



**Professional Development  
across Borders:  
The Promise of U.S.-Mexico  
Binational Teacher Education Programs**

**By Adam Sawyer**

As the school year gave way to summer vacation, a group of 11 Nebraska educators eschewed more traditional summertime activities to embark on a 16-day professional development journey to the western Mexico city of Guadalajara. During a two week stay in Mexico, these educators—who were made up of in-service and pre-service teachers and school support personnel—engaged in a structured program of guided school visits, meetings with Mexican educators, Spanish classes, lectures on Mexican culture and immigration, and Mexican family home stays.

What compelled this group of present and future educational professionals from the U.S. heartland to make this voyage to Mexico to immerse themselves in this study abroad course? As we will see, theirs was a part of an urgently-felt educational response to a dramatic demographic shift in the state.

Echoing a pattern found in locales throughout the American Midwest and South—the so-called “New Latino Diaspora”—recent mass immigration has caused Nebraska’s Latino population to more than quadruple between 1990 and 2010 (Hamann & Harklau, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As a result, educators in the state—who are almost uniformly non-Latino—have little to no experience or

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cultural and linguistic reference points to guide instructional efforts in meeting the educational needs of this new population that now comprises 14.3% of the state's total school enrollment (Nebraska Department of Education, 2011).

Indeed, each participant in this program was currently practicing or expecting to work within this burgeoning Mexican immigrant population. The program—known as “Mexican Schools and Communities”—was coordinated as a partnership between a public university in Nebraska and a private religious university in Guadalajara, Mexico, and is an example of a little-known, but growing phenomenon of U.S.-Mexico binational teacher study abroad programs with similar objectives (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Hamann, 2003; Sawyer, 2006; Terrazas & Fix, 2009).

This article tells the story of these program participants, their time in Mexico, and what they feel they gained from this immersion experience in relation to their work as educators in Nebraska. With a special focus on the reflections of three purposively selected teacher participants in the program, I find that each of these educators experience growth in their intercultural development as a result of program participation as demonstrated by an increased empathy for immigrant Latino parents and children; a breaking of stereotypes about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans; and an increased knowledge of the transnational lives of Mexican-origin students. Within each of these areas, these teachers utilized their previous life experiences as a lens by which to access this new knowledge and the challenging of previously-held beliefs—a finding speaking to the constructivist nature of teacher intercultural learning. I furthermore argue that these changes would likely not have been achieved without the program's study abroad component. I posit that teacher study abroad to Mexico—with certain important caveats—has the potential to be a powerful tool in developing the intercultural competence and self-efficacy necessary to enact culturally responsive pedagogies for teachers serving Mexican-origin communities.

### **Background**

During the now-declining fourth great wave of immigration to the United States, immigration from Mexico stands alone in the magnitude of its contribution to the country's diverse contemporary ethnic landscape. The 11.7 million Mexican-born people living in the US represent nearly a third of the nation's foreign-born population. Overall there are 32.9 million people of Mexican-origin living in the United States, representing 64.9% of the Latino category<sup>1</sup> (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Currently one in 10 children in U.S. primary and secondary schools—over 11.7 million persons under age 18—are of Mexican origin (Passel, 2011). As the Mexican-origin population in the U.S. has grown over the past three decades it has increasingly dispersed to locales beyond the traditional population centers of the U.S. Southwest to the “New Latino Diaspora” states of the Midwest and Southeast (Zuniga & Hernández-León, 2005; Hamann & Harklau, 2009). For example, Nebraska—the state for which the teachers studied in this article reside—has seen

its predominately Mexican Latino population more than quadruple between 1990 and 2010 (Hamann & Harklau, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Both historically and within the present population boom, Mexican-origin students have not been served well by U.S. schools. Throughout their educational trajectory, Latinos (2/3 of whom are of Mexican-origin) have persistently stood at or near the bottom of the U.S. education system's achievement divide on such measures as reading and math achievement, high school completion, and college enrollment and completion rates (Carter, 1970; De la Rosa & Maw, 1991; Garcia, 2001; Harklau, Losey, & Siegel, 1999; National Task Force for Early Education for Hispanics, 2007; NCES, 2010; Jensen & Sawyer, 2013; President's Advisory Commission, 1996; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Valdés, 2001; OECD, 2003; Valenzuela, 2005).

Amidst the myriad of explanations for Latino under-schooling, the pernicious effects of educator low expectations, negative stereotyping, low self-efficacy, and inadequate training loom large. Alas, even within the traditional Latino population centers of California and Texas, teachers (the vast majority of whom are non-Latino) report low self-efficacy and knowledge in serving the English Language Learner student population—the vast majority of whom are Latino (Gándara, 2002; Gándara, 2007; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This capacity gap is even more pronounced in states of the New Latino Diaspora such as Nebraska where school efforts to meet this competency gap have been improvisational at best (Hamann & Harklau, 2009).

Given the established link between teacher self-efficacy, expectations, classroom interactions, and student achievement (Good, 1987; Buriel, 1983; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Ruíz de Velasco & Fix, 2000; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999), these gaps are cause for concern. Thankfully, there is also evidence to suggest that Latino students thrive when these intercultural competency gaps of educators are reversed. Indeed, research has shown that *resource pedagogy* approaches—such as *culturally responsive instruction*—that build upon existing knowledge-base, strengths, language and other assets of the child typically moored within the home culture and community are linked to increases in student engagement and achievement (Gay, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; González & Moll, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mahon, 2006; Mahon, 2009; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Paris, 2012; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002). Thus, intercultural development of teachers can make a difference for Latino students; the question remains, however, how can this intercultural competence be developed in U.S. educators serving Latino student—the vast majority of whom do not share the cultural background of their students?

## The Mexico Teacher Study Abroad Option

One response to this dilemma in the field of teacher education has been the quiet but steady proliferation of teacher study abroad programs in Mexico for U.S. educators. These binational programs have sprung up over the past decade both

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within traditional Mexican receiving states such as California, Texas, and Arizona and also in newer receiving states of Oregon, Florida, Nebraska, Georgia, and Kentucky (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Hamann, 2003; Terrazas & Fix, 2009; Sawyer, 2006). These programs, usually partnerships between U.S. universities, government agencies, and private organizations and a corresponding Mexican associate, send aspiring and in-service teachers, administrators, and other school-based practitioners serving (or intending to serve) Mexican newcomer children to Mexico for first-hand experiences. Within such programs, participants typically take courses in the Spanish language, Mexican culture, migration, and intercultural education while making guided visits to Mexican schools and migrant sending communities (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Hamann, 2003; Sawyer, 2006; Terrazas & Fix, 2009).

Present U.S.-Mexico teacher study abroad programs draw their inspiration in part from broader efforts over several decades to incorporate study abroad within teacher education. These experiences—which have included educator stays in locales throughout the world—vary greatly in length, but typically include coursework, school-based field experiences and stays with host families. Extant literature on these programs suggests that when designed well—especially when providing of frequent guidance and reflection opportunities—there are numerous benefits for participants from this experiential approach. These positive outcomes include increased cultural knowledge, empathy, self-efficacy, and self confidence (Cushner, 2008; Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Marx & Moss, 2011; Merryfield, 2000; Quezada, 2004). Most importantly in regards to diversity training in teacher education, researchers have argued that study abroad provides such changes in ways not possible in a domestic experience. Indeed, research has shown that participants have attributed their rapid growth in these areas to being deprived of the typical comfort zone and support networks available within their home culture (Cushner, 2008; Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Marx & Moss, 2011; Merryfield, 2000; Quezada, 2004). As noted by Marx and Moss (2011):

A significant concern with domestic, cross-cultural placements in urban schools is that they are themselves imbedded in the dominant cultural hegemony that most preservice teachers implicitly understand and do not question. Thus, even when placements might be in schools that serve culturally diverse student populations, the larger structures and culture of the school system are not dissimilar from the ones that the preservice teachers themselves experienced as students.

Within this larger context, Mexico teacher study abroad experiences are unique in that they match U.S. teachers with the nation of origin of immigrant students in which they intend to serve, thus the potential—and danger in cases of participant essentialization of culture—to apply specific new cultural knowledge to the population they are serving (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Hamann, 2003; Macias, 1990; Sawyer, 2006; Terrazas & Fix, 2009). Though such programs trace back to the

1970s (LeBlanc-Flores, 1996), empirical research on this phenomenon has been sparse (Terrazas & Fix, 2009). A first step in this still nascent knowledge-base was established during the late 1990s when several programs collected survey data to assess the satisfaction of participants. The surveyed educators overwhelmingly described their experiences as “life-changing” and “highly satisfying” (Cantu, 2006; Licon, 2003; Mitchell, 2006), but it was unclear from these accounts as to what teachers felt they had specifically learned and how they intended to use these new understandings in their teaching practice.

A more in-depth account is provided by Hamann’s (2003) portrait of the *Georgia Project*, an exchange between Dalton, Georgia, and a private university in Monterrey, Mexico. Based upon post-participation questionnaires and observation of 21 teachers upon return from Mexico during the summer of 1997, Hamann found that the vast majority of teacher participants had attained a greater empathy for the language struggles of their students, increased cultural sensitivity, and a complex set of first-hand impressions of Mexican schools and society. The author also noted, however, that the lasting impact of this experience for many teachers hindered by a lack of district, administrative, and collegial support upon return to U.S.-based schools (2003). The process of these transformations is examined by McLaughlin and Allexsaht-Snider (2007) in their account of another Georgia-based program. The authors propose a four-stage continuum for these transformations progressing in order of “Discomfort” to “Dissonance” to “Disillusion,” and finally to “Discovery” (McLaughlin & Allexsaht-Snider, 2007). Alfaro and Quezada (2010) both corroborate and expand upon this previous literature. Based upon exploration of a summer program for in-service southern California teachers in the Central Mexican state of Querétaro, the authors find that participants make gains in cross-cultural sensitivity and their political commitment to social justice, but like Hamann (2003) note the limits to this growth upon returning to school districts unsupportive of such programs. Given the number of Latino/a teachers participating in the summer program, Alfaro and Quezada also break ground in documenting the impact of Mexico study programs for educators who share a common ethnic background with Mexican-origin students. The authors find that 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latino/a teachers—through immersion in a marginalized indigenous community—are able to draw parallels to the struggles of their own immigrant parents and a renewed commitment to support educational progress for immigrant Latino families (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010).

My study aims to build upon this previous literature in several ways. For one, it offers to the best of my knowledge the first empirical examination of the binational study experiences of teachers from the U.S. Midwest, thus expanding existing accounts within the New Latino Diaspora—where intercultural competency gaps of teachers are most immense. It is also the first—to the best of my knowledge—to examine the beliefs of teachers in depth *before*, *during*, and *after* program participation, which allow for a more profound exploration of the elements and processes

of teacher change. Finally, extant literature on Mexico teacher study programs has yet to coalesce around common theories of teacher intercultural development. In the following section I will offer an established intercultural development framework (also used by Marx and Moss' 2011 study of an England-based study abroad program for U.S.-based teachers) as a lens by which to analyze these processes of teacher change and growth.

### **Teacher Intercultural Development**

One of the most lasting and influential models of intercultural development is offered by sociologist Milton J. Bennet's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (See Bennet, 1986, 1993, 2004). According to this continuum, as individuals develop their intercultural capabilities, they travel from "ethnocentrism"—the experience of one's own culture as central to reality—to "ethnorelativism"—the experience of one's own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality amongst many viable options (Bennet, 2004). Along this journey, according to the DSIM, an individual will pass through the stages of "denial," "defense," "minimization," "acceptance," "adaptation," and finally to "integration." Important to Bennet's ideas is the notion that intercultural development is based upon processes of *cognitive constructivism* and *cognitive complexity*. That is, such development occurs as the result of novel intercultural experiences that draw upon frames of reference derived from prior ones (Bennet, 2004). Additionally, the complexity of one's analysis of a new intercultural experience draws upon both the amount of previous experiences, but also the depth of analysis attained within these prior episodes. As such, according to Bennet, intercultural development is at its heart a constructivist process and accordingly relies on models and expert guides (Bennet, 2004).

### **Research Methodology, Positionality, And Validity**

Although I possess a long interest and set of experiences living and working alongside Mexican-origin communities as a teacher, teacher educator, ally, friend, husband, and father, it is important to note that I was not born into the culture. I am from a middle-class White family in a politically progressive multicultural university community in Northern California. My mother is a second generation daughter of working-class Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and my father hails from an English-Irish-Scotch Unitarian Universalist family—with a history of involvement with abolitionist and suffragist movements—that has New England roots tracing to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. My upbringing and heritage—wrapped in White middle class privilege as it was—nevertheless instilled in me a concern for social justice and profound interest in immigrant socioeconomic mobility and the sustenance of minority languages and cultures. My first meaningful experience of coexistence with the Mexican immigrant community and communication through

Spanish came from a four-year stint as a restaurant bus boy in San Francisco during my high school years, in which most all of my co-workers were recent Mexican immigrants. My experiences have grown to include six years work as a Spanish Bilingual elementary school teacher within predominately Mexican immigrant communities in East Palo Alto, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, California, and a year's work as a teacher educator in the Central Mexican states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Aguascalientes—all major origin-sites of immigrants to the United States. My connection to the Mexican-origin community is not one solely of a professional nature; my wife is the daughter of working class Mexican immigrants and my stepson a third-generation Mexican American.

Although my experiences as an adolescent and adult have imbued me with some insight into matters of cultural sensitivity, privilege, and the great heterogeneity of Mexican American culture and life, they certainly have not been immune from numerous occasions of intercultural missteps, essentialization of the “other,” and failures to examine my own privilege. As these messy processes continue in my daily life, I make every effort to bring to my work the insights gained from my own intercultural journeys (and compassion for those struggling with such processes and their consequences), and constant checking and correcting of my assumptions, analyses, and conclusions through consultation with a broad and multicultural network of colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

In regards to the present study, I had both commonalities and differences with the research participants. On one hand, I shared skin color, class positionality (broadly speaking), language, and the shared experience of having been an educator interested in acquiring intercultural skills to serve diverse student populations. On the other hand, my gender (each of my participants was female), religious background, urban coastal upbringing, and place as a university researcher set me apart from these individuals. Although there appeared to be a good deal of comfort and honesty with me and the research study from the beginning, I nevertheless went to great lengths to develop rapport (Seidman, 1998) with my participants (outside formal data gathering activities) both in Nebraska and in Mexico. It likely helped that I, like them, was a participant in the program, and had no authority in the evaluation of participants or the administration of the program.

## **Data Collection**

I collected data for this study as a participant observer in the “Mexican Schools and Communities Program” over a two-week duration in the summer of 2006. My data record also includes collection efforts undertaken during a one-week pre-program visit to Nebraska the previous spring. During my stay in Nebraska, I took daily field notes based upon observations of major Latino receiving communities and when possible, the surrounding communities of the schools where participants worked, as well as informal conversations with both the interview participants and

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other educators serving the Latino community. In Mexico, I took field notes based upon my experience as a participant in the program which included observation of structured (classes, fieldtrips) and informal (time with host families, free time in public) program activities as well as informal conversations with program administrators, implementers, Mexican instructors, and host families.

As many scholars have bemoaned, teacher voices are largely absent from research and policy reform efforts (Delpit, 1995; Gonzalez & Moll, 1995; Lyttle & Cochran-Smith, 1990; Reimers & Reimers, 1995). The present case study operates under the stance that teacher descriptions of their experiences, and the meanings they ascribe to their changing beliefs and knowledge are crucial to understanding the processes of transformation within professional development programs and the implications these have for policies seeking to improve teacher professional development for educators of Latino immigrant children. For this reason, in addition to the observational data, I selected a sample of three focal teachers whom I shadowed and conducted three in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These three teachers were “purposefully” (Maxwell, 2005) chosen based upon the fact that they each had previous in-service experience working with Mexican-origin students and presumably a set of notions and beliefs in regards to working with the population.

The first of these interviews was held in Nebraska in late May shortly before the departure to Mexico; the second at roughly the midpoint of the 17-day program; and the third during the last two days of the Mexican visit. Interviews initially focused on biographical information, reasons for program participation and expectations, previous experience working with Mexican immigrant students, and beliefs as to the academic strengths and challenges of this group. Subsequent interviews focused on eliciting teacher description of their participation in program activities and how and if this was shaping or adding to knowledge and beliefs about their Mexican immigrant students. The final interview paid special attention to how participants intended to apply these new insights and understanding to their future teaching practice. One year after participation, the focal group of teachers was asked to complete a follow up questionnaire in which they were asked to describe their lasting impressions of the program and its impact on their teaching practice.

### **Data Analysis and Validity**

During my pre-program visit to Nebraska and throughout the two-week stay in Mexico, field notes were first taken long hand, and later typed. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim including notation of verbal emphases, non-verbal gestures, and other forms of communication not captured in a direct transcription. All data was subsequently coded, using open and theoretical codes in order to construct emerging categories and analytic questions. Within the transcripts and all subsequent materials participant names were provided pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

Throughout the data analysis process, I solicited feedback from a bi-monthly convened writing group at my graduate institution in the northeastern United States, consisting of faculty and doctoral students interested in Latino education and teacher professional development, with whom I shared my coding strategies and theoretical interpretations and opened my analytic process to their critiques and alternative explanations. The members of these gatherings did not possess any ties to Nebraska—though some were from the Midwest—and did not know my participants or their workplaces. Nevertheless, I concealed names and other identifiers of my participants throughout this process to protect confidentiality. I have further addressed the validity of my data and the conclusions I draw from it through triangulation (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). I conducted the semi-structured interviews at three discrete points in time and personally observed the activities and events referred to by participants in their accounts. I will thus be able to support the claims I make in the study with these different types of data.

## **“The Mexican Schools And Communities Program:”**

### **A Description**

All participants (including myself) in the The Mexican Schools and Communities Program—a partnership between a large state university in Nebraska and a small Jesuit university in Guadalajara—were housed with families in the middle class community of Zapopan located within the sprawling metropolis of Guadalajara. Guadalajara, Mexico’s second largest city, is located within the western Mexican state of Jalisco and traditionally one of the largest sources of migrants to the United States. Participants were joined on this journey by two female Nebraska university faculty, one of whom was Anglo, the other a Mexican-born Latina. Classes in the Spanish language and Mexican migration and culture were held twice per week at the host university by its faculty. Non-class days were reserved for visits to the economically marginalized Guadalajara suburb of *Lomas de la Primavera*, where socioeconomic conditions and migration rates—according to the program leaders—were more similar to those of the actual sending contexts of Nebraska migrants.<sup>2</sup> Visits to *Lomas* consisted of school and community tours as well as meetings with local educators, social welfare practitioners, and community members. Throughout the two weeks, participants were required to keep a reflective journal on the experience for which they received frequent feedback from their two faculty chaperones.

### **Program Impact:**

#### **Through The Eyes Of Three Nebraska Educators**

I chose Annabelle, Mary, and Jessica as focal educators for the simple reason that they and one other participant<sup>3</sup> were the only experienced teachers who had

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previously worked with Mexican origin students. As I was most interested in understanding the impact of US-Mexico Binational Teacher Exchanges on in-service educators with previously formed impressions of the Mexican-origin students, they were a natural fit. While they did provide some diversity in terms of background, age, experience, and levels taught, as I was the only male in the program it was impossible to attain variation in gender. Given their status as middle class female educators between the ages of 35 and 56 from different parts of the state, it is not unreasonable to assume that they were in some ways like a great deal of Nebraska's teaching force. Though, the fact that each had participated in non-touristic travel abroad, had made attempts to learn Spanish, and were extremely curious about Mexico likely made them atypical when compared to the "average" Nebraskan educator.

#### **Mary**

Mary, a 35-year-old high school Spanish teacher with ten years of service had been provided a sink or swim cultural and linguistic immersion into Latin American culture during a two year Peace Corps placement in Costa Rica in the mid 1990s. Judging by her fluent, well pronounced, and nearly grammatically flawless Spanish, her time in Costa Rica had endowed her with excellent Spanish language skills. This experience also seemed to have inspired an affinity and knowledge of Latinos living in the United States as she spoke enthusiastically and knowledgeably to me of Omaha and Eastern Nebraska's different Latino populations, the push and pull factors leading to their migration, and the challenges facing them within the receiving context. Perhaps owing to these language skills and the affinity she gained with the culture during her time in Costa Rica, Mary had also established a special bond with the 6%—and growing—Latino population at her high school on the outskirts of Omaha:

We have a growing Hispanic population and I've kind of taken the Hispanics under my wing, and started a Latino Leaders group. And so I've been really working with the Latino population trying to get them to understand what opportunities are available to them, that college is available to them. (Interview 1, lines 55-60)

Mary's involvement with Eastern Nebraska's Latino community also extended into her personal life. Through her contacts in Omaha's Mexican immigrant community, she met and eventually married an undocumented construction worker from Veracruz named Hector. She and Hector, despite having been married for three years, were currently separated as they awaited the outcome of the U.S.' labyrinthine Green Card application process. This experience had helped make Mary very aware of the challenges facing Nebraska's Latino immigrant communities and the lives of the families she served at her high school.

Mary's high level of personal and professional involvement with Latino communities both in Costa Rica and Nebraska had also infiltrated into her sense of

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identity. When I asked her whether she identified with her German and Danish immigrant past, she responded:

No, I don't know any...you know, that's funny. I grew up not knowing anything. I mean I know sauerkraut is something from Germany and I hate ...I can't even stand the smell of it. But yeah, I don't identify with it at all. In fact, to tell you the truth, I think I ...I think I'm Latino in *el corazón!* (Interview 1, Lines 837-840)

Intrigued by this response, I asked Mary what she identified as ethnically and nationally:

United Statesian. *Estadounidense*. Yeah. Although...this is funny. You say...I mean we're laughing about this but my...my Latino students made me an honorary Latino. And I think my family in Costa Rica made me an honorary Costa Rican. And now my family in Vera Cruz, or my husband's family, made me an honorary *jarocha*, that's what they call the music and the dance down there. So...I guess I'm adopted.

While it is possible that Mary underestimates the impact of her more distant immigrant past in creating a sense of sympathy and identification with today's Latino immigrants, what is clear is that Mary has attained a great comfort level and rapport with different Latino communities. Given the number of rich previous experiences, it is not surprising that her goals for the program involve adding greater depth and complexity to her present understanding of Mexican communities and culture:

Well, I was reading...that this area where we're going, near Guadalajara, in Jalisco, is the state itself, there's a high percentage of migrants or high percentage of people leaving that area to go to the States to work...I thought that was kind of interesting, that there's a high percentage from that area coming...it sounded like to Nebraska or maybe to the Lincoln area. Yeah, and so I guess when I'm talking with my kids, if I've actually been from their home state or from their...maybe even their home town, I think that helps provide a connection between the kids and the teacher or administrator or whoever it is that's going on this trip... It helps to understand the economic situation in that area, what's available as far as farming and work, and what kind of environment they grew up in (First Interview, Lines 245-291).

Here, Mary displays an advanced knowledge of the great heterogeneity of the group monolithically referred to as "Mexican". She understands that Mexicans migrate in networks from specific sending contexts to specific receiving communities, and that different regions of Mexico have distinct cultures, circumstances, and ways of life that are transferred to their U.S. host community. She is also aware that speaking Spanish and knowing the superficial—or stereotypical—aspects of Mexican culture is not enough to profoundly connect with Mexican origin students in the United States. As we will see, the program experience, allows her to build upon this previous knowledge.

**Annabelle**

Annabelle is a 46-year-old veteran math teacher from the highly rural western

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panhandle of Nebraska. Though growing up in a homogeneously White environment, Annabelle had multicultural sensibilities awoken in her during her more than twenty years teaching high school math on the outskirts of the Pine Ridge Indian reservation on the Nebraska-South Dakota border and through a Fulbright Exchange to study schooling in Japan. She describes these experiences as instilling in her an awareness of cultural pluralism and a fierce opposition to what she describes as “one-size-fits-all” educational practices.

While quite knowledgeable on the intricacies of Native American culture, Annabelle has had much less exposure to Latino immigrant communities. She speaks only rudimentary Spanish and talks from the perspective of an outsider that stands in sharp contrast to Mary. She acknowledges with some shame her first exposure to Latinos coming through the pejorative and racially tinged jokes of family members living in close proximity to Mexican migrants:

My aunt lived in Mitchell Nebraska, my aunt and uncle, which is also, you know, like 13 miles from Scott’s Bluff. And they would make jokes, and I guess...I’m not, you know, I am so much more cognizant of it now than I probably was then... There was a huge concentration of Hispanics in the Gearing, Scott’s Bluff, Mitchell rural area. And, you know, they would sometimes call them *Beaners*, you know, that was one of the...I guess slang words for Hispanics at the time.

Here, Annabelle’s multicultural awareness acquired as an adult comes into tension with the beliefs and actions of her childhood. Even in the present tense, while she expresses very tolerant attitudes towards Latinos, she nevertheless—in contrast to Mary—speaks of them very much as “the other” and inaccurately states that undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes and uses the term Hispanic and illegal immigrant interchangeably :

I think they’re hard workers you know, the Hispanics...illegal immigrants, you know, they are...they’re willing to take that risk. You know, it’s true they don’t pay taxes, but they’re willing to work for, you know, the lower wages and do that kind of stuff. They’re not on the welfare, they’re...you know, so I look at it that way, too. They’re...I just like to see people that want to work, you know (First interview, lines 370-393)

Here, it seems that Annabelle is comparing Latino immigrants to some other un-defined presumably lower income group. It is clear that her language—especially in the use of “you” and “they”—reflects an inclination to speak of Latinos as “the other.” This is in sharp contrast to Mary who goes as far to imply her symbolic membership in the Latino fold. Here, Annabelle describes her goals in the realm of intercultural competence:

I think I hope to learn more about the culture...and how students are addressed. Matter of fact, I got to attend an excellence in education conference at the end of March, and Carmen Tafoya I think, she gave one of the key notes and she talked about the mispronunciation of names, you know, like ‘Tere,’ and you know, the teacher would say “Terry,” you know, and no it’s...you know, “Te-re.” And I think

that teachers need to be aware of that kind of stuff. It's...don't try to make them into your mold (Interview 1, Lines 575-585).

While simply pronouncing Hispanic names correctly pales in complexity and sophistication to the goal set by Mary, it nevertheless is well intended and represents an opening to greater and more complex levels of cultural competence and sensitivity. Interestingly, during the Guadalajara experience, Annabelle discovers unexpected levels of commonality between her rural Nebraska roots and the Mexican families she meets in Guadalajara—a revelation that opens the door to her developing greater cross-cultural understanding.

### **Jessica**

In her mid fifties, Jessica was the senior member of the focal teacher group. Born and raised in Missouri and having moved to Nebraska as a young adult, Jessica had worked for more than two decades as an educator, and currently works as a community outreach coordinator and board member for an afterschool program in a rural community in northeastern Nebraska. Of the three educators I profiled, Jessica was by far the one who was serving the largest number of Latino students as the afterschool program's transient enrollment varied from 40-60% Hispanic depending upon the time of year.

Though speaking only the most rudimentary Spanish, she had spent parts of the past three summers in Mexico on service trips and in language schools. From these visits, she had become exposed to the harsh poverty that afflicts many parts of rural Mexico:

Well, mainly I think succinctly put, they...Mexicans are a conquered people. They've been conquered and conquered and conquered and conquered. And so the resources have been stripped. I think their hope in government has been stripped. But their pride is in their work ethic, if there is work available. Well, I think that they...they rely on each other, their families, and they rely on the church. And if they have crisis, or they have need, or whatever, those are the first two places, you know, that they seek help. (First interview, lines 51-67)

Here, we see that Jessica seems to have a one-dimensional yet sympathetic view of Mexican life. Similarly, she expresses sympathy for the Latino immigrants in Hastings. In addition to participating in the spring 2006 immigrant marches, she criticizes what she sees as the rigidity of her fellow educators in meeting the needs of the emergent Latino population:

As an advisory board member of that group, and indeed an early founder of the group, I had been a little dismayed that I cannot get the board to see that you can't run the program, you know, like status quo, how we've always done it. Because we have a different clientele. And you know, they don't necessarily buy into the same things that our kids have bought into before. (Interview 1, Lines 128-133)

Hence, similar to Annabelle, Jessica's views of the group were tolerant and ad-

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vocacy-oriented; However, also similar to Annabelle, but in contrast to Mary, her views and attitudes of the group still came from an outsider perspective seeking entry into a still mysterious cultural universe. In putting forth what she hopes to gain in terms of cultural competence from the Guadalajara program, she describes the cultural pitfalls she has encountered with the population within the seemingly mundane activity of snack time:

I looked at the snacks that we provide, a lot of times the Hispanic kids don't eat the snacks. So it kind of got me to getting a group of them together and say hey, what do you think. And they said well, you know, like a course...we like chips and salsa. Well, that's pretty messy, you know, for an after school program or whatever, but they don't like oreos, you know. But you know, I said okay, so what would you like for a snack. You know, let's work on that. Why don't I sit down with you, we can come up with some things that you would like for a snack and we'll just plan these snack days out... We'll call it Cinco de Mayo Day or whatever, you know. And so the kids really kind of liked that idea. But then what I found was they didn't...they meaning the Hispanic kids, really didn't want to be involved in planning it or making it. If it was there, they'd eat it. And so it just...I'm missing some piece here in knowing how to engage these immigrant youth. And I don't know that I'm going to get that answer. I don't know where the hook is, you know, for this population. (First Interview, Lines 146-172)

Here we see that Jessica has struggled in her work with Hasting's Latino youth, and that part of her rationale for participation in the program is a desire to overcome the perceived cultural divide she feels between herself and these students. As we will see, the cultural immersion provided by the Guadalajara program makes her both more aware of her commonality with those she meets in Mexico as well as the cultural biases she has held against the group.

### **Deepened Understanding of the Cultural Background of Mexican-Origin Families**

#### ***Annabelle and Jessica:***

***“So, I can just kind of put myself in their shoes, I guess.”***

Of similar ages and roommates with the same host family, Annabelle and Jessica spent a great deal of time together during the Guadalajara experience. The two blonde and blue-eyed Nebraskans brought their Midwest friendliness to the streets of Zapopan. As they walked between their host family's home and the university each afternoon, they greeted all passer-bys with smiles and greetings of *hola*, *buenos días* and the sort. It was in these interactions—or sometimes lack thereof—that the women's foreignness became painfully apparent to them. According to Annabelle:

Jessica and I when we'd walk to the university and then we'd walked around

after, but anyway, she's friendly, I'm friendly. I mean that's just it. I'll always say, "Buenos dias," "Buenas tardes," "Buenas noches" "Hola," or whatever. But for the most part, the people that are out on the streets, most of them do speak, but some of them would rather, I mean keep their eyes down. And if we speak first, they most generally will speak. But I don't think that they, with the exception of last evening, that they are the ones that initiate the conversation. (Interview 2, Lines 286-300)

Jessica describes other incidents in which she and Annabelle felt singled out as foreigners:

J: Annabelle and I get the stereotype look quite frequently, you know, dumb gringos.

AS: In response to what?

J: Oh, like, if we're at the convenience store Oxxo it's hurry up and go, so here we have the gringos standing here going...And the people are standing there going—you're just handing your money to the cashier, you know, and they're just staring like get out of the way. (Interview 2, Lines 1096-1121)

Despite the discomfort these encounters brought, it seemed that they also presented opportunities for learning. They both professed—perhaps with some hyperbole given how different their lives still were from minorities in the United States—having gained a sense of empathy for ethnic minorities in the U.S. from having the shoe put on the other foot. Annabelle put it most strikingly:

A: I think this whole trip has given you a perspective to see what other people, the minority feel like too.

A.S.: Say more about that.

A: Just the fact that some people will talk to you first. Otherwise, most will ignore you, will look the other way or else will just walk straight ahead, which I've heard that that's the case, you know, with some minorities. Well, [some White people] just not acknowledge the colored people. So. And that's kind of how I felt a little bit. But then I don't know. I'll always try to be happy and be nice. If they don't want to say hello back or whatever, that's their issue. (Interview 1, Lines 301-328)

Despite these uncomfortable encounters in which she felt "othered," Annabelle—owing to her rural Western Nebraska roots—nevertheless found connection with the unity of Mexican family life. It was in relation to host mother Lupita and family where these lessons rang most true for her:

A.S.: So I want to talk a little bit more about what the family life has been for you here in Mexico, in Guadalajara, living with the family.

A: I think it's really been good for me. When I went out to DC too, that was the first thing I missed was being around my family. I couldn't wait to get away. You know, my mom and dad lived in the same town as I did and such. But now I

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realize how much I missed them, but then here it even amplified that because of the fact that Lupita, her son and her daughter live in Guadalajara, well all three of them live in Guadalajara, and Ernesto I guess lives upstairs still... So there's always been family there with her. And also a couple nights ago she stayed with her daughter's children because her daughter went someplace and so she kind of babysat. And it made me think back again to how important family is. And that's what I really like about this. And all that I have accomplished, I would have never accomplished if it wasn't for my family and having that strong support there. (Interview 2, Lines 9-33)

Having as background a strong and unified family of her own, Annabelle comes to appreciate this facet of her host family's organization, one that she perceives to be common in Mexico.

A.S: Judging by what you know about Mexican origin students and their communities in the U.S. and now what you've seen here in this short time in Mexico, how would you compare the two, Mexicans in Mexico versus Mexicans in the U.S.? Are there similarities and differences that you've been able to see in the two contexts?

A: I, in both context—context, I'd say that family is a big issue. And, I think that supports of the family, because I—from what I've heard just in my little interview of the teachers who did teach Mexican students in Lexington and you know that's their – their first thing is to say well, the ones that were in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Now, teachers will say you know there's no family support. They don't have it. And, but the English language learner teacher said that there was because of the fact that they wanted their—they knew—their parents knew that to get ahead you had to have an education. So, I don't know.

A.S.: How do you reconcile that?

A: Yes. I think it's a cop out. I do think it is

A.S.: Cop out on the part of whom?

A: Of the seventh and eighth grade teachers... Everybody you know has the same expectations rather than thinking of scaffolding or doing things on that and knowing more about their culture. And, why it is that no one—I can tell you too from my experiences these last two weeks and my language—my lack of language, I should say. Why maybe, some of the parents maybe don't go on, you know and follow their students, their children, maybe in high school or so as far as going to conferences and checking up on them.

A.S.: So, say more about this. So, your experiences of the language, how does that relate to the parents?

A: Well, I can see—you know because I've heard again, going back to my little interview that I did that when parents can't speak the language, they feel uncomfortable trying to communicate with the teachers who are in the other language. I think they feel like they're perhaps not inferior or something. And, they shouldn't feel that way. But— but I know that myself as I have had to do hand gestures with

*Adam Sawyer*

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(laughing) or who can speak Spanish better than I can. So, I can just kind of put myself in their shoes, I guess.

Here, the identification Annabelle feels with Mexican families and her first-hand awareness of the perils of managing language barriers instills her with empathy and a belief that U.S. educators serving the Mexican immigrant community need to enlist the family in the educative process and incorporate cultural relevancy within classroom instruction.

Similar to Annabelle, Jessica was able to move past her initial discomfort in Mexico to attain important new sensibilities from the study abroad experience. The most profound change for Jessica was an emerging awareness of her own cultural biases regarding Latinos, leading her to question previous treatment of her Mexican-origin students.

A.S.: What else has impacted you strongly on this trip?

J: Ok, one of the things, I have been a little bit critical of the dress, of the specifically of young ladies [Latinas in Nebraska].

A.S.: And why? What have you not liked about it?

J: I look at the way the girls dress here, I think they dress very provocatively, very provocatively. But it doesn't seem to be any big deal, in this environment anyway. And yet, if a white girl [in the U.S.] is dressed that way and they are looked at being out for the meat market, you know kind of thing. So I kind of had to adjust my thinking about the Hispanic girls that come to the Zone [Jessica's afterschool program] at seventh and eighth grade and they have you know, dark makeup on, and their little skimpy tops, and stuff. And a lot of times they can't wear those to school. So they'll change into after school, and I have kind of said, I thought that the same rules for apparel had to go in the after school program, as in school. And I think, and I still think that's kind of true. Because, we, I don't know...I just feel uncomfortable with it.

A.S.: So, you feel uncomfortable with the rule, or with the dress?

J: I feel uncomfortable with the dress. Because these are kids that are hanging out, and are making friends. We find the Hispanic kids not the white kids, finding corners where there making out, and we've had to pull them out of the bathrooms a couple of times. And so, and I don't know that, having them not dress as provocatively, will stop that. But that's a real difference that we see between, between the two cultures.

A.S.: But having this experience broadened the question for you a little bit, so you're that you're not quite as on one side of the issue as you once were?

J: Yes.

A.S.: And why is that?

J: Because it's just like, it's just like in Missouri we like to go barefoot. But that

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doesn't mean we're hillbillies. You know, it's another perception; it's another stereotype. (Interview 3, Lines 570-616)

We see here quite interestingly that not only has seeing “exotic” behavior in its “native” environment made Jessica more aware of the presence of cultural biases in educational institutions and practice, while also making her aware of the commonality of her own—perhaps buried—experiences of being discriminated against due to a cultural difference.

#### **Mary: “It’s kind of like a melting pot here, in Mexico”**

Likely due to her previously attained levels of comfort with Latinos, Mary does not experience as steep a learning curve in terms of deepening her understanding of the cultural background of Mexican-origin families as Annabelle and Jessica. Nevertheless, she acquires important knowledge from the visit that provides greater complexity and nuance to her pre-existing knowledge set on cultural matters. Mary declined the program’s offer of lodging in middle class Zapopan to stay with her husband’s cousin in *Lomas de la Primavera*. Taking advantage of this insider status and strong Spanish language skills to speak at length with members of the community combined with knowledge gained in the program’s migration course, Mary learns that the Guadalajara area itself is a prominent receiving context for internal migrants, which provides her a greater understanding of the complexities of Mexican society:

M: from what I’ve heard, there are people here from other states that have moved here and, for the same reason that happens in any place, the same reason it happens in Nebraska, you know, Guadalajara is the second largest city, so if there’s no work on the farm, you go to the city and, so, where would that city be? Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, one of the big cities.

A.S.: So, did that change the way you think of Mexican immigration in general, to the US or internally?

M: Well, I think it puts another aspect to the cities that are of this size that you have people who aren’t necessarily from Guadalajara that come from many different places. For example, you might come to this house and you might get food from Veracruz, you know? And there might be some traditions or music that’s listened to there that’s traditional from that state, and you might go to the next door neighbor and have a completely different experience. It might even happen with language. And so, in a school, the teacher might have to deal with that, with different people coming from different places. So, it’s kind of like a little melting pot right here, you know, within Mexico. (Interview 2, lines 177-248)

In reflecting upon the how educational practice should accommodate Mexican-origin students, Mary applies some of the lessons in the complexity and heterogeneity of the group that she has learned on the trip:

And then the other thing was talking about students who come to the country and have limited formal education here and how they're different from students who maybe had formal education. They can adapt and learn English much quicker than students who didn't have any education here. So, I think that there needs to be a better process in the US to evaluate those students, and not just throw them in ESL or the wrong Spanish class. Well, let's say this kid comes from the mountains of Mayan country and doesn't even know Spanish very well themselves, they probably need to be in Spanish I. Or, let's say, they've been living in California for 10 years and have never taken a Spanish class in their life...so you have to look at all those factors before you just throw them in an ESL program or put them in Special Ed because you think they're dumb or have some problem. (Interview 2, Lines 845-886)

## **Discussion And Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that teacher study abroad in Mexico can be a powerful tool in promoting the intercultural awareness of dominant-culture teachers serving Mexican-origin student populations. In considering the experiences of Mary, Annabelle, and Jessica, it is clear that each has grown in intercultural development as a result of program participation. For Annabelle, this growth came through development of empathy for the difficulties of immigrant life and how this translates to processes of parent involvement in schools. For Jessica, growth came in the breaking of a stubborn stereotype she had held of young Latina women in her afterschool care. Mary, for her part developed an increased knowledge of the complexity and heterogeneity of the transnational lives of Mexican-origin students.

The use each woman made of prior experiences in attaining new levels of intercultural understanding is consistent with the constructivist notions espoused by Bennet (2004) in regards to intercultural development. For one, each of these participants entered the program with previously attained notions of ethnorelativism—defined by Bennet to be the acknowledgement that one's own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality amongst many viable options (Bennet, 2004)—due to prior international experiences and other intercultural episodes. Thus, each came into the program receptive to additional intercultural knowledge with these previous experiences as a spring board. As for individual processes of change, Annabelle accessed her background from a tight-knit family to identify with her Mexican host family—which when coupled with her discomfort as a foreigner in Guadalajara—allowed in her words for “putting myself in their shoes” in regards to the trepidation some Mexican immigrant parents feel about participation in school activities in the United States. For Jessica, personal experiences with being stereotyped as “hillbilly” brought awareness to how she too was guilty of stereotyping young Latinas based upon their choice in dress. Mary's strong Spanish skills, intercultural abilities, and numerous previous experiences with diverse

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Latino communities helped her to become aware of the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of a single Mexican community.

Consistent with previous teacher study abroad literature (Cushner, 2008; Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Marx & Moss, 2011; Merryfield, 2000; Quezada, 2004), the processes of intercultural development found in this study for Mary, Annabelle, and Jessica would likely not have occurred without a study abroad approach. For example, Annabelle's lesson in empathy was made possible by the daily and "full-time" cultural and linguistic discomfort that only occurs through immersion in a foreign land. Similarly, Jessica became aware of her bias towards Latina teenagers through immersion in a different social ecology in which behavior previously deemed to be deviant was normative. Alas, Mary's lesson in complexity and diversity of Mexican populations was made apparent through seeing and living the diverse Mexican social ecology first hand. In sum, each of these powerful experiences would not have been possible in the United States and required a departure from the support network and familiar linguistic, cultural, and social ecologies of home.

### **Limitations to Mexico Study Abroad**

This study largely confirms previous findings on the positive intercultural benefits of Mexico study abroad for teachers (Hamann, 2003; Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; McLaughlin & Allexsaht-Snider, 2007). However, it remains unclear whether such programs have the ultimate intended effect of fostering culturally responsive teaching practices. Indeed, previous literature has suggested that unreceptive schooling contexts and a lack of follow-up support has limited the ability teachers have to pedagogically enact their new insights (Hamann, 2003; Alfaro & Quezada, 2010). In fact, my own follow up communication with Annabelle, Jessica, and Mary indicated that each of them had had their own struggles in enactment due to these same factors (Follow Up Questionnaire, July 1, 2007)

This lack of programmatic follow-up also possesses other dangers. As with any constructivist process, each step of progress within one's intercultural development is dependent upon additional experiences to solidify and broaden these competencies (Bennet, 1986; Bennet, 1993; Bennet, 2004). This is of special concern in the cases of individuals like Annabelle and Jessica who find themselves in the early stages of adapting to the Mexican-origin population with whom they work. One particular danger is that of essentialization—the over-generalizing the cultural traits based upon a small number of interactions. This type of overgeneralization is also of concern in considering what study abroad participants might extrapolate from Mexican life in Mexico to Mexican-American life in the United States. As scholars have shown, processes of migration and acculturation inevitably transform immigrants (Reese, 2002), who even from the start are often dissimilar from those that remain in regards to education level, socioeconomic status, and other background factors

(Feliciano, 2008; Portés & Rumbaut, 2001). Thus, appropriate applications of the knowledge gained in Mexico requires expert facilitation of additional experiences in both the sending and receiving contexts of Mexican migration.

### **Study Limitations**

As with any small qualitative study, generalization of these findings must be undertaken with some caution in regards to how diverse actors in other locales might experience a Mexico teacher study abroad program. Nevertheless, the consistency of my findings with the existing conceptual and empirical record on teacher study abroad and intercultural development leads me to believe that the teacher learning processes observed here are transferable in many ways to other contexts and program experiences. Not attained by my study, however, was participant variation in regards to gender and ethnicity, which clearly leaves a gap in terms of the disparate pathways that may occur in Mexico study abroad experiences. Also, it is probable—especially when comparing my results to those of Alfaro and Quezada’s (2010) examination of a southern California study abroad program—that there will be some similarities, but also important differences between the experience of teachers from the New Latino Diaspora states such as Nebraska and those from the traditional receiving states such as California. The nature of these similarities and differences can best be fleshed out through additional studies of this sort.

In addition, it is important to note that this and most other studies of this phenomenon have focused on participants already pre-disposed and receptive to the type of change sought with these programs. To a great extent, this is due to teacher study abroad programs being (for the most part) voluntary and thus susceptible to a self-selecting bias. With consideration to the potential of scaling up such approaches, future programs and research should inquire into what occurs for less receptive participants—perhaps those required to participate through mandated professional development. Finally, an important limitation to this and other studies of teacher study abroad is the lack of classroom-based investigative follow-up on teacher participants. Such inquiry would aid knowledge of whether and how these program experiences alter the classroom practices of these educators, especially in regards to the providing of culturally and linguistically responsive practices. It is imperative that future research make this leap, so as to discern whether such programs are having their intended effects on teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion**

These limitations and caveats aside, the findings of this study indicate that teacher study abroad in Mexico can be an effective tool for promoting the intercultural development of dominant culture teachers serving Mexican-origin children in the United States. The data indicates that each of the focal teachers studied in

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this research makes important advances in intercultural knowledge as a result of the study abroad program, and that each attributes this growth to powerful program experiences only possible in a foreign land. Though it still uncertain whether program participation is linked to the use of effective culturally and linguistically responsive instruction in participant classrooms, we do know that educator intercultural competence is a necessary prerequisite to such work (Gay, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; González & Moll, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mahon, 2006; Mahon, 2009; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Paris, 2012).

Is it possible that teacher study abroad develops intercultural competence for dominant culture teachers in ways not possible through other professional development approaches? Given the growing importance of Mexican-origin and other Latino/a student populations in locales throughout the nation, teacher study abroad to Mexico should be given serious consideration as a possible means to rectify the competency gap of teachers serving this critical demographic.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> It is often difficult to isolate Mexican immigrants and their children from the larger Latino category in statistics, which is why I will take the imprecise step of using Mexican-origin and Latino synonymously throughout this analysis.

<sup>2</sup> While it is not unreasonable to assume that the actual sending communities for Nebraska migrants may in some cases resemble *Lomas de la Primavera*, there is no evidence suggesting that emigrants from this community have settled in Nebraska.

<sup>3</sup> I asked the fourth teacher, Samantha, to participate in my study. Without explicitly denying my request, she nevertheless posed numerous roadblocks (such as not returning my initial correspondences and making excuses not to be interviewed while in Mexico), that made it impossible to include her within my interviews. Interestingly, she was the participant who I perceived to have the most negative experience in Mexico. I will comment more on the implications of Samantha's experience in the discussion section.

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