

SPOTLIGHT ARTICLE

CULTIVATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT CLASSROOMS

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Classrooms throughout the United States are increasingly becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse. According to the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2014), it is estimated that over 4.5 million public school students are English language learners (ELLs). It is projected that by the year 2050, Latino/Latina students will constitute more than thirty percent of primary and secondary students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). With 6.7 percent of the North Carolina student population participating in ELL programs, teachers need the knowledge and experience to develop awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation of cultures different from their own. In other words, teachers must develop cultural competence, which "entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering



Participants enjoy cultural activities in Guanajuato, Mexico

a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching" (Diller & Moule, 2012, p. 5).

Research has shown that teachers can influence students' academic success by understanding and incorporating the students' culture within the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003). As NC State University (NC State) prepares pre-service teachers to teach students from all backgrounds, it is therefore imperative that NC State provide these teachers with learning experiences that develop culturally relevant pedagogical skills. Culturally relevant pedagogy can be defined as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, pp. 17-18). A culturally relevant teacher, therefore, "utilizes the students' culture as a vehicle for learning" by creating a classroom environment and lessons that build on students' prior

knowledge and cultural experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). In essence, culturally relevant teachers take a proactive approach to getting to know the students' backgrounds, prior knowledge, and lived experiences—all in order to inform their pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2001) explains that culturally relevant pedagogy is present in classrooms where the teacher takes responsibility for learning about students' cultures and uses the students' cultures as a foundation for learning.

However, a pre-service teacher's understanding and acceptance does not transpire solely from reading and discussing different cultures in a collegiate classroom. Instead, pre-service teachers develop culturally relevant pedagogy when they experience intercultural opportunities to interact with cultural norms, beliefs, and attitudes. Intercultural opportunities also provide pre-service teachers the experience of being the "other," which requires them to address their insecurities, reflect on their own cultural assumptions, and examine stereotypes (Slapac & Navarro, 2013). By participating in experiences that allow pre-service teachers to cross borders, these teachers can develop the competency to effectively teach students from backgrounds different than their own.

As a higher education institution, it is part of the mission of NC State's College of Education to prepare pre-service teachers with opportunities to teach to and through the strengths of every student, in order to have a classroom environment that is culturally validating and affirming to the students' intellectual knowledge, linguistic skills, and emotional needs. In the College of Education's efforts to provide our pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop culturally relevant pedagogy, we designed and facilitated a Mexico short-term experience to provide graduate students and pre-service teachers the opportunity to learn about Mexican culture and learn Spanish. During the summers of 2015 and 2016, we facilitated cultural immersion experiences with the intention of developing graduate students' cultural competence, helping them become culturally relevant teachers.

For both of the summer experiences, the graduate students were either earning a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree or a Master of Education (MEd) degree. Some of the participants were American, while some of the participants were international students; specifically, primary and secondary teachers from China earning an MEd degree. Therefore, the program had a lot of opportunities for cross-cultural conversations between the graduate students who had varied lived experiences and diverse backgrounds.

When designing the program, we decided on four main goals for the Mexico cultural immersion experience. The first goal was to plan experiences that contributed to disrupting deficit mindsets about English language learners (ELLs) to ensure that our graduates view their future students' home language as a cultural asset. The second goal of the summer experience included providing our students with the opportunity to learn Spanish from native Spanish-speakers and experience what it would feel like to live in a country where English is not the dominant language. A third goal of the program was to provide our students with the opportunity to work with other educators and educational systems that adhere to different practices about teaching languages, as a way to broaden their instructional techniques. The fourth goal was to allow our students the opportunity to develop the viewpoint that many values and behaviors are personal or cultural rather than universal.

Before journeying to Mexico, the graduate students completed five weeks of pre-departure classes to gain background knowledge about Mexico. We recognized the need for purposeful conversations to develop the pre-service teachers' cultural competence by learning about Mexico's cultures and languages. In addition to reading multiple scholarly articles, students also read *Enrique's Journey*, by Sonia Nazario, which tells the true story of a seventeen-year-old Honduran boy searching for his birth mother after she is forced to leave her family to find work in the United States. Students read about the brave

young man's journey from his hometown of Tegucigalpa to the United States, which involved traveling on freight trains, escaping gangs, and relying on the kindness of strangers. During the class discussions, students remarked that the novel provided them with another perspective of the ordeals that immigrants encounter during their migrant journeys, which contributed to developing the students' empathic understanding of immigrants' lived experiences and disrupting deficit mindsets about immigrants.

Furthermore, the Consulate General of Mexico in Raleigh gave a presentation to the students providing an overview of the social, economic, and political relationships between the United States and North Carolina. In particular, students learned that 151,000 jobs in North Carolina depend on trade with Mexico, and North Carolina exports \$3.2 billion dollars in merchandise to Mexico (Mexico's Ministry of the Economy, 2016). Also, Latinos/Latinas are projected to account for three-quarters of the growth in the United States' labor force growth from 2010 to 2020, according to projections from the United States' Bureau of Labor Statistics (as cited in Pew Research Center, 2012). The Consulate also mentioned that in 2010, unauthorized immigrants in North Carolina paid \$253.1 million in state and local taxes, according to data from the Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy; this figure includes \$53.8 million in state income taxes, \$26.1 million in property taxes, and \$173.1 million in sales taxes (as cited in American Immigration Council, 2015).

With regard to education, the Consulate explained that the number of immigrants in North Carolina with a college degree increased by 99.1%, between 2000 and 2011, according to data from the Migration Policy Institute (as cited in American Immigration Council, 2015). In North Carolina, 78.9% of children with immigrant parents were considered "English proficient" as of 2009, according to data from the Urban Institute (as cited in American Immigration Council, 2015). After the Consulate General's presentation, students commented that the aforementioned information is not often presented in

the news media and publications; instead, there are many myths and stereotypes suggesting that immigrants do not contribute to America's economy, are not educated, or do not pay taxes. As a result of this presentation, students were further motivated to deconstruct stereotypes, implicit biases, and even deficit mindsets about Latino/Latina immigrants, as well as ELLs within their own classrooms. One graduate student mentioned feeling more empowered knowing this information and suggested it could be used to advocate for future ELLs within schools and society.



Participants at Universidad Iberoamericana (IBERO) in Mexico City, Mexico

Following the pre-departure sessions, the NC State students participated in a ten-day cultural immersion experience to Mexico City and Guanajuato, Mexico. To begin the experience, students learned about the Mexican education system and immigration by attending classes at Universidad Iberoamericana (IBERO) in Mexico City. Afterward, the graduate students went to the Tochan Nuestra Casa, a migrant shelter, to speak one-on-one with immigrants living in Mexico. Specifically, the Tochan Nuestra Casa provides housing, food, and employment opportunities for Central American immigrants. Students had the opportunity to speak with migrants about their lived experiences to better understand their journeys, hopes, and fears. One graduate student remarked how powerful the shelter experience

was in giving a voice to the voiceless, which is often not heard. When meeting with the immigrants, graduate students heard firsthand accounts of the immigrants' journey through civil wars, poverty, and gang violence. Another graduate student remarked how hearing the individuals' lived experiences gave the student more compassion for immigrants. In essence, the migrant shelter experience provided our graduate students with an opportunity to learn about the complexity of immigration not from a policy perspective, but from a personal point of view.

The second part of the trip included eight days in Guanajuato, Mexico. While in Guanajuato, students participated in service learning by observing and teaching English in local elementary schools. During the morning, graduate students would observe instruction in local Guanajuato elementary schools. Graduate students observed instruction of math, science, and reading in Spanish. During the afternoons, the graduate students participated in three-hour Spanish language classes at Escuela Mexicana—a total-immersion language school with a mission of immersing students in the rich culture and history of Guanajuato. Based on the graduate students' Spanish pre-assessments, they were placed in either the beginning- or advanced-level Spanish courses that met three hours a day and included grammar, vocabulary, guided practice, and Spanish conversation.



Teaching English in the local elementary school

One of the major highlights of the cultural immersion experience was the opportunity for the graduate student teachers to teach English in the local elementary schools. On the first day visiting the elementary schools, the graduate students observed what the elementary students were currently learning in the different content areas. Then, our students collaborated with the elementary school's English teacher to plan English lessons for the week. For instance, in one particular classroom, elementary students were learning the English vocabulary words for different family members. The graduate students planned vocabulary development lessons focused on English words for family members and personal relationships. In planning the lessons, graduate students created language-rich activities, including asking the elementary students to bring family photos to later label with English words. The lessons incorporated the four modalities—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—to learn the words for mother, father, brother, sister, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, and uncle. The graduate students also incorporated the use of English and Spanish cognates to provide extra support. Additionally, the graduate students used their own laptops to show video clips of different family members. Although paper was limited to make handouts, the graduate students improvised by having the elementary students create graphic organizers in the students' notebooks to provide adaptations of the content for every learner. The graduate students provided meaningful activities that integrated the content with multisensory language practice opportunities and connected the concepts explicitly to the students' background experiences. Graduate students created word sorts, with and without pictures, of the key vocabulary words to provide the elementary students multiple ways to learn the content. Additionally, some of the graduate students created concept definition maps, and some classrooms created vocabulary games that allowed the elementary students to collaborate with other another. Furthermore, the graduate students incorporated cognitive and affective strategies to develop the ele-

mentary students' understanding of the English words through frequent opportunities to discuss and interact with each other.

Overall, the graduate students found multiple opportunities for concrete, realistic models and hands-on opportunities to help the elementary students learn the English vocabulary words. One graduate student remarked how invaluable it was to collaborate with the classroom teachers to lesson plan as well as practice using a variety of sheltered instruction practices. This student remarked that the experience helped broaden the graduate students' confidence to utilize similar instructional techniques when teaching ELLs in the United States. Another graduate student mentioned that the experience teaching in the elementary schools has motivated her to incorporate more multilingual books to foster a multilingual classroom and view the students' home languages as an asset for learning.

In addition to observing and teaching in elementary schools, the graduate students had opportunities to participate in other cultural experiences throughout Guanajuato. Some highlights included salsa dance classes from local dance instructors, exploring the Diego Rivera museum, learning how to cook local foods in a cooking class, touring local silver mines, and attending local musical concerts. By learning more about Mexican culture, one graduate student remarked how full Mexico is of multiple types of individuals with differing behaviors and values, which echoes the idea that one's values and behaviors can be personal or cultural, but not universal. Additionally, the graduate students participated in homestays

with local Guanajuato families, which allowed them to practice Spanish and learn about Mexican culture on a more personal level. One student remarked that the homestay was one of the best parts of the entire experience because it truly allowed students to practice Spanish in a real-life context. This student commented further that the experience reemphasized the importance of making real-life connections to her own future students' lived experiences when teaching English. The homestays also provided a more conversational approach to learning Spanish from native Spanish-speakers and highlighted what it would feel like to live in a country where English was not the dominant language.

Given the success of the Mexico cultural immersion experience, we are continuing to plan similar cultural immersion experiences to develop pre-service teachers' culture competence. Currently, MAT students have the opportunity to tutor at El Centro Hispano in Raleigh, North Carolina, through Dr. Ann Harrington's elementary literacy course at NC State. For this upcoming summer, we are also planning to incorporate a service-learning opportunity for MAT students with the Durham Public Schools in Durham, North Carolina, as well as continuing to plan future cultural immersion experiences in Mexico. Thus, with these expanded opportunities, future teachers will have even more opportunities to engage in cross-culturally learning opportunities that deepen their cultural competence and contribute to them cultivating culturally relevant classrooms.

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