, helping them with their lessons, and demonstrating care and interest in their everyday lives.

Supporting and Expecting Academic Achievement

Many students from both universities wrote about how Mexican students’ academic difficulties may be related to the school environment and teacher attitude rather than inherent deficits. Students also agreed that limited resources in the schools and classrooms were detrimental to Mexican students’ opportunities to learn. In addition, they commented that the teacher–student ratio, in most schools, was not beneficial for student success. In many cases, the teacher–student ratio was approximately one teacher for every 40 students. One student in Group A summarized the general feelings of most students in the Mexico Abroad Program:

1) The rooms are not physically large enough to facilitate the storage of books and supplies for 40 students... 2) Students are sitting in desks that are jammed together or they share small tables and benches. 3) Individual attention to student achievement is difficult when there are so many students.

Despite these concerns, all the students agreed that the teachers they assisted were exceptionally resourceful, patient, and cariñoso (full of care and concern). Furthermore, the students were amazed by the tenacity and dedication demonstrated by each Guanajuato teacher observed. Teacher attitude did not have an injurious affect on students; instead, most student teachers believed that the teachers’ outlook was a positive force motivating and encouraging Mexican students to succeed, despite limited resources.

It is worth noting that the teachers the student participants observed were selected by the principal at each school; therefore, students may have only been exposed to the best teachers. Students’ high opinions of these teachers may have differed if students had been allowed access to all teachers’ classrooms. Therefore, it is with some caution that we, as researchers, conclude that the general teacher attitude observed by the American students was consistently positive.

ELD was emphasized and more evident in the class goals and syllabus from the university attended by students in Group B. Some students (n = 7) successfully learned and applied constructivist methodologies, including sheltered content instruction developed to teach the students in the assigned Mexican elementary classrooms. One of the most significant instances of the application of context-embedded teaching strategies was a student who opted to teach English content in English to her Spanish-speaking third graders, and ended up developing a thematic unit on English nouns as they relate to classrooms. This student teacher concluded the following from this experience: “This real classroom experience in Guanajuato has empowered me to teach content to my students learning English when I get back home,” the Group B student reflected in her journal.

Other Emergent Themes

When eight or more (one-third) student participants in this study referred to topics related to their journeys toward cultural competence that we could not tie directly to our grounded categories (see Figure 1), these topics became emergent themes. Emergent themes spanned both programs and were organized into four categories: humility, pride in Mexican identity, emotional affect, and ethnocentrism.

Humility. A number of students expressed varying levels of humility when comparing the United States and Mexico. One student observed:

The humility of the people from Mexico despite this ancient culture is unmatched. Why does the U.S. fail to report this history in a social science context? Why do students not hear much of the indigenous peoples’ lives and history from Mexico? I find it so difficult to conceive of a low-esteem Mexican identity because of the rich histories all around this country.

Another shared:

The family’s home, my home away from home, was mostly constructed by the father and his brothers. It is a beautiful, solid building, mostly brick and some wood. It is built into the side of a hill. I am sure it took a lot of time and effort. I can hardly imagine. I can see his pride and joy are still a work in progress. When I complimented Señor on the house he was so matter of fact about it. Like building his family’s home was no big deal!

Pride in Mexican Identity. Numerous students, mostly of Mexican descent, were observed to exhibit or explicitly express pride in their heritage or culture as a result of visiting Mexico and partaking of its cultural richness. For Mexican students or those of Mexican descent, this experience abroad was much more than a credential requirement, enhancement, or academic exercise. The experience became for them an eye-opening process through which students could reconnect to their Mexican cultural, historical, and artistic roots. A first-generation Mexican American student elaborated: “I feel somehow responsible to see and take pictures of everything for my family. A lot of family donated money for me to come on this trip and they will want me to share everything.” Another student described her connection to ancient Mexico after visiting the pyramids of Teotihuacán: “I could not think that some part of my DNA might be an inheritance from some distant relative who worked on these serpentine aqueducts.”

Emotional Affect. During the Mexico Abroad Program, students’ emotions ranged from Elation, to frustration, to contentment. The emotional responses most often recorded in their journals or observed were those relating to feelings of compassion for Mexican teachers and overcoming timidity and fear when asking for assistance. Many students from Group A expressed their admiration for Guanajuato teachers. Researchers were surprised by authentic relationships that developed
between students representing both universities and teachers. The most intimate and profound relationships were observed at the school for students with severe and profound disabilities. Most notable was the relationship between 1 Arizona student and a teacher that worked with older students, the average age of which was about 20 years old. Most of these students were multiply-disabled or had severe and profound cognitive challenges. The teacher herself was deaf. She was a remarkably gifted lip reader, spoke Spanish, and signed in Spanish sign language. The student described her in this way: “... I love observing her interactions with her students. She cares so much and extends herself so much to us as students that a community is quickly formed.”

Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism manifested itself in the attitudes of students who compared the U.S. educational system with Mexico’s. Many of the attitudes demonstrated an inherent judgment on the part of students. Several described being left alone in classrooms with large numbers of children for extended periods of time as being a negative experience. “When I showed up this morning there was no teacher in the classroom. I didn’t know what to do, as I don’t speak Spanish. She showed up 45 minutes late. That would never happen in the States,” reported a frustrated student. Some perceived the Mexican teachers to display “different methods of discipline or lack of disciplinary enforcement.” One student shared, “I don’t know how they teach. There are close to fifty students, everyone is talking at once and the teacher just goes on teaching the five students in the front row.” Trying to be sensitive and exhibiting some semblance of cultural competence on the topic of discipline and classroom management, a student candidly shared, “A lot of cultural adjusting will be needed for my students and myself [sic]. I know this will not be easy for either of us.”

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: AL FIN

This inquiry supports travel-abroad programs to locales that enable students to better connect with groups of cultural similar people in the United States. Results are hopeful and suggest that teacher preparation programs can increase understanding of the circumstances of facing ELLs and their families in school systems in both Southwestern states “imperative for improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for ELLs” (Spradlin & Parsons, 2006, p. 59). Substantial progress toward developing cultural competence was observed in and reported by the majority of the students in these study-abroad programs. Descriptive progress is noted as professional and personal. For example, students felt that as adults, a variety of places in situations where they became Spanish language learners (14 of 24 participants were monolingual English speakers), they were better able to empathize with students and parents of Mexican descent. Many said that experiences visiting historical sites in Mexico will enable them to connect with students and families with shared memories of Mexico. Participants of Mexican descent who had never been to Mexico, or who left the country as young children, reported that they felt profound and unique connections to the country and noticeable boosts in their pride and self-esteem as related to their abilities to serve ELLs in U.S. schools.

Many students reported heightened feelings of acceptance toward ELLs. Through emotional ties to ELLs, students realized that they were equipped and able to increase the academic achievement of all learners upon returning home. Special educators felt a sense of kinship and shared struggle with special education teachers and students in Mexico. The commitment of teachers to social justice and equity—transcending race, ethnicity, language, and culture—was notable.

According to their journals, student participants left Mexico transformed in positive ways. The majority felt more equipped to teach ELLs of Mexican descent by using strategies embedded in culturally responsive teaching. Many students expressed that their experiences in Mexico had allowed them to acquire a better understanding of how to connect with students’ families. Implications for novice and veteran teachers are immense. To better serve diverse populations, and to close achievement gaps that polarize students from one another, all teachers would benefit from participating in professional development programs such as this one. Participants in the Mexico Abroad Program realized that doing this kind of work affects the greater good, and that achieving social justice and equity can be realized through their teaching careers. We wish the same for a larger number of educators: pre-service, novice, and veteran alike.

REFERENCES


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