

Chapter 61

A Decolonizing Study Abroad Program in Mexico for Pre-Service Teachers: Taking on the Cultural Mismatch between Teachers and Students

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ABSTRACT

Due to the well-documented cultural mismatch between predominantly white teachers and the majority of non-white youth entering U.S. schools, teacher educators have sought multiple avenues to address this problem. This chapter explores one university study abroad program for pre-service teachers of English learners and its efforts to decolonize education by indigenizing the curriculum. The chapter explores the major program set-up, from curricular issues to building relationships with partners in Mexico. The chapter provides multiple insights into the partnership between the Mexico-based language institute, with its focus on social justice, and the doors it opened toward partnership with one indigenous school that embraced the Four Agreements. The pre-service teacher participants were dramatically impacted by that experience in ways that the author argues are enduring and decolonizing.

INTRODUCTION

The eight pre-service teachers and I waited in line at Escuela Raices School in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to wash our dishes and silverware behind about fifteen children, ages 3-12 during summer 2014. There were scant remnants of refried black beans and chili pepper-seasoned scrambled eggs on the plates, bits of herbal tea leaves in the tea cups, leaves which had been harvested from the many tropical trees which lined the school's courtyard. Near the line, Melisa, a four year-old, carried a toy poodle mix and stroked its fur between the eyes gently. When asked about the breakfast routine, another young boy explained,

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“Yes, we wash our dishes like this every day. No, there’s never any problem. This is how we do things here.” Food leftovers were separated into a compost heap by the outdoor sinks.

Two boys began to argue in the multipurpose courtyard after washing their dishes over a soccer ball. One of the boys took a step back, and then reminded the other, “Be impeccable with your word,” one of Don Miguel Ruiz’s *Four Agreements* (1997), a centerpiece for the curriculum at the school. The other boy quietly handed over the ball and discarded any sense of emerging anger. An older boy carried a one-year old to the common bathroom area nearby and helped clean her face from the beans that didn’t make it into her mouth, and then he brushed his own teeth. The youth were about to join their “families” for their daily work of engaging the day’s curriculum, which included analyzing power and the Mexican national anthem, sharing and learning dance in a studio course, and learning how to make clay from the earth as well as sculpt it. This was a day like any other which served the most marginalized youth in the community, those who lived in unofficial and semi-official housing right off the railroad tracks. No one was obligated to attend the school, yet, day after day, the same youth eagerly returned for authentic and meaningful learning experiences which had born many fruits. One of the outcomes was that most teachers who staffed the school were products of the loving learning environment, despite the difficult odds they faced in the material conditions of poverty outside the school. Those youth-now-teachers had lived and testified the realities of their environment, from facing violence in the streets to violence in domestic partnerships. Thanks, in large part, to the community of Escuela Raices, they had persisted and found greater meaning in returning to continue their journeys as teachers at the school. Amy, a participant from the program, related the following reflection in a focus group interview nine months after returning:

I think about like the ideas that we learned there all the time. Like, “The one who knows more teaches the one who knows less.” And, “The older takes care of the younger.” I think about that all the time. Like how in the classroom everyone has so many things to learn and how important it is to create that team environment so that everyone can be there to help each other and how important that is... possibly one of the biggest things I learned there. And just how beneficial that was for them. I don’t know what video it was that we watched; if it was there or if it was something they had told us to look at, but when all the teachers were talking about what environments they could have been in. And then how their experience changed. I mean, we’re going to have kids that are in similar situations some that are not...everyone is going to be able to learn from that environment no matter what, like, predicament they are at home. And just how, I don’t know, how helpful it is to feel like you’re in a team, not necessarily just one person trying to do it all themselves.

Amy’s insights show how she had observed and framed her understanding of what she learned toward what appears to be a more decolonized approach to teaching, one that emphasizes a recognition of the systemic social factors’ impacts on people’s lives, their sense of agency rooted in core beliefs, and the possibilities from working in the collective, rather than from an individualistic approach to education, to include the students themselves as part of the process of problem-solving and learning.

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