

# What Pre-Service Teachers Bring Home When They Travel Abroad

## Rethinking Teaching Through a Short International Immersion Experience

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the impact of an education course with a short immersion trip to Bolivia on a group of pre-service teachers and the way in which it changed students' understanding of education and of their role as educators. Based on the responses of six of these former students to a short survey, this article argues that the main impact of this course was helping these prospective teachers to enhance their understanding of education as a community-based enterprise and to develop new pedagogical tools that provided them with a greater sense of agency as teachers.

Teacher education programs have assumed, with different degrees of success, the socially crucial task of educating pre-service teachers to address diversity and equity in schools. This already challenging chore has become increasingly difficult in a globalized world. In the face of increasing political and economic interconnectedness among people and nations, the charge of educating for a more diverse and just world can no longer be confined to the geographical borders of any country nor can it focus on the social groups within these limits. Rather, this task requires educators to transcend physical geographies and to understand the way in which nations, people, and communities around the globe are interrelated and shaped by relations of power at the local, national, and international level

(Coulby, 2006; Roman, 2003). The inclusion of this global dimension in education has been advocated by theorists such as Merryfield (2000) who has explicitly asked the question of why teachers are not being prepared for global interconnectedness. Other theorists such as Ochoa (2010) have added a sense of urgency to this goal by reminding us that “Preparing teachers for the twenty-first century is one of the most critical tasks facing teacher education programs in the United States and in the world” (p. 103).

Responding to this call, teacher education programs have increased the number of immersion experiences abroad (Pickert, 2001; Schneider, 2003). Education students enroll in these experiences in lower numbers than students in other disciplines (Cushner, 2009), and the field has been criticized for the lack of a coherent international perspective in its curriculum (Quezada, 2010). Nevertheless, teacher education has developed its own germane international programs, such as student teaching abroad, and has become more creative in fulfilling academic credits in other host countries (Hutchins, 1996; Lewin, 2009). The literature on international immersion experiences is conclusive regarding their benefits. Students who embark on these journeys undergo a personal process that makes them more aware of other people’s cultural realities (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). In many cases, such travel even questions the very cultural identity of those who experience it (Dolby, 2004). Willard-Holt (2001) echoes the positive outcomes of educational immersion experiences abroad by stating,

International student teaching experiences may potentially change beginning teachers’ thinking about themselves, curriculum design, and teaching strategies (McKay & Montgomery, 1995); enhance skills and abilities of effective teachers; force examination of personal beliefs, habits and values; and encourage commitment to open-mindedness (Mahan & Stachowski, 1992). (p. 506)

Referring to previous works in this area, Willard-Holt further suggests that “the greatest benefits included growth of tolerance, acceptance of self and others, and independence” (p. 506).

This article intends to provide new insights on education immersion programs abroad by focusing on the impact of these experiences upon pre-service teachers’ conceptions of education and of their role as educators. To this end, it presents an analysis of the testimonies of a group of undergraduate students who took an education course with a study tour component to Bolivia in spring 2007. At the core of this study is Ochoa’s (2010) concern that, while international experiences,

are helpful and necessary to begin the process of exposure to another language and culture and to gain empathy and understanding of the complexities of cultures, the question remains of how helpful such short-term

experiences are to transform teacher disposition to cross-cultural challenges, value orientations, language learning, and sensitivity to another culture or society. (p. 109)

Taking Ochoa's concern seriously, the purpose of this study was to go beyond the gains in cultural sensitivity and to know more about how short international educational immersion experiences shape pre-service teachers' professional perception of the role of education in society and of their own responsibilities as educators. Based on the responses of the participants of this study, this article argues that the main impact of this course was helping these prospective teachers enhance their understanding of education as a community-based enterprise and develop new pedagogical tools that provided them with a greater sense of agency as teachers. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications of these findings for the internationalization of curriculum in teacher education.

### **The Course and the Immersion Trip**

The course that grounds the analysis presented in this article was titled EDU 2711 Education and the Jesuit Mission in Latin America. It was taught in Spring 2007 and involved a 10-day study tour to Bolivia during Spring break. Of the 14 students enrolled in the class, eight were education majors, two education minors, and four were majors in other disciplines such as sociology, Spanish, international relations, and theology. Four of the students were males and 10 were females. Most students were in their junior or senior year.

The course was developed by the author of this article in a context of collaboration between a North American Jesuit university in northeastern United States, and a Jesuit organization in Bolivia called *Fe y Alegría* (henceforth FyA). Founded in Venezuela in the mid-1950s and now present in all Latin American countries, this organization is nationally and internationally recognized for its efforts to provide formal and non-formal education to the most socially disenfranchised groups. Currently, over 250,000 students (approximately 9% of the nation's total student population) attend these schools in Bolivia. As is the case in other countries in Latin America in which the state cannot offer full educational coverage, FyA in Bolivia works under an agreement with the Bolivian Ministry of Education according to which these schools are structurally and organizationally independent while they are obliged to follow the curriculum and regulations prescribed by the government. The same agreement requires the Ministry of Education to pay for FyA teachers and allows this organization to include additional elements to the official curriculum.

The ultimate purpose of the course was to make students aware of the role of education in non-Western contexts. This goal was particularly important considering the demographics of pre-service teachers such as their homogeneous background (mostly Caucasian females raised in middle and upper class

communities), their lack of exposure to non-Western traditions, and their limited experiences with marginalized people in the United States (Cushner, 2009). As with most teacher candidates across the country, the students taking this course were mostly Caucasian females raised in racially homogeneous middle and upper class communities. Statistics suggest that these prospective teachers would eventually teach a population of 40% of increasingly poor students of color (Cushner, 2009). This course was intended to familiarize them with the lives and circumstances of some of their prospective students.

During their trip to Bolivia in the middle of the semester, students were immersed in schools and spent most of the time observing classes, meeting with teachers, and talking to parents. Because it was the first time that most of these students traveled to a developing country, the course intended to guide their journey through notions of justice and equality. Specifically, the class intended to engage the students with Crabtree's (2007) questions when reflecting on the impact of international service learning: "Do our relationships with institutions, communities, and people in a global education and service-learning partnership *reproduce* or *disrupt* historical and inequitable power relationships between rich/poor, 1st world/3rd world, urban/rural, educated/not formally educated, etc." (p. 42, emphasis in the original)? The course was intended to explicitly "disrupt" these historical relations of power and to embrace "A contrapuntal curriculum of study abroad [that] would cultivate understandings of identity and difference not as natural divides of nations, cultures, or humans, but as dynamic processes constituted relationally" (Talburtt, 2009, p. 115). To accomplish this goal, the course adopted Roman's (2003) notion of "relational genealogist," according to which the purpose of international experiences "is not to over-valorize differences or read universal sameness in the process of making interconnections. . . . Instead, it is to determine the bases and practice of solidarity" (p. 284).

Searching for these bases for solidarity, the first part of the course was an exploration of the historical, social, and cultural factors, including education, that have shaped the lives of the Bolivians whom students would meet during the trip. The texts for this exploration were historical accounts of the recent changes in the country and several articles about processes, such as neoliberalization, that have had a profound impact both on Bolivians' lives and on their hopes for the future. The historical moment of the country was a unique opportunity in this regard. Just a year prior to the trip, Evo Morales had become the first indigenous president both in Bolivia and Latin America. Consequently, issues germane to indigenous communities, whose voices have been traditionally marginalized, were now present everywhere in the media and were emerging as a counter-narrative to the political assumptions of previous political regimes.

Of particular importance to understanding the realities of many of the Bolivians and to developing a sense of solidarity with them was reading about the so-called "water war" between 1999 and 2000 that took place in Cochabamba, our main destination. Known worldwide as one of the major victories of ordinary

people against multinational corporations, the book *Cochabamba: Water War in Bolivia* (Olivera & Lewis, 2004) narrates this popular revolt of the people of this city against “Aguas del Tunari” and the process of privatization of the water system by this company. Oscar Olivera, the union leader who was the face of the struggle and who courageously mobilized different social groups, tells the story. This book depicts this struggle as a collective search for social rights, as a battle to define water as a human right that no one should be deprived from because of the outrageous prices imposed by private companies.

After reading about the sociocultural context that frames the current lives of Bolivians and before taking the study tour, the course devoted most of the time to reading about education in Bolivia and about the work of FyA. Some of these readings discussed issues prominent in the conversation on education in the country such as race and interculturalism. Additionally, some of the readings introduced students to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy and to the idea that education is also a political practice (Shor, 1993). Upon return, the course engaged students in a process of reflection on what they observed and experienced while in Bolivia. As a part of this process, some of the readings discussed before the trip were revisited, and some new readings were introduced. The course concluded with a final research paper that allowed students to pursue, individually or in small groups, a topic of their interest and germane to their discipline. This last assignment was presented to the class at the very end of the semester. The topics addressed by the education students ranged from themes such as the situation of special education in Bolivia, how to incorporate the notion of water as a human right experienced in Bolivia in the U.S. curriculum, or what was the literature that helped the revolutionary movements in the country; the latter pursued by a student majoring both in English and education.

## **Methodology**

Because this study intended to explore the ways in which this class impacted former students to ask and to think about education in their current lives, a qualitative research methodology was used (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The subjects of this study, the 10 former education majors and minors who took this class, constituted what Morse (1998) refers to as “intensity sampling” because they were the only subjects with the necessary experiences to articulate this impact. The study took place in spring 2010. Because none of these former students lived in the area, they were contacted by phone and were invited to participate by filling out an open-ended questionnaire. As Krathwohl (2009) explains, open-ended questions allow for a wider range of responses and are less likely to influence the participants’ responses.

All of them accepted the invitation but only six of them completed the questionnaire within the established period of time. This article is based on the responses of these six participants. At the time of the survey, two of the

participants were in graduate school and had had little exposure to teaching. The other four were teaching full-time, either as teachers or as classroom aids. Five of the participants were female and one of them was a male. To preserve gender anonymity, this study refers to all the participants as females. Also to protect the identity of the participants, all the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

All the data for this study was collected through the responses to the 18 questions in the open-ended questionnaire asking the participants about the changes in the way they understood education as a result of this immersion class. Roughly, the first five questions addressed what they remembered as important from the class and how they described what they learned in this class to their families and friends. The next six questions specifically addressed the way they thought this class has changed their understanding of education, teaching, teaching practices, and teaching assumptions. The last two sets of questions referred to the recommendations they would make to our teacher education program after this experience and whether this class has inspired them to pursue additional interests. Within this qualitative study, the processes of data analysis and data interpretation were interwoven (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) and took place in three steps. First, all the responses were read to achieve an understanding of the information provided by the participants. Second, a summary of the responses was created for each of the questions in the questionnaire comparing the responses of each of the participants and identifying the themes that informed these responses. Finally, the data was interpreted, summarized, and written as presented in this article.

### **Changes on Students' Understandings of Education**

The overall responses of the participants of this study indicate that this course had impacted their personal lives and professional growth in significant ways. As documented in the literature (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001), these former students believe that after the trip to Bolivia they are more culturally sensitive and more prepared to teach students culturally different from their own. The testimony of Rachel, one of the participants, is revealing in this regard:

I find myself talking about this experience on a daily basis, though I participated years ago. Whether it is interviews, social settings, or in a classroom I cannot help but think about the overall impact the trip had on my cultural, global, and educational understanding. I returned with a new ability to conceptualize the world and education, I believe its overall impact is something I constantly think about.

This statement echoes the testimony of the other participants. Also, it articulates the argument that international immersion experiences provide students with a unique context to understand some of the complexities of culture and the larger issues that shape people's lives in foreign communities (Kambutu & Nganga,

2008). Similar to this former student, all the other participants expressed in several ways how they felt that their knowledge of education became richer as a consequence of this course. Heather, for example, stated that taking this course allowed her “to compare/contrast the schools in Latin American countries to the schools in the U.S.” and Michelle that “The stress of cultural identity has been particularly relevant for me as a person and teacher.” When asked about how this course has changed her understanding of education, Holly further states: “My outlook on the world and how I would like to make it my priority to help give back even if it is in little ways.”

Of particular interest when trying to understand the nature of this impact is the fact that when these pre-service teachers reflect on this experience, the line between the personal and the professional is completely blurred. In other words, it seems as if this course, and very specifically the visit to Bolivian schools and communities, provided the participants with experiences that inspired both their personal conception of the world and their professional understanding of education. In the account of these former students, these two areas seem to be inseparable from each other. This symbiotic relationship between the personal and the professional was particularly evident when responding to the question of what ideas in the course have been particularly important for them as a person and as a teacher. Most participants provided a similar answer to the two parts of the question. Michelle, for example, responded to this question by providing one single answer and stating: “I have met several people who are immigrants in this country. I have found that Americans often hold prejudice against people who are not from here without cause, and this often can lead to a person concealing their culture.” She continues by saying that “As a person and teacher I love learning about other cultures, and strongly feel that everyone should be proud of who they are and where they come from.” When the participants addressed the two aspects of this question separately, they still seemed to explain their process of growth in these two areas as rooted in similar principles and concerns. Heather illustrated this response when stating: “As a person—social issues, community issues, country issues, neighborhood issues, justice. As a teacher—social justice issues, issues that exist in the community of the school that I work at, neighborhood issues, diversity issues.”

While some of the implications of the participants’ professional growth will be addressed later, an important question raised by the intimate connection that these former students perceive between the personal and the professional is whether we could utilize the power of this connection in teacher education programs to capitalize on the personal experiences of students returning from international immersion trips. The literature illustrates that pre-service teachers enroll in international experiences such as semester abroad in lower numbers than the general undergraduate population, and that most teacher education programs don’t provide additional academic opportunities to discuss the effect of these experiences on their professional growth (Cushner, 2009; Pickert, 2001;

Schneider, 2003). As the testimonies of these participants suggest, if the personal and the professional can be so powerfully linked and feed upon each other, we need to ask ourselves what kind of opportunities we are missing by not providing additional opportunities for these students to channel their personal growth in international contexts into a more complex understanding of their roles as educators in a global society.

Also, the general responses of the participants in this study offer a reflection on the limitations of short international immersion trips. By their own account, none of the participants has pursued any kind of professional or personal connection with Bolivia. Some of them stated that they still keep in contact with some of the people they met in the country but that this communication has become increasingly weaker. Also, their responses illustrate that they did not engage in other professional activities prompted by this course. Some of the participants mentioned immigration, traveling, and speaking Spanish as interests awakened through this experience. However, none of them have channeled such interests in any formal way. This lack of active engagement with the topics developed in the course could appear as contradictory to the importance that the participants attribute to their trip to Bolivia. However, those familiar with teaching study tours know that this difficulty to sustain these interests is just a reminder that the energy mobilized by immersion experiences, no matter how powerful at that moment, is short-lived if students don't have additional opportunities to explore, sustain, and to expand them (Bonfiglio, 1999; Mahon, 2007; Talburt, 2009).

While the great impact that the participants attribute to this course and the cautionary note on the limitations of this impact are somehow predictable outcomes of short immersion experiences, the responses of the participants in this study also provide some interesting insights into areas less explored by the literature; particularly on the relationship between international immersion experience and pre-service teachers' understanding of education and of their roles as teachers. None of the participants conceptualized the changes they perceived on the way they now understand education and teaching as dramatic. When asked if this class has changed, modified, or reinforced their previous ideas about education, none of the participants responded by choosing the verb "change." However, they all stated that this course has "modified" or "reinforced" their ideas in profound ways. For example, Michelle explained how the course reinforced her commitment to education as a tool in poor communities and consequently, how she now perceives herself as a teacher as an important resource in such communities. In her own words:

This class made me realize that I definitely want to teach in an area and a community where I can make a large impact. While in Bolivia, I discovered that even when there are limited resources and a large group of children, an educator that is prepared and positive can make a big difference in a situation that may seem difficult.

Heather stated that as a consequence of this experience she is,

more aware of the social/justice issues that exist for children who cannot receive such a great education due to the neighborhood/location of where they live versus those students who receive a solid education, with the tools that are needed for them to succeed (technology, textbooks, supplies, etc.) due to the prominent town that they live in.

Yet Nicole explained that she now “. . . understand[s] that teaching children in poverty does not mean teaching them differently but it means using certain strategies and reconsidering which factors are both pertinent and destructive to building a functioning and successful member of society.”

The overall responses of the participants in this study suggest that most of the changes, even if not dramatic, they experienced in their perception of education could be attributed to what they now see as the crucial role of poor communities in education. Many times throughout the survey, the participants expressed their amazement at the strength of parents and community organizations in the impoverished areas they visited in Bolivia. Witnessing the investment of these communities in education seemed to have helped the participants to articulate a much more complex relationship between schools and community and to imagine themselves as participants in this equation. This perception is particularly evident in the responses to the question of whether they thought this class has helped them to understand the role of the community in education. Heather answered this question by referring to the inseparability of the school and the community and by stating: “Students in the Latin American countries tend to rely on one another and the surrounding community for support and ways of retrieving more knowledge.” She also believed that students in this context “are a community of learners” and that schools in Latin American countries “are set-up where most students from the community come to that school in the community, so these students are aware of how much their families rely on one another for help and assistance in all areas of life.” A second participant, Rachel, reflected on a new relationship between the school and the community in disenfranchised groups that, unlike in the U.S., recognize the community as the engine of education. In her words:

Yes, I think watching a community educate their students was a powerful message. In Bolivia it seemed like the country takes to heart the message of a village raising a child, whereas sometimes in the US it is less collaborative. I think watching students yearn for education and to see what the community efforts were to fill that void was empowering.

Yet, a third participant, Martha, was able to capture the reciprocal relationship between students and community when stating: “Looking back, I think the

course helped me to understand not only the importance of the community in the education of students, but also the importance of student education in the future of the community.” For this participant, education is a reciprocal process in which the community sets a process in motion that each of its members commits to for the sake of the group to which they belong.

The participants’ responses indicate that witnessing the strong investment in education by poor communities in Bolivia has provided a new context to read their own experiences in the country, particularly their encounter with poverty. For example, when asked what they usually tell their friends and family about the trip, most participants refer to cultural and social empowerment they perceived in the community they visited. Conceptualizing the community in this positive light seemed to have allowed these participants to detach poverty from the negative psychological and social connotations that this reality carries in the U.S. For example, Nicole responded to this question by saying: “I usually tell them that Bolivia is a different environment and a very respectable culture because they do not let poverty define who they are as an individual, nor do they allow it to break or hinder them.” Contrasting this situation with her own experience, she further stated that in the city where she lives, “if you venture into impoverished areas, you will find it to be very depressing. However, in Bolivia, I as a visitor did not feel depressed when venturing the area, nor did the people or mood seem depressed.” Another participant, Rachel, responded to this question by stating: “When I describe what I learned in this class I highlight the Jesuit mission that *Fe y Alegría* focuses on, but I also talk about the fierce desire to better education in poverty stricken country.” She continued by explaining: “I also include the series of schools, locations, and talks that I had the incredible opportunity to take part of, but mostly I talked about the spirit of Latin America and their desire to change and advance.” As Nicole, Rachel implies that “The trip could have been a depressing depiction of how some of the world is lagging beyond” but that “rather it was a refreshing realization of the pursuit of advancement.” These testimonies undoubtedly romanticize the power of poor communities in Bolivia. However, they also make clear that this course has challenged the participants to interrogate the conventional view of disenfranchised communities as lacking a desire or the capacity for education (Perry, 2003; Rogers, 2006).

Looking back at the participants’ answers to the question of whether this class has changed, modified, or reinforced their understanding of education, it seems that these responses are grounded in their awareness of the community as a locus of agency. In these responses, most of the participants allude to the importance of understanding, celebrating, and acknowledging the power of the community. The following excerpts illustrate this reference to the power of the community: “This class definitely reinforced the idea of the necessity of promoting a community environment within the classroom. It is necessary for students to feel empowered and a part of something.” “It helped me understand that I have to appreciate and become knowledgeable about my students’ parents and their

family history. You never know where your students' experiences could have come from." "The course experience [ . . . ] led to a great deal of reflection on the idea of education as a tool for profound social change, and I still feel the effects of this reflection in my current teaching philosophy and practices."

The changes experienced by the participants in the way they understood their own role as educators seems to be grounded in their perception of the community as active agents and in their desire to connect the classroom with the community. For example, when asked if this course has influenced their decision on where to teach, five out of the six participants stated that this experience had reinforced their decision to teach in low socioeconomic areas or in schools serving a diverse student body. One participant responded to this question by specifically referring to her commitment to teach poor inner-city youth. Another participant responded that she wanted to teach in schools with empowering pedagogies. The fact that most participants had chosen the verb "reinforced" and that only one of them stated that her decision on where to teach has "changed" indicates that most of these pre-service teachers originally had enrolled in this course with a degree of commitment to impoverished communities. However, their responses indicate that this course has solidified this commitment and has given them new pedagogical tools to pursue it. Indeed, when referring to their own teaching throughout the document, all the participants refer to different ways of acknowledging or incorporating the community into their pedagogies. When asked more specifically the question of whether they believed that their current teaching is informed by this class, the participants teaching full-time at the time of the survey or who have had teaching experiences since they took the course responded with a resounding yes. Two of the participants stated that they incorporate knowledge about culture into their teaching. Michelle, for example, explained:

I incorporate Spanish and sign language daily in my lessons. We also have cultural celebrations where we read stories about different countries, in different languages, or by authors from a particular country. I have the families involved in these events by visiting our class to read, or by sharing food, music or clothing from their culture.

Rachel added:

I think some of the lessons I teach surrounding cultural diversity and poverty were inspired by this experience. Pictures I show my classes or anecdotes that I share usually incorporate something from this trip. I think that I have also learned to appreciate perspective more and how others view the world and the world that they bring with them into my classroom.

Teaching about the culture they just experienced is a trait reflected in the literature as one of the tools developed by undergraduate students after international

immersion trips (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). Naturally, teachers tend to teach about what becomes important and familiar to them. However, some of the participants' responses illustrate the power of international education immersion experiences in developing larger pedagogical strategies to guide teachers' practices. For example, one of the participants credited this class for her commitment to higher order thinking and for allowing for students' voices to be heard in her class. For Martha, this class provided a new entire paradigm to understand her own role as a teacher. In her words:

One of several overlapping and interacting roles that influence my teaching is the model of 'teacher as liberator,' and the related practices that I employ, including teaching for critical literacy at the high school level, can be partially attributed to the understandings developed in the course.

In general, the experiences of the participants in this course seemed to have greatly influenced their current understanding of their role as teachers. When asked specifically if there is anything they currently do as teachers as a consequence of this class, the four participants who were teaching provided specific examples of this influence. Two of the participants responded by articulating a need for knowing and respecting the cultural backgrounds of their students. Two others mentioned specific pedagogical models and teaching strategies. For one of them, it was the commitment to the model of teaching that she describes as "teacher-liberator." For the other it was the realization that: "teaching children in poverty does not mean teaching them differently but it means using certain strategies and reconsidering which factors are both pertinent and destructive to building a functioning and successful member of society." For the other two participants, the role of the teacher now implies new responsibilities such as bettering oneself by learning more about others, by sharing this knowledge and perspective with their students, or by standing up for what is right.

## **Summary and Implications for Curriculum**

The findings of this study suggest that this class has been a very rich educational opportunity, both personally and professionally, for the pre-service teachers who took it. While far from being the "life-changing" experience that they enthusiastically claim when sharing their trip to Bolivia to friends and families, it is evident that this course has compelled them to explore teaching and education as transformative processes in which they are a part of a larger picture. Also, it has provided some of the participants with specific conceptual and methodological tools to pursue this understanding such as new theoretical models of teaching to guide their practice or the ability to articulate broader educational goals for the students they serve. In the words of one of the participants, "overall this class has

given me the opportunity to be looking at the world differently and to prepare my students with a richer understanding of the world at large.”

Additionally, the analysis presented in this paper provides some insights on the questions raised by Quezada and Cordeiro (2007) and formulated as: “[h]ow are pre-service teachers who participate in an international experience different from those who do not? What occurs during the experience that accounts for these changes?” (p. 5). While this study did not address these two questions specifically, the responses of the participants of this study seem to indicate that it was their encounter with impoverished communities with a strong commitment to education in Bolivia that catalyzed their perception of education as an empowering social task. Likewise, this encounter seems to be the main force behind their understanding of themselves as teachers as an active part of this process of social empowerment. Based on this indication, there are two additional questions also raised by Quezada and Cordeiro that this study would like to offer as a concluding reflection. They are: “How can we utilize the research in international education to plan and prepare future teachers?” (p. 4) and “How can education coursework reflect a more international focus in its curriculum” (p. 4)?

The participants in this study provided some interesting insights on these two questions. When asked what recommendations they would make to our teacher education program after taking these course, they echoed some of the suggestions advanced by proponents of a more global perspective in education and responded that there should be more international immersion experiences, a stronger emphasis on languages, and a broader course offering in areas related to global issues such as immigration. However, as crucial as these suggestions are, the literature in this field reminds us that to truly provide our pre-service teachers with an international perspective, the whole curriculum needs to be “internationalized” (Bonfiglio, 1999; Green, 2002; Mahon, 2007; Quezada, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Schneider, 2004). How to accomplish this challenging task obviously escapes the purview of this work. However, the narratives of the participants in this study suggest that there are at least two steps that we could take in this direction: to provide pre-service teachers with a historical perspective on the struggles for education in poor communities, and to familiarize them with the notion of the teacher as an agent of social transformation.

Most of the pre-service teachers taking this class seemed to have discovered the power of education in impoverished communities of Bolivia. However, the history of education in the U.S. provides plenty of examples of the struggle for education among the most disenfranchised groups. Teacher education programs should familiarize students with these accounts to help pre-service teachers understand, for example, that the philosophy of education that sustained the literacy efforts of the African-American community was grounded in a search for liberation and humanity (Perry, 2003), that immigrant communities have always possessed a love for education that the process of formal schooling has failed to acknowledge

and nurture (Valenzuela, 1999), and that bilingualism has always been a struggle for self-determination (Murillo et al., 2010; Salinas, 2000). Highlighting the agency of poor communities in teacher education programs would allow pre-service teachers to look at education as a tool for empowerment. Equally important, it would allow them to see education as a social process that uncovers the “common differences” (Roman, 2003) in the way people and communities in different historical and geographical locations articulate their hopes for the future.

Infusing the curriculum of teacher education with this historical and relational perspective would further require conceptualizing teaching as a socially transformative enterprise. When pre-service teachers view communities as agents of change, just as they did in Bolivia, they naturally start seeing themselves as a part of this social process. Internationalizing the curriculum in teacher education could help these prospective teachers to realize that this teaching paradigm is not desirable only in poor and remote places such as Bolivia but that is equally important in our own schools. To achieve this goal, we could place liberatory pedagogies at the core of our programs, and we could present them as a necessary tool to address current dynamics of disempowerment in communities around the U.S. Reversing the damaging effects of the No Child Left Behind in poor urban schools is a good example in this regard. A growing body of literature has documented how this law narrowed the curriculum offered to these students and has submitted schools to an unfair competition without the necessary resources (Kim & Sunderman, 2004; Ravitch, 2010). As some authors suggest, liberatory pedagogies could be crucial in this context to disrupt the outcomes of this law and to empower these students and communities to have more control over education (Apple, 2007; Quezada, 2008; Rogers, 2006).

Informing the curriculum in teacher education programs with a historical perspective on the struggles of poor communities and with liberatory practices could mobilize students’ hearts and minds in their search for teaching as a social justice task. Also, it could provide students with the sense of agency that Michelle displayed in an incident that she described in the following terms:

Early last year there was an incident on my block involving a volunteer fire fighter and a Dominican woman in my town. While the woman was driving her sons to school, which was a block away, she beeped so that he would close his door because she was approaching the corner. He proceeded to spit in her face, call her an inappropriate racial term, and told her to get out of our neighborhood. I was right behind her car, and I called the police. When we went to court, she was so happy to see me, and I went even though I was not issued a subpoena.

This former student credited this class for “feel[ing] the need to stand up for people I may not even know when something unjust is occurring,” and she doubted that she would have had the courage to call the police if she had not

taken this course. Infusing our curriculum with these relational and pedagogical elements would allow many more pre-service teachers to act in this way. Indeed, it would be the entire program, and not a single course that would be credited for these transformative actions.

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