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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, THE EFFECTS OF A SHORT-TERM CULTURAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE TO MEXICO ON SCHOOL LEADERS, by PAULA JO DINNAN, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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Paula Jo Dinnan

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EFFECTS OF A SHORT-TERM CULTURAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE TO MEXICO ON SCHOOL LEADERS

by  
Paula Jo Dinnan

The U.S. Census bureau projects that by 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children. The population of school-aged Hispanic children is already the largest ethnic group, and the sheer number and rate of increase of these linguistically and culturally different students creates unfamiliar cultural challenges for school leaders. School districts are confronted with diversity-related issues and school leaders, who are predominantly white and middle class, are often ill-prepared to meet the challenges. Effective professional development aimed at preparing school leaders to better understand the social and academic needs of culturally diverse students is a topic receiving much attention in recent years.

Studying the social, cultural, and political circumstances of diversity in its natural setting offers particular advantages that other methods cannot replicate. One suggestion is for school leaders to spend time in the local communities of their Hispanic students. Another option for learning about culture, albeit a more difficult and costly one to achieve, is to have school leaders visit the home country of their Hispanic students and immerse themselves in the local culture for a short period of time. A school district in Georgia decided to provide authentic culture learning for some of its school leaders through a short term cultural immersion experience.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of an eight-day cultural immersion trip to Xalapa, Mexico on school leaders from the Mary County School District in Georgia. Because this short-term cultural immersion experience was aimed at increasing the cultural awareness of school leaders and improving relationships with Hispanic students and their families, the primary focus of this study is to explore the meanings attached to the experiences of administrators participating in the trip.

THE EFFECTS OF A SHORT-TERM CULTURAL  
IMMERSION EXPERIENCE TO MEXICO  
ON SCHOOL LEADERS

by  
Paula Jo Dinnan

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the  
Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Educational Policy Studies  
in  
the Department of Educational Policy Studies  
in  
the College of Education  
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2009



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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROBLEM

When I told my mother that I had accepted the position as an elementary school principal in the neighboring Mary County School District [pseudonym], she clasped her hands over her mouth and gasped, “Oh dear! There are so many Mexicans there!” Upon hearing her words, I suddenly became nervous at the thought of leading a school that was 30 % Hispanic; I had no experience with this ethnic group, and the stereotypical images that I held were quite frightening. My small town, middle-class upbringing and my professional experiences of teaching and leading in middle-class schools with little diversity created cultural misconceptions and ignorance of which I was not fully aware.

I awkwardly served in my role as principal of more than 200 Hispanic students during that first year. I did not understand the culture, and I did not speak the language; therefore, I spent most of the year avoiding contact with the students and their families. I was not prepared for relating to or understanding the Hispanic culture, and the three hours of sensitivity training provided by the school district left me feeling confused and inadequate.

Through intentional efforts, including a cultural immersion experience to Mexico and by working with the Hispanic families in my school through the Even Start Program, I was able to lead my Hispanic students more confidently. The Even Start Program included home visits as a component of the program, and it was through the home visits

that trust and understanding began to develop between the families and me. A transformation of sorts took place; I recognized it when a colleague commented that he had heard about a trip that I was planning to take to Mexico. I asked him if he would like to join me to which he quickly responded that the closest he wanted to get to Mexico was El Sombrero, a local Tex-Mex restaurant. Another principal asked if I could bring back some house framers because he was building a new home. As the comments brought a round of laughter from the other principals, I was reminded of the perspectives held by some of our school leaders. Six years earlier, I might have shared similar thoughts. Due to our limited experiences, we may know very little about the students that we lead. Nieto and Bode (2008) noted, “As a result, beliefs about students of diverse backgrounds may be based on spurious assumptions and stereotypes” (p. 6).

### Theoretical Framework

Reflecting on the above scenario, I do not think that the principals realized that their remarks were derogatory or oppressive. Sometimes we innocently and inadvertently draw conclusions about others based on our own limited cultural perspectives. The comments from my colleagues may have reflected what Nieto and Bode (2008) described as “unexamined ideologies and myths that shape commonly accepted ideas and values” (p. 7).

Many of our ideas, values, and beliefs are absorbed during childhood from family, community, and religion – the aspects of our culture (Mezirow, 1981). We often think of culture as our language, dress, food, or government, and we are also reminded of the traditions that distinguish us as a particular part of society – our celebrations and



observances. Culture, however, also includes our learned behavior patterns - how we classify people, teach our children certain expectations, distinguish between right and wrong or good and bad (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Rarely do we stop to challenge these cultural beliefs and norms; for the most part we accept the ideas and beliefs as principles that have guided us into adulthood and helped us to understand life. As Cranton (2006) noted, "People have a set of expectations about the world that are based on formative childhood experiences, and those expectations continue to act as a filter for understanding life" (p. 19). Although these assumptions are what we understand and believe, they may also include "distortions, prejudices, stereotypes, and simply unquestioned or unexamined beliefs" (Cranton, 2006, p. 23). These assumptions are our way of seeing the world based on our background, culture, and experience and are expressed as our points of view or perspectives (Mezirow, 1990).

Sometimes the beliefs or values that we have maintained throughout our lives are called into question. This was clearly the case in my experience of leading Hispanic students. I recognized my deeply embedded assumptions after I became the principal of a school with a significant Hispanic population. I was frightened because of my limited experiences with diversity and my unfamiliarity with the language and culture. As I established relationships with my Hispanic students and families, I began to wrestle with some of my embedded assumptions. It was when a Hispanic parent took my hands into hers and thanked me for "loving the Hispanic people" that I recognized the transformative process that had taken place. I realized that there had been a transformation between what I had been conditioned to believe was right and true and my new set of beliefs that were much more open and reflective.

In situations where our beliefs and values are challenged, we may choose to reject the alternative perspective, just as I initially did when I avoided contact with my Hispanic students. We also may choose to critically examine our beliefs and possibly adapt new habits of mind. According to Cranton (2006), “When people critically examine their habitual expectations, revise them, and act on the revised point of view, transformative learning occurs” (p. 19). This process transforms our taken-for-granted frames of reference to “make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Mezirow believed that new experiences can be the catalyst for the creation of new perspectives which may transform how we think about ourselves and the world – a shift that can dramatically alter our way of viewing the world. This belief is at the heart of Mezirow’s (1990) transformative learning theory and will be a lens used to analyze the results of this study.

### Research Problem

School districts are confronted with diversity-related issues, and school leaders, who are predominantly white and middle class, are often ill-prepared to meet the challenges that diversity brings (Nieto & Bode, 2008). One such issue has emerged with the dramatic increase in the number of Hispanics living in the United States. The term *Hispanic* is used in this paper because data accumulated for this research from the U.S. Census Bureau and The Mary County School District reflected data using the term, *Hispanics*. Nieto and Bode (2008) shared that the term *Hispanic* is more widespread and well known although it does not refer to a specific country or continent. Nieto and Bode

(2008) further stated that there is continued debate regarding the appropriate term and that when possible, it is more appropriate to use the specific ethnic name. For that reason, I use the term *Mexican* when I refer specifically to that ethnic group and *Mexico* when referring to that specific country in this paper. The term *Hispanic* includes people from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries.

Hispanics are now the largest minority in the country and constitute almost 15 % of the total population (The Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). From 2000 to 2006, the Hispanic population in the United States increased by 57 %, compared to a 13 % increase in the total population. During that same period, the white, non-Hispanic population increased by less than two percent, and the number of blacks increased by less than eight percent. Sixty-nine percent of the total Hispanic population in the United States is Mexican American and 28 % of Hispanics live in poverty. These numbers do not include the estimated 10 million undocumented Hispanic immigrants who live in this country. Should the trend continue, by 2050 there will be 138 million Hispanics in the United States, an 82 % increase in this ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The increase in Hispanic residents has clearly impacted the number of Hispanic students attending school in the United States. The number of Hispanic students nearly doubled from 1990 to 2006, accounting for 60 % of the total growth in public school enrollments (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). There are now approximately 10 million Hispanic students, and they make up about one-in-five public school students in the United States; in 1990 just one-in-eight students was Hispanic (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) predicts that the strong growth in Hispanic enrollment is expected to continue for decades. It projects that the Hispanic school-age population will increase

by 166 % by 2050 while the non-Hispanic school-age population will grow by just four percent over this same period. “In 2050, there will be more school-age Hispanic children than school-age non-Hispanic white children” (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 1).

As the Hispanic population moves from minority to majority, the sheer number and rate of increase of immigrant students attending school creates a challenge for serving these linguistically and culturally different students. School leaders with limited experiences with diversity could operate from unexamined beliefs concerning Hispanic students. Are Hispanic students viewed as future house framers, or are they seen as having the same potential as students of the dominant culture of European Americans? In 2002, 75 % of Hispanics said that discrimination was a problem in schools; just five years later, 84 % reported the same (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). Fry and Gonzales (2008) noted that “although discrimination in schools was viewed as problematic in 2002 and 2007 by a strong majority of respondents, the percentage of Hispanics who believe it is a *major* problem rose over the five-year period from 38 % in 2002 to 64 % in 2007” (p. 9). We define ourselves as a nation of immigrants but there is waning support for new immigrants, particularly for those families who are daily crossing the borders of the United States (Banks & Banks, 2007). Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias and Tinajero (2001) stressed that “as schools attempt to meet the needs of Latino children throughout the United States, less than inviting attitudes are present in many educational communities” (p. XV).

These attitudes have been prevalent in the education of Mexican American students throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mexican immigrant children often did not attend school, and there were conflicts regarding their school attendance.

Farmers did not want Mexican children to go to school because they were needed to do farm work; public officials thought that school attendance was the way to Americanize the children. The Mexican children who attended school faced segregation and were presented a curriculum designed to rid them of their native language and customs (Spring, 2007). In reality, many Mexican children did not experience this type of deculturalization process because compulsory education laws were not enforced for these students. By denying Mexicans the “knowledge necessary to protect their political and economic rights and to economically advance in society” was a method of social control (Spring, 2007, p. 95). “As one Texas farmer stated, ‘Educating the Mexicans is educating them away from the job, away from the dirt’” (Spring, 2007, p. 95). Failure to enforce compulsory attendance laws for Mexican children was one of the most discriminatory acts against Mexican children (Spring, 2007).

There continues to be an argument for social justice in the education of Mexican students, even today. The reality is that Mexican students are attending school in the United States in large numbers, and these numbers will continue to increase. These students deserve an equitable education in an environment of acceptance and respect. Social justice is not solely about being kind to minority students or providing them with the same resources and opportunities as other students. According to Nieto and Bode (2008), social justice “challenges, confronts and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences” (p. 11).

Schools need culturally competent leaders in order to combat social injustice (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Addressing the inequities that exist in schools begins with a

commitment from the leadership of the school. The school leader sets the tone of respect and acceptance and must have confidence in educating all students. The ability of the school leader to understand and react appropriately to differences affects the education students receive (Ryan, 2003).

There is a critical need for school leaders to better understand the culture of their students so that students have more than an equal opportunity for education or support for educational success; students should attend schools where understanding and acceptance of all students is sincere and evident. There is a problem when barriers caused by language, cultural misconceptions, misconceptions, and racism exist between school leaders and their students. School leaders who lack cultural competence are not fully capable of leading effectively. Having a culturally competent school leader is one reason that schools have success with a high Hispanic student population (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias & Tinajero, 2001). A problem for the school district is how to prepare their leaders to reach this level of cultural competence.

A report by The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) indicated that for school leaders to become culturally competent, they must have cultural awareness and cultural knowledge (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). The authors of the IEL report stated that culturally aware leaders have developed an understanding of other ethnic groups, and leaders who have cultural knowledge are familiar with cultural characteristics, histories, values, belief systems, and behaviors of members from other ethnic groups. The IEL (2005) report further indicated that:

A leader's grasp of cultural issues and a leader's commitment to socially just and equitable schools will help determine whether he or she sets a tone for all stakeholders and welcomes diversity as an opportunity to help

students develop new skills and improve outcomes or whether he or she will react defensively to maintain the status quo. (p. 3)

Moreover, educational leaders who are not culturally competent cannot be fully effective. The authors of the report suggested that to become culturally competent, leaders must work to understand their own biases and that professional learning provided in safe environments where school leaders are able to share their values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations will foster cultural competence. Additionally, the authors conclude, “leaders need exposure to cultures and settings different from those they are used to if they are to lead, rather than react, to political currents in their own schools” (IEL, p. 7).

### Purpose

Effective professional development is needed to prepare school leaders to understand how to meet the needs of their culturally diverse students (IEL, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Although an option for culture training is through seminars or workshops, Sue and Sue (1990) suggested that culture learning should contain experiences beyond what is included in training sessions that rely on lectures with handouts. When the learner is directly involved through experiential learning opportunities, there is a deeper level of reflection and understanding (Keeton & Tate, 1978).

Studying the culture in its natural setting provides an opportunity to fully experience the social, cultural, and political circumstances of diversity. One approach is to have the school leader spend time in the homes and communities of their Hispanic students, studying family interactions, learning the language, and engaging in authentic learning – learning by being a part of the real world. Another option for culture learning

is to visit the home country for a period of time to become immersed in the culture. In *Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain (1869) wrote:

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness and many of our people need it sorely on those accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime. (Chapter LXI, Conclusion)

A group of school leaders in Mary County, Georgia, volunteered to participate in authentic culture learning through a short-term cultural immersion experience. The purpose of this study was to examine the short-term cultural immersion aimed at increasing the cultural competency of school leaders and to improve relationships with Hispanic students.

The data from the experience were analyzed through the lens of transformative learning theory, a theory based on the constructivist assumption that meaning is made from our experiences and validated through interaction and communication with others (Creswell, 2007). The theory suggests that encountering a new experience can cause unexamined beliefs to be addressed, and through reflective discourse a new perspective may be developed (Mezirow, 1990). This study examined how the cultural immersion experience shaped the participants' perceptions of Mexico, its culture, and people.

### Research Questions

The general question underlying the research for this study was how does a short-term cultural immersion trip to Mexico prepare school leaders to better understand the cultural dynamics of the Mexican students and families in their schools? Within the context of this question were three related questions:



1. How does a cultural immersion experience to Mexico shape school leaders' perceptions of Mexico, Mexicans, and the Mexican culture?
2. How does a short-term cultural immersion experience foster transformative learning?
3. What insights do participants gain from a cultural immersion experience?

### Contextual Background

Mary County [pseudonym] is located approximately 40 miles northeast of a large metropolitan area in the southeast. Over the last 25 years, the poultry industry, which includes farms and processing plants, has attracted migrant workers, mainly from Mexico. In 1990, there were 4,558 Hispanics living in Mary County, but by 2007, there were 44,148 Hispanics living there - 35,994 of those residents were Mexican (Mary County Chamber of Commerce, 2008). The dramatic increase in Hispanic families also has had an impact on the local school district. As indicated in Table 1, less than three percent of the student population in 1989 was Hispanic, but by 2005 the population had increased to over 30 %. This data reflects demographic information obtained from school registration documents. When registering students for school, parents are required to indicate the demographic term that best describes their nationality or race. The term, *Hispanic*, in this scenario, reflects all students who are from a Spanish-speaking country. In the Mary County School District, this includes students from six countries. The district does not maintain data that reflects information by specific country, but groups all Spanish-speaking students into the category termed *Hispanic*.

Table 1

*Number of Hispanic Students by Year in the Mary County School District*

School Year	Number of Hispanics Enrolled	Percentage of School Enrollment
1989-1990	325	2.45%
1990-1991	476	3.45%
1991-1992	594	4.19%
1992-1993	732	4.93%
1993-1994	973	6.30%
1994-1995	1175	7.35%
1995-1996	1570	9.38%
1996-1997	1930	10.99%
1997-1998	2224	12.30%
1998-1999	2612	13.96%
1999-2000	3219	16.46%
2000-2001	3908	19.26%
2001-2002	4613	21.87%
2002-2003	5080	23.50%
2003-2004	5874	26.14%
2004-2005	6622	28.67%
2005-2006	7423	30.85%

For nine years very little changed in the Mary County School District to address the needs of Hispanic students and their families, although this particular population of

students continued to increase. In 1998, however, the United States Office of Civil Rights (OCR) conducted a review of the school district and established a set of mandates regarding the education of Hispanic students in Mary County. To address the leadership training component of the OCR mandates, newly hired administrators were required to attend a half-day seminar to gain a better understanding of the English language learner and the process of second language acquisition.

Additionally, participants were to examine elements of culture and explore effective instruction for English language learners. The topic that examined elements of culture appeared to be the item aimed at addressing cultural awareness for school leaders; however, the resource for this topic was a half-page handout entitled “Acculturation and the ESOL Student” (Appendix A) that gave a one-sentence overview of the stages that an individual might experience when moving to an unfamiliar place. The handout states, “Children may move through the stages at a different pace than their parents. The stages affect school learning. A student who is in culture shock may have little energy left for learning” (Mary County Schools, 1998). That was the extent of culture-learning for the administrators new to Mary County, Georgia.

The school district continued to establish goals to address the Hispanic student population for the next eight years (Appendix B). The system-level goals addressed translation issues, classroom needs, and instruction, but did not address the cultural awareness, knowledge, or competency of school leaders. The school leaders in Mary County were faced with understanding and solving many diversity-related challenges in their schools without the training necessary to address the issues.

By 2008, there were 21 elementary schools in the Mary County School District. One of these elementary schools was over 96 % Hispanic while the Hispanic student population at four other elementary schools exceeded 70 % (Mary County School District, 2008). That year steps were taken to explore ways to prepare school leadership to effectively and confidently lead schools to educate an increasing Hispanic population. Almost 20 years after the arrival of the first Hispanic students, efforts were made to address the need for school leaders to participate in learning experiences that would foster an understanding of the Mexican culture. Conversations were initiated in May, 2008, by Dr. Rose (a pseudonym for an elementary school principal in the district) about a cultural immersion experience to Mexico for school administrators. Mexico was chosen for the cultural immersion site because over 70 % of the Hispanic students in Mary County were from Mexico. After a presentation by Dr. Rose at the monthly district-wide leadership meeting, four elementary school principals and three assistant principals volunteered to participate in the cultural immersion trip. Within three months, three of the elementary school principals had decided not to participate, thereby leaving one elementary school principal and three assistant principals who participated in the immersion experience. One of the three principals could not participate because her daughter decided to get married during the week of the trip. Another participant cancelled because of financial obligations, and the third principal shared that she did not think that she was ready “for an adventure of this nature.” When questioned further, she noted that she was more of a “tourist-type traveler and not ready for the difficulty that immersion experiences entail.”

Wilson (1993) suggested that new attitudes are the result of an international experience. The hope for a handful of leaders in the Mary County School District was that this opportunity would also provide insights into the culture of their students and create confidence in their abilities to build relationships with Mexican students and families. School leaders needed a cultural understanding that exceeded an annual Cinco de Mayo celebration with piñatas, sombreros, and nachos - activities that Banks and Banks (2007) list in the lowest level of implementation of their continuum of integrating multiculturalism. The focus at this level is simply on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements, and often only provides students with a memorable one-time experience; it does little to advance cultural understanding.

### Overview of the Study

This study examined the effects of an eight-day cultural immersion trip to Xalapa, Mexico, on school leaders from the Mary County School District. The primary focus of the study was on the meanings attached to the experiences of administrators, defined as principals and assistant principals, participating in a cultural immersion to Mexico. Four school leaders volunteered for the cultural immersion trip and to be a part of this study. Three of the participants were women, one was a man, and all of the participants were white. Only one participant spoke Spanish, and none of the participants had been on a prior cultural immersion trip, although three of the participants had vacationed in Mexico on prior occasions.

The study site was Xalapa, Mexico, which is located in the mountains in the state of Veracruz. This site was chosen because of the relationship that Dr. Rose, the bilingual

trip coordinator, had with the University of Veracruz in Xalapa. Additionally, Xalapa is not a major tourist destination for foreigners; therefore, visitors experience authentic Mexican life and hear only Spanish. Participants also visited the nearby cities and villages of Naolinco, Coatepec, Actopan, Puebla, and Xico.

Prior to the trip, orientation sessions were conducted by Dr. Rose to address logistics of travel, specifics of the immersion experience, and to assign articles to be read about the history and culture of Mexico; the handouts for these sessions are included as Appendix C. Dr. Rose decided to lead this particular immersion trip because she had participated in prior cultural immersion experiences to Mexico and found the experiences to be valuable in her ability to lead her Hispanic students.

During the trip, participants took Spanish lessons through language immersion that was coordinated by a bilingual professor from The University of Veracruz. Participants also visited four elementary schools that were representative of a variety of educational settings in Mexico. A description of each of these schools is given in Chapter Three.

I conducted interviews with each participant prior to and upon returning from Mexico. I was also a participant observer during the trip, and I took and maintained field notes. Additionally, I conducted document analysis on the daily journals that were kept by the participants and on photographs taken during the immersion experience. Two evenings during the trip, participants met in group sessions for the purpose of reflective discourse and the group met after the trip to discuss their experiences.

### Limitations

This study was limited because Hispanics in the United States represent 15 Latin countries, yet the study focused only on an immersion experience to Mexico. The goal was for the participants to become literate about the culture of the Hispanic students in the Mary County School District – over 70 % of whom are from Mexico; therefore, Mexico was chosen as the site for the cultural immersion experience. Because the site was chosen by Dr. Rose, a representative of the Mary County School District, this limitation could not be controlled. Because the study was examining a cultural immersion experience for school leaders who volunteered to participate in the trip, the number of participants in this study could not be controlled.

My participation in a prior cultural immersion experience was a limitation because of perceptions and biases that developed as a result of that trip. There were some benefits to my prior visits to Xalapa; I was somewhat familiar with the area and was able to facilitate the travel of the participants. Additionally, because I had previously experienced many of the events that happened on this immersion trip, I was less distracted by the cultural experiences and was able to focus on the research.

Another limitation was the biases that I have because I am a principal in the same district as the participants of the study. I am familiar with the history of the school district and had established trusting relationships with the participants. I made no secret of the fact that I had professional relationships with the participants, and I acknowledged my prior immersion experiences during the study in an effort to ensure transparency.

### Significance

Census data strongly indicate that the Hispanic population in the United States will continue to increase. Specific to this study is the dramatic and continued increase in Hispanic students, mainly from Mexico, in Mary County over the last 20 years. Some school leaders in Mary County are concerned about a large group of immigrant students who need an environment of acceptance and understanding, and current school leadership that is insecure and unprepared in meeting those needs. It is simplistic to think that a single, short-term cultural immersion experience for four Mary County school leaders could eradicate prejudice or bias against Hispanic students. However, if a cultural immersion experience to Mexico creates situations where relationships between school leaders and their Mexican students and families are improved upon, then the information gleaned from this study is important for knowing how to prepare school leaders for cross-cultural competence.

Additionally, this study is significant because there is little research that addresses cultural immersion experiences for school leaders. There is an abundance of literature that addresses the pivotal role that a principal plays in school success; however, more research is needed that is focused on the role of the principal in the education of Hispanic students (Banks & Banks, 2007; Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 2001; Nieto & Bode, 2009).

Finally, by participating in this study, there was the potential for school leaders to challenge currently held beliefs and attitudes regarding Mexican students and families. The immersion trip included all of the components outlined by Mezirow (1989) that would facilitate a change in perspective – an experience, the opportunity for critical



reflection, and an opportunity for reflective discourse. The potential implication for the school district, as a result of this level of perspective transformation, could be a change of the organizational focus regarding how to prepare school leaders to meet the needs of the growing Mexican population of students and their families. The potential implication for the Mexican students in Mary County is that they would attend schools where the leaders have taken intentional and specific steps in improving their cross-cultural understanding.

### Tourist Adventures versus Cultural Immersion Experiences

There is more to cultural immersion than physically being in another country; going there does not mean that cultural understanding will naturally follow. At the heart of cultural immersion experiences are the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual effects and whether they initiate a new viewpoint or perspective (Williams, 2005).

Cultural immersion opportunities differ from tourist experiences because a goal of a tourist-based experience is to excite and entertain participants as well as to display the exotic aspects of the culture (Williams, 2005). My earliest recollection of experiencing a culture different from my own was when I was eight years old. My family drove to Cherokee, North Carolina, to see the “Indians” on the Reservation. I vividly remember riding down the main street of Cherokee, which was lined with shops that sold moccasins and tomahawks. As we drove, we would point excitedly when we would see a Native American in full headdress standing on the side of the street selling the privilege of having a photograph taken with him. I was dismayed in my high school U. S. History class to learn that the Native American indigenous to that area did not wear a colorful

headdress. History had been re-written in Cherokee, North Carolina, to provide entertainment for visitors and for the purpose of generating revenue.

Tourist adventures tend to be revenue-driven. Expensive guided tours and excursions are designed to keep tourists from being disappointed; the tourists are paying to see unique aspects of a culture. My husband and I went to Jamaica where we purchased quite expensive excursion tickets. We boarded an open-air bus and rode around the island. At one point, we stopped in front of a ramshackle building and were told that it was a one-room schoolhouse. Almost on cue, seven or eight children poured into the yard in front of the bus and sang two songs. The tourists applauded and immediately began offering dollar bills to the children. Although this appeared to be a routine stop on the tour, the tourists reacted as if that they were being given a special and unique glimpse into the culture of Jamaica.

The typical tourist would not necessarily have access to the experiences that a carefully planned cultural immersion trip provides. The participants on cultural immersion opportunities spend time immersed with natives and their families, participating in language and culture learning in real life situations, including meals, shopping, and other daily events. Limited communication and knowledge of the culture and language may create unsettling situations during the experience; therefore, participants often find the immersion trip to be more difficult and less entertaining than tourist adventures (Rodriguez, 2000).

Finally, cultural immersion trips are opportunities for developing relationships with members of another culture in an effort to develop a genuine understanding of the person and his or her culture. Participants of cultural immersion experiences must

recognize the difference between cultural immersion and tourist trips where the culture is displayed to generate revenue. The image of a safari where participants ride by, as I did in Cherokee, North Carolina as a child, to stare at the natives is a far cry from the rich experiences available in an immersion experience where participants have the opportunity to build relationships, learn from individuals, and develop mutual respect, knowledge, and understanding of both cultures through personal experiences.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

There has been a dramatic increase of Hispanics in the United States and, as noted in Chapter One, census projections indicate that the trend is likely to continue. School leaders often lack confidence in educating Hispanic students due to language barriers, misconceptions about culture, lack of experience with ethnic groups, and unchallenged personal beliefs (Banks & Banks, 2007; Cranton, 2006; Howard, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2008). There is a strong argument that the principal plays an important role in the success of Hispanic students and that effective principals need to understand the cultural dynamics of their students (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias & Tinajero, 2001; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008). A lack of cultural awareness may result in social injustice.

#### Social Injustice

The evidence is clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Banks & Banks, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Scheurich & Laible, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). According to Brown (2004), “When compared to their white middle-class counterparts, students of color and low socioeconomic status consistently

experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources” ( p. 79). Although social injustice includes access, power, and privilege based on race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, background, ability, and/or socioeconomic position, a focus of this study is on social injustice towards Hispanic students as a result of their ethnicity or culture, a phenomenon that is not new. According to Spring (2007), an attitude of European superiority provided motivation for the United States to take over Mexican land and fueled hostilities between the two countries through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The attitude was reflected in the treatment of the Mexicans who remained after the United States conquest and of later Mexican immigrants (Spring, 2007).

Historically, Hispanic students have not fared well in public schools in the United States; they are underrepresented in honors and advanced placement courses and overrepresented in non-college preparatory and special education classes (Ochoa, 2008). The Pew Hispanic Center reports that 77 % of Hispanic students in the United States drop out of high school (2009). These conditions continue to exist although it has been over 40 years since 10,000 Hispanic students in East Los Angeles, California, walked out of their schools in protest against a system of educational inequality.

Inspired by the black civil rights movement, the farm workers movement, and the land rights struggles in New Mexico, Mexican American students walked out of schools demanding bilingual and bicultural education, more Mexican American teachers, relevant curriculum, accurate textbooks, and the end of prejudiced teachers that steered Mexican American students into vocational classes. (Ochoa, 2008, p. 1)

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the failure experienced by many Hispanic students, including a concern that school leaders lack the ability to create schools that are more inclusive and that serve diverse students more effectively (Tyack &

Cuban, 1995). Riehl (2000) said that school administrators, sometimes unwittingly, reproduce conditions of oppression in particular by fostering compliant thinking instead of critical reflection. Unchallenged values and beliefs may cause school leaders to operate from assumptions that include prejudices, stereotypes, and distortions (Cranton, 2006). Even if done inadvertently, the results could still reflect issues of social injustice for many students. According to Brown (2004), “if current and future educational leaders are to foster successful, equitable, and socially responsible learning and accountability practices for all students, then substantive changes in educational leadership preparation and professional development programs are required” (p. 80). Furthermore, Martin and Vaughn (2007) stressed that professional development targeted to increase cultural competence - the ability to understand, communicate, and effectively interact with people across cultures – is essential for school leaders.

### Preparing School Leaders to Educate Hispanic Students

In Chapter One, I proposed that there is value in professional development for school leadership that incorporates authentic learning experiences and that cultural immersion is an option for acquiring cultural competence. However, as stated in that chapter, there is more to cultural immersion than physically being in another country; going there does not mean that culture awareness will naturally follow. Essential to a cultural immersion experience is its cognitive, emotional, and spiritual effects and whether it initiates a new viewpoint or perspective (Rodriguez, 2000).

Developing a new viewpoint is central to transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1981). As products of our culture, we believe and act in ways that were taught

to us by our parents, teachers, and other significant people from our childhood. School leaders are also products of a leadership culture that does not necessarily promote diversity and equity in transformative ways (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). According to Mezirow (2000), our frames of reference go unchecked unless something happens that challenges our beliefs. Transformative learning theory states that new perspectives are developed when adults encounter experiences that call into question previously held beliefs and there is an opportunity for discourse and reflection (Mezirow, 1981).

### Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning is a process of critical reflection that can be brought about by people, events, or changes in a context that challenges our basic assumptions of the world (Mezirow, 1981). Although transformative learning has been debated for over 30 years, the original theory was constructed from Mezirow's (1978) study of women returning to college after being out of school for an extended period. The study involved in-depth interviews of 83 women from 12 college reentry programs in Washington, California, New York, and New Jersey. Mezirow (1991) described the ways these women overcame dependency relationships and roles that were culturally induced, and how their educational programs facilitated their growing self-confidence.

Transformative learning is an adult education theory that explains how adults revise what Mezirow (1981) called *meaning perspectives*. These meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in the course of childhood through socialization and acculturation, most frequently during significant experiences with teachers, parents, and other adults. They “mirror the way our culture and those individuals responsible for our

socialization happen to have defined various situations” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11). Over time and in conjunction with numerous congruent experiences, these perspectives become reinforced. These meaning perspectives support us by providing an explanation of the happenings in our daily lives, but at the same time, they are a reflection of our cultural assumptions. These assumptions can constrain us, making our view of the world subjective, and sometimes distort our thoughts and perceptions (Cranton, 2006).

When we come upon a new experience, our meaning perspectives act as a filter through which each new experience is understood and given meaning. As the new experience is assimilated into these structures, it either reinforces the perspective or gradually stretches its boundaries, depending upon the degree of congruency (Mezirow, 2000). However, when a radically different experience cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective, it is either rejected or the meaning perspective is transformed to accommodate the new experience (Mezirow, 2000). A change in our meaning perspectives – a worldview shift - is central to transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). A perspective transformation is “a more fully developed frame of reference...one that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163).

Transformative learning may occur over time through events that change how we see ourselves and the world. An example of this type of transformative learning -what Mezirow (2000) called *incremental change* - is seen in the reflections of an American who lived in Honduras for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer:

I definitely see the world in a whole different light than how I looked at the world before I left. Before I left the states, there was another world out there. I knew it existed, but I didn't see what my connection to it was at all. You hear news reports going on in other countries, but I didn't



understand how and what we did here in the United States impacted on these people in Honduras, in South America, Africa, and Asia. Since I did not have a feeling for how our lives impacted their lives, it was as if the U.S. were almost a self-contained little world. After going to Honduras I realized how much things we did in the States affected everyone else in the world. I no longer had this feeling the U.S. was here and everybody else was outside. I felt that the world definitely felt much smaller. It got smaller in the sense of throwing a rock in the water creates ripples. I am that rock and the things I do here in the States affect people everywhere. I feel much more a part of the world than I do of the U.S. I criticize the U.S. much more now than I would have in the past. (Taylor, 1998, p. 175)

Transformative learning may also occur as a result of an acute personal or social crisis such as the death of a loved one, a divorce, a natural disaster, or loss of employment. Mezirow referred to this type of change in perspective as the *burning bush phenomenon*. According to Mezirow, if our reaction to the loss of a loved one, for example, causes us to examine the value of spending time with family and as a result we change our habits and make sacrifices or career changes so that we are able to spend more time with family, then perspective transformation has occurred.

As adults, we are capable of transforming our perspectives because we have the capability for critical reflection. According to Mezirow (1981), “only in adulthood does one become aware of the uncritically assimilated half-truths of conventional wisdom and power relationships...and come to recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it” (p. 11). Critical reflection refers to questioning the integrity of assumptions and beliefs based on our prior experiences. This type of reflection often happens when we encounter a contradiction among our thoughts, feelings, and actions - when we realize something is not consistent with what we hold to be true in relation to our world. Mezirow strongly believed that critical reflection of assumptions frees us from cultural distortions and constraints, and leads to rational discourse (Mezirow, 1981, 1995, 2000).

Rational discourse is the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed in Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Through critical conversations with others who have shared similar situations, experience is reflected upon and assumptions and beliefs are questioned. It is where meaning structures are ultimately transformed (Taylor, 1998; Mezirow, 2000).

### The Role of Feelings and Emotions in Transformative Learning

Critical reflection and rational discourse are essential components of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Taylor (2001) noted that "on another level some studies find critical reflection granted too much importance, a process too rationally driven, that overlooks the role of feelings and emotions" (p. 219). Mezirow saw critical reflection as a cognitive process; however, critics of his original theory (Ekpenyong, 1990; Clark & Wilson, 1991; Cunningham, 1992; Tennant, 1993) argued that the theory overly relied on critical reflection and rationality and ignored other ways of knowing, such as intuition, affect, and feelings. Sveinunggard (1993) explored the role of affective learning in transformation and found that participants could not act on cognitive learning until they had engaged in "learning how to identify, explore, validate, and express affect" (p. 278). Fostering transformative learning means that rational discourse has to include the "discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making. Feelings and rationality need to be placed on equal footing - a prerequisite for developing a critical reflective capacity rests on the ability to recognize, acknowledge, and process feelings" (Taylor, 2001, p. 219).

The purpose of this study was to examine how a cultural immersion experience to Mexico will impact the perspectives of school leaders towards their Mexican students. The worldviews of many of our school leaders have been limited because they have not had experiences with or exposure to diversity. According to Delpit (1995), “these individuals have never had to make an adjustment from home life to public life, as their public lives and the institutions they have encountered merely reflect a reality these individuals have been schooled in since birth” (p. 74). Therefore, the purpose of an event, such as a cultural immersion experience, is to help adults expand their perspectives of others. According to Brown (2004), “the contrast between the other ways of education and their way of schooling raises adult awareness that their way is not the only normal way and that their beliefs and assumptions are not universally shared” (p 95). Furthermore, Brown (2004) said that “by encouraging adult learners to travel somewhat outside their usual milieu, they experience this realization more directly. The jolting experience of culture shock results in increased appreciation of how their social environment shapes their most basic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (p. 95).

#### Implications of Transformative Learning Theory for School Leaders

Employing a transformative pedagogy requires educators to open their minds and explore the self-understandings that are embedded in their worldviews, values, and experiences. Senge (1990) says that these can be seen as mental models, and are “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images, that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (p. 8). Preparing school leaders to adequately and confidently meet the needs of all students requires a deep commitment

and a fundamental rethinking of personal beliefs. According to Brown (2004), “exploration of new understandings, the synthesis of new information, and the integration of these insights, throughout personal and professional spheres leads educational leaders to a broader, more inclusive approach in addressing issues of student learning and equity” (p. 87). Furthermore, by engaging in opportunities requiring an examination of assumptions, values, and beliefs, school leaders are better equipped to work with and guide others in effectively educating all students (Brown, 2004).

Engaging in activities that lead to transformative learning is not risk free. These activities may pose threats as they challenge comfortably established beliefs and values (Mezirow, 1981). Transformative learning may also cause changes in long-established relationships. Recall in Chapter One that my mother was nervous that I had chosen to lead a school with “so many Mexicans.” Later, she became quite upset when I participated in immersion trips to Mexico. Upon returning from my first trip to Mexico, she did not speak to me for several weeks.

Although school leaders may not feel comfortable with or capable of dealing with these sensitive and emotionally-laden issues of social equity and the examination of personal perspectives, Harrison and Hopkins (1967) noted that “by sidestepping direct, feeling-level involvement with issues and persons, one fails to develop the ‘emotional muscle’ needed to handle effectively a high degree of emotional impact and stress” (p. 440). Given new roles, changing school demographics, and heightened expectations, principals must develop emotional muscles that are often strengthened through reflective examination of beliefs and values.

Mezirow (1981) contends that for school leaders to be able to examine currently held beliefs there has to be an event that challenges previously held assumptions. In the next section, the research on cultural immersion was examined as a means for raising the consciousness of school administrators to appropriately educate culturally diverse students. By their very nature, cultural immersion experiences foster transformative learning (Sanders & Morgan, 2001).

### Cultural Immersion

Travel for the purpose of learning is not a new concept. Reflecting on her travels in Europe as a teenager, Eleanor Roosevelt considered the experience “one of the most momentous things that happened in my education; I really marvel now at myself – my confidence and independence” (Wilson, 1993, p. 12). There is research about immersion experiences for Peace Corps volunteers, business, economic, medical, agricultural initiatives, and trips out of concern and care for Third World countries. The following review of the literature, however, is focused on outcomes from university study abroad programs and educator cultural immersion experiences because these particular studies informed the purpose of my research.

### University Study Abroad Programs

The idea of college students studying in another country as a part of their curriculum originated in the United States in 1923 when Professor Raymond Kirkbride, an instructor in the Modern Languages Department, submitted a study abroad proposal to the president at the University of Delaware. At the time, study abroad was unheard of, but

Professor Kirkbride saw the potential for cross-cultural understanding through studying abroad, so he took eight college juniors to France for six weeks of intensive language immersion. The original study abroad programs attracted only wealthy students interested in improving their foreign language skills. It was during the mid-1950s that study abroad for Americans became an accepted instrument for general education (Abrams, 1968).

Since 1992, the number of college students studying abroad has more than doubled, and while Europe remains the most popular destination for students, other regions of the world, including Third World countries, are becoming increasingly popular (Dolby, 2004). Study abroad programs are typically for a semester or longer, but also include immersion experiences during summer or other school breaks. Students participate in language study, live with local families, and take part in cultural events.

The research on studying abroad indicates some positive benefits. Van Hoof & Verbeeten (2005) found that there are benefits when students have exposure to different social and cultural environments. According to Talburt and Stewart (1999), students are more mature, self-aware, and independent after participating in study abroad opportunities. Additionally, students reported feeling more knowledgeable, adaptable, patient, and flexible, less materialistic, more independent in their thinking, and more sensitive to other cultures as a result of studying abroad (Gmelch, 1997; Mahan & Stachowski, 1992). Hansel (1986) made an important point that students studying abroad gained different insights than the ordinary tourist or traveler would gain: "While many of the students may have seen famous sights in their host country, none mentioned this as an outcome of their experience" (p. 30).

According to Drews, Meyers and Peregrine (1996), students who studied abroad returned with the ability to see members of different national groups as individuals rather than in association with non-personal attributes such as food or geographical characteristics. Students also returned with an enhanced cultural understanding and were more appreciative of different cultures than before they left their home campuses (Hadis, 2005). Living in another culture changed the stereotypical images students had of other nationalities and presented an alternative view of the world (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

Carlson and Widaman (1988) found that a transformation of the student's worldview occurred as a result of studying abroad. They found that participation in study abroad programs provided students with an opportunity to view the world from new and different perspectives with higher levels of cross-cultural interest. Additionally, students often found themselves looking inward as well as outward, reconciling their views of themselves and their cultural assumptions with the new cultural context (Hopkins, 1999). A student who studied for a full semester in Chile commented, "This whole experience has helped me to look at what I've always taken for granted. And more than that, it has helped me understand myself and how I interact with other people" (Hopkins, p. 3).

#### Concerns with Study Abroad

Zhao (2007) reported that studying abroad takes time, organization, and money, and is often limited to students who can afford to participate. Most of the time, study abroad is an expense added to the cost of tuition which makes the opportunity unrealistic for some students. Another factor is that students often experience stress, frustration,

anxiety, and rejection during a study abroad as they struggle with new experiences (Rodriguez, 2000). If these feelings are unresolved during the trip, they can affirm negativity toward the host country.

### Teacher Immersion Programs

Wilson (1993) found that teachers who study abroad often participate to enhance foreign language skills and/or because they want to experience another culture. Willard-Holt's (2001) study on the impact of the international experience on elementary teachers revealed a positive impact, especially in regard to cultural, interpersonal, and personal knowledge. Teachers also found that their cultural immersion experience "made dramatic differences in their lives by counteracting some of their previously held negativism and they reported more success in their teaching as a result of the immersion experiences" (Walker de Felix & Pena, 1992, p. 748).

Thompson (2002) found in his study of teachers participating in a cultural immersion experience to Spain that the majority of the participants made gains in their speaking ability and listening comprehension in Spanish and that gains in cultural knowledge were evident as well. International experiences also led to an enhancement of the teachers' content knowledge. In a study of the impact of high school social studies teachers' backgrounds on the implementation of global education curricula, Thorpe (1988) found statistically significant associations between travel abroad (the number of countries a teacher had visited) and respondents' knowledge self-ratings. Teachers who participated on short-term immersion experiences wrote that "they taught with more



accuracy, authority, creativity, enthusiasm, and understanding about the places they had visited” (Wilson, 1993, p. 18).

Furthermore, students of teachers who have had cultural immersion experiences found the trips to have contributed to the knowledge shared in the classroom. One student shared, “He knows more than the books say; he can tell us what it’s like to live there” (Wilson, 1993, p. 33). According to those students, “there is a big difference; you learn more from someone who’s been there” (Wilson, p. 33).

### Concerns with Teacher Immersion Experiences

As with the university study abroad programs, the cost involved in teacher immersion programs presents a problem because it can limit who is able to participate. Additionally, teacher immersion opportunities are not always available; some universities offer these trips to teachers who are in graduate programs and other universities offer them to teachers in school districts located near the university. Another concern is what happens to teachers while they are abroad and whether it will adversely or positively influence their attitude toward the target culture. Thompson (2002) found that factors such as culture shock and homesickness negatively affect study abroad participants’ attitudes.

### Cross-cultural Leadership Development

Although the research on cross-cultural leadership development through cultural immersion is limited, Robertson and Webber (2000) conducted a study of a cultural immersion experience as a component for a university leadership training program. In

this study, a cohort of Canadian students and a group of students from New Zealand participated in a travel study exchange to foster understandings of educational issues that are prevalent in education nationally. In the first part of the study, three graduate students from New Zealand, sixteen graduate students from Canada, and a researcher from the United Kingdom participated in classes, meetings, seminars, and school visits in Calgary, Alberta. In the second phase of the study, ten Canadian graduate students went to Hamilton, New Zealand, for an immersion experience. The students in the study were either teachers or principals with a depth of teaching experience. The participants kept reflective journals and completed survey instruments. Additionally, field notes were compiled by researchers (Robertson & Webber, 2000).

The study found that “in-depth reflection by students on their personal educational contexts is enhanced through examination of other educational contexts, both locally and internationally” (Robertson & Webber, 2000, p. 328). Also noted was that:

The breaking of boundaries between theory and practice, between university professors and students, between two nations, and between self and others, can foster the development of critically inquiring leaders who may not only have more questions than answers, but more importantly, know that there are still more questions to ask. (p. 329)

The researchers also found that the participants were likely to be critically reflective about the quality of education in their schools and to demonstrate the belief that they are able to make a difference to the quality of education offered in their settings.

Research regarding cultural immersion experiences for practicing school leaders is needed. The literature in this area is limited. Further research would be valuable in addressing the effects of cultural immersion on the development of cultural competency in school leaders.

### Summary of the Literature

There is a long history in the United States of diversity in schools, and unfortunately much of that history is laden with missed opportunities in meeting the needs of students with differences. School leaders are products of leadership training that does not necessarily promote diversity and equity in transformative ways (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Perhaps school leaders will continue to lead in ways that promote the status quo unless something happens that challenges their beliefs. A change in how we practice leadership can be fostered by a change in professional development and leadership training (Martin & Vaughn, 2007).

Transformative learning theory suggests that for adults to challenge values and beliefs that were taught by parents and other significant people from childhood, there must be an event that causes critical reflection on current beliefs. Cultural immersion experiences are opportunities that have the potential to challenge currently held beliefs about other cultures and bring about a new viewpoint or perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

Cultural immersion fosters rich opportunities for participants through authentic learning in another country. Participants have returned from cultural immersion experiences feeling more knowledgeable, adaptable, patient, flexible, less materialistic, and more sensitive to other cultures (Gmelch, 1997; Mahan & Stachowski, 1992). The literature indicates that participants return with an enhanced cultural understanding and are more appreciative of different cultures (Hadis, 2005). Teachers found cultural immersion to counteract previously held negative feelings and reported more success in their teaching as a result of the opportunity (Walker de Felix & Pena, 1992). Participants

also found that after their experiences, they began to see people as individuals rather than stereotypes of the culture (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

As previously noted, cultural immersion experiences can be expensive and often are not readily available for educators. Additionally, depending on the experience, there can be a negative reaction towards the host country as a result of culture shock or homesickness (Thompson, 2002). The literature sufficiently addressed studies conducted on university study abroad programs but was limited in studies that addressed teacher immersion experiences. Additionally, the literature was sparse regarding cultural immersion opportunities for practicing school leaders - research is needed in this particular area.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The plan for data collection and the plan to manage the data are explained in this chapter, as well as the use of triangulation and the issues surrounding the ethics and confidentiality involved in the study. Finally, the guidelines for interpretation and dissemination of the results of the study are described.

#### Methods

In choosing a methodology for this research, I needed an approach that would help construct an understanding of a cultural immersion experience on the perspectives of the participating school leaders. For that reason, the research approach for this study is framed by a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research fosters what Denzin (1989) calls thick descriptions.

Thick description goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick descriptions, the voices, feelings, actions and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p. 83)

In qualitative research, personal experiences are communicated through written and oral stories, through open-ended interviews, and through fieldwork (Willis, 2007; Creswell, 2007). My goal was to gain an understanding of the effects of cultural

immersion on the participants' perceptions by capturing stories from their experiences through methods involving language and images, and by being a part of their experiences. There is a Chinese proverb that says, *Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand* (Chinese proverb, author unknown). It was the degree of involvement, along with the amount of time spent with the study participants and the type of methods used for gathering information, that led to an understanding of the participants' perspectives of cultural immersion.

### Research Settings

#### The Study Site in Georgia

Mary County, Georgia, is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Mary County Chamber of Commerce (2008) reports that about 20 % of its 180,000 residents are Hispanic. A description of the dramatic increase in Hispanic residents in Mary County, many of whom came to work in the poultry business, was given in Chapter One.

There is an area in Mary County where Hispanic-owned businesses are prevalent and where many Hispanic families reside. This section of the county is often referred to as "Little Mexico" by white residents although not all of the residents in this section of town are Mexican but reflect a variety of Spanish-speaking countries. Business signs along the main thoroughfare are in Spanish and there are many Hispanic-owned restaurants and stores, as well as a Hispanic flea market. There is a Hispanic-owned and operated radio station in this area, and the newspaper has served as the means of communication for the Hispanic population. The elementary school in this area is over

96 % Hispanic. Although Mary County has a significant population of Hispanic residents clustered in “Little Mexico” as well as in other pockets of the county, Hispanic residents are not represented in political offices, the Chamber of Commerce, or on the Mary County Board of Education.

### The Study Site in Mexico

Xalapa is a major city in Mexico with approximately 500,000 residents and nearby coffee plantations and fruit orchards that serve as a main source of revenue. The city is known for its cultural richness with a symphony orchestra, the Ballet Folklórico, parks, and a busy downtown. Xalapa has a traditional Mexican atmosphere coupled with modern conveniences - there is a Wal-Mart and Home Depot in town and the streets are lined with shops, coffeehouses, and internet cafes. It is the capital and main university center for the state of Veracruz.

### Participants

The participants in this study were school leaders from the Mary County School District who volunteered for the cultural immersion experience. A brief description of each participant follows.

#### Victoria

Victoria is an assistant principal at a school that is over 96 % Hispanic. She has worked at the school for over 20 years and has seen a drastic change in student demographics during her tenure. Victoria has been in education for 33 years.

Prior to becoming the assistant principal at her current elementary school, Victoria had little experience with diversity. She grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta in a white, middle-class neighborhood. She lived with both parents and attended an all-white high school. Victoria shared that she was so sheltered that when her husband accepted a position at a church in Boston she felt as if she had moved to a foreign country. After returning to Georgia, she taught in small all-white schools in the North Georgia Mountains until she accepted the position at her current school. Victoria shared that prior to the cultural immersion, her greatest concerns about the trip were being able to communicate, getting sick from the food or water, and being worried that she would embarrass herself in front of her peers by not knowing appropriate customs.

#### Sylvia

Sylvia has been a principal in the Mary County School District for six years. The student population in her school has been predominantly white but the demographics in the area have changed; the school is currently 20 % Hispanic. She expressed frustration with her faculty that views the world from years of being an elite white school. Sylvia said that she wanted to visit Mexico because she saw herself sharing some of the same stereotypical beliefs that she sees among her staff. Sylvia said that she wants to be able to build relationships with her Hispanic students and families and described an event that has continued to bother her. Last year, the kindergarten classes were having a culminating activity that involved parent volunteers. As she walked down the halls, she noticed that the parents and grandparents of one of her Mexican students had come to help with the activities. Sylvia said that she was afraid to approach the family because of



the language barrier, and when she finally tried to speak to them, she knew that the family did not understand anything that she said. According to Sylvia,

The precious little grandmother just kept smiling and nodding at me, and I was so upset and frustrated that I couldn't do anything to make her realize how much I appreciated her that day. I would have given anything to be able to have talked to her and to tell her how thankful I was that she was there.

Sylvia shared that she had visited Mexico once when she was a child. She laughed as she shared the story about her family driving a motor home into Mexico for the day although she sensed that her parents were nervous about going to Mexico. She said she remembered “piñatas, sombreros, the smell of food, and being afraid.” Her uncle accidentally rear-ended her father's motor home while they were in Mexico that day and her father panicked. She said that he was running around screaming, “get in the car and let's get out of here before the police come and arrest us all.” She said they sped away and she remembered being relieved when they were back in the United States. She agreed that her father would not have reacted in the same manner if the accident had occurred in the United States.

#### Matthew

Matthew is a second-year assistant principal at a school that is over 70 % Hispanic and was the only man to volunteer for the immersion experience. Although Matthew is bilingual, he had limited experience working with Hispanic students and families prior to becoming an assistant principal two years ago. His ability to speak Spanish is from taking lessons and from visiting Mexico. Although he had visited Mexico, Matthew had never had the experience of visiting schools.

Matthew described himself as a “...weird teenager who had no interest in sports. I sat around the house learning Spanish and listening to Latino music.” He took one year of Spanish that was offered in high school and continued to work on his own to learn the language. Later, after a career as a mortician, he returned to the University of Georgia where he earned a degree in Spanish and taught at a middle school. Eventually, his career led him to his current position. Unlike the other participants, Matthew was not concerned with communication issues during the trip but did share concerns about health issues, specifically concerning the flu due to the recent world-wide outbreak. At the time of the interview, the media had indicated that the flu epidemic had originated from Mexico. He was most excited about the school visits in Mexico.

#### Dianne

Dianne is an assistant principal of a school that is approximately 40 % Hispanic and 60 % economically disadvantaged. Dianne shared that she relates to her students because she grew up extremely poor. In 1976, when Dianne was thirteen years old, her family installed a bathroom in their home for the first time. A relative had died and left her father a mobile home that had a bathroom. Dianne’s father cut a hole in a wall of the house and attached the mobile home so that the family could walk through to the bathroom. Dianne has a clear understanding of poverty and genuinely relates to students who come from economically disadvantaged homes.

Growing up in a rural north Georgia county, Dianne’s exposure to diversity was limited. She was in third grade when the first black student moved into her sister’s class.

Dianne said, “We gawked at him because we had never seen anyone who was black.”

She does not remember any Hispanic students attending school with her.

Dianne had several concerns prior to the trip; she was concerned about speaking Spanish, understanding cultural expectations, and embarrassing herself in front of the group. She was most excited about learning more about the culture so that she could better understand her students.

### Immersion Itinerary

The participants met with Dr. Rose, the trip coordinator, once a month beginning in March of 2009 to discuss articles regarding the culture and history of Mexico. The emotional and physical challenges associated with immersion into another culture were discussed and details about the trip were given, including daily itineraries and contact information. Dr. Rose provided the participants with information including survival Spanish, how to exchange money, immunizations before traveling, and advice about visiting Mexico. She also included a list of items to bring on the trip and collected emergency contact information from each participant and copies of their medical insurance cards. This information accompanied her on the trip. During the first pre-immersion group meeting, I gave each participant a journal and asked them to begin journaling their thoughts prior to the trip and to keep a daily journal while in Mexico. I explained that I would ask for the journals once the trip was completed but would return them after my data analysis.

On Tuesday, June 2, 2009, the participants flew to Mexico City where they boarded a bus for a five-hour trip to Xalapa. Traveling by bus from Mexico City to

Xalapa provided participants a glimpse of the different types of towns, villages, and cities located throughout the country.

The mornings were spent visiting elementary schools in different communities, and afterwards the group had lunch together where there was an opportunity to debrief. Originally, the plans included Spanish lessons provided by the University of Veracruz, but due to time constraints and a recent scare with a flu epidemic which resulted in closing down schools in Mexico for several weeks, the university was unable to provide the lessons. Instead, a bilingual translator, a teacher from the University of Veracruz, accompanied the group throughout the visit and Spanish was practiced through immersion. The interpreter designed different scenarios each day that would provide practice of the language that had been taught. For example, the participants practiced ordering food, making purchases, asking for directions, giving directions to their taxi drivers, participating in conversations, and asking questions in Spanish. Each participant kept a language journal for entering phrases and vocabulary.

Because dinner was typically not eaten until eight or nine each evening in Mexico, participants had free time in the afternoons to shop at the market, explore the city, or have coffee at the café overlooking the park. Each night, participants had dinner together and participated in group sharing and debriefing sessions led by Dr. Rose. On Monday, June 8, the group visited a school in the morning and boarded a bus that afternoon for a three-hour ride to Puebla for another perspective of Mexico. Puebla is the home of Talevera tile and is considered a weekend vacation destination for residents of Mexico City. At 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday, June 9, 2009, participants took the bus back to Mexico City where they boarded an afternoon flight to Atlanta.

Within two weeks after arriving back in the United States, the participants met again for dinner and to talk about the immersion experience. Participants were asked to bring photographs that they took during the trip and to share insights that they gained while in Mexico. Before the end of June, each participant was again interviewed by me to gain their perspectives of the cultural immersion experience.

### Home Stays

As part of their cultural immersion experience, participants were scheduled to live with Mexican families that had been screened and approved by the University of Veracruz. Participants were paired for the home stay where they were to have meals with the host families, shop, and participate in family events. The host families speak only Spanish but have years of experience hosting American visitors. Most of the host families live within walking distance of downtown.

Prior to the trip, concerns about the home stay portion of the immersion experience were shared with Dr. Rose, and the participants indicated they would prefer to stay in a hotel. One participant expressed concern of coming in contact with the flu during a home stay, and others expressed fear of living with a family when they did not know the language or the customs. Because of their concerns about the home stay portion and because of the recent flu outbreaks, Dr. Rose made the decision to take the home stay experience out of the immersion trip, although she made several attempts to convince the participants of the value of the home stay component of the immersion experience. She was concerned that if she did not take the home stay experience out of the itinerary that the participants would not go on the trip. Instead, she booked rooms at a small, hacienda-

style hotel located within walking distance of downtown Xalapa. It should be noted that although the H1N1 influenza epidemic was originally thought to have originated from Mexico, it was later determined that there were influenza outbreaks throughout the United States as well as in other countries, and that there was no evidence that the flu originated from Mexico.

### Overview of the Schools

Participants visited four elementary schools representative of the different types of schools in Mexico. In Mexico, public education is provided for free through sixth grade although families are responsible for purchasing school uniforms, which are mandated for all students, and for providing a snack each day as meals are not provided by the school. Once students complete elementary school, parents are responsible for paying tuition of approximately \$250 per year per child which includes instruction, uniforms, and supplies. Children attend school from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 and children attend school from the beginning of September through the middle of June.

### La Escuela Normal

La Escuela Normal is located in downtown Xalapa and is located on the same campus as the teachers' preparatory college. As a laboratory school, La Escuela Normal works closely with the teachers' college to train future teachers. Observations of student teachers are conducted by teachers, professors, parents, and visitors from an observation cubicle that is attached to each classroom. There are approximately 900 students and the children of middle to upper-class families who live in Xalapa attend this school.

La Escuela Normal has excellent resources, and is located on a beautiful, well-maintained campus. There are students from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade and each teacher has a physical classroom for instruction. The two-story facility has a principal and vice-principal and it is obvious, from this and prior visits to this school, that the state education officials are proud of this facility.

#### La Escuela de La Cana

Participants also visited a one-room schoolhouse located in La Cana. The teacher at this school lives in Xalapa and boards a city bus each day for an hour-long ride down the mountain to Actopan, the closest village to La Cana. Actopan is as far as the bus will travel. There is a drastic change in climate from Xalapa, which is cool and damp, to Actopan where it is always hot. Once in Actopan, the teacher walks through the village to a winding path that meanders along a river and through a mango grove. At the end of this 30-minute walk, the teacher crosses a swinging bridge that is in disrepair, climbs the river bank, and walks down the only road in La Cana to the one-room schoolhouse. The participants in the study took the same journey that this teacher makes daily.

The dirt road in La Cana is lined with the homes of the residents - some are wooden shacks while others are made of concrete blocks. The nicer block homes belong to families whose husbands and fathers are working in the United States and are sending money home to their families in La Cana. The few men who remain in this isolated village work in the groves, picking and crating mangos. It is a rural area with electricity in the school but only in a few homes; there are no telephones in La Cana. There are

approximately 120 residents and some of the women continue to cook their corn tortillas on hot bricks on the dirt floors of their homes.

There were 14 students ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade attending the one-room school in La Cana. The number of students has decreased from a yearly average of 40 students. The mothers in the village La Cana explained that they have been disappointed with the instruction provided by the teacher who was assigned to the school three years ago, and many families have chosen to have their children walk to Actopan to attend school. The decrease in the number of students attending school in La Cana concerns the mothers because they are afraid that the government will eventually close the school.

The school was built by the government but is maintained by the residents of the village. The building is in good condition. There are two computers but there is no internet service. In a recent campaign, the government installed an overhead projector and screen in every school in the country, even in those schools without electricity.

The parents of the children in La Cana are quite involved in the school. Parents are concerned that as their children become educated they may choose to leave La Cana, yet many parents have also said that they want their children to have more money and fewer worries than they have. The parents in La Cana believe that getting an education is the key for their children to be able to escape the difficult lifestyles that are a reality in their small village even though they do not want to see the children of La Cana leave the village forever.



## La Escuela de Tapachapan

La Escuela de Tapachapan is another one-room school located on a coffee plantation near the town of Coatapec. The school enrollment varies because students in this school are transient - their parents are migrant coffee plantation workers. On this particular visit there were 40 students with one teacher, and 36 of those students were new to the school this year. This is an extremely poor area located on a river in the rainforest. It is damp and often the school is without electricity because the constant rain causes power outages. Many children walk up to two miles each way to school. There is little transportation other than an occasional burro or horse, and the road that leads to the school in Tapachapan is in such disrepair that the taxi drivers often refuse to take passengers all of the way to the school.

The parents of the children who attend school at Tapachapan work long hours each day picking coffee beans and often worry about finding work. Therefore, the teacher at Tapachapan has difficulty getting parents to come to the school for events because most are not able to take time off from work without fear of losing their jobs. In the evening, there are no lights along the dark and mountainous paths to the school. The teacher relies on two or three mothers who are able to help at the school on a regular basis; these mothers usually help by cleaning the building.

For many of the children, the school is a safe haven where they are well cared for and where they are able to escape their difficult lives for a time. The children proudly wear mandated school uniforms consisting of a t-shirt with the school name printed on it and solid colored skirts or pants. The uniforms are stained and worn and have been passed down from older children for several years; they pale in comparison to the

beautifully custom-designed plaid coordinating uniforms worn by the children at the La Escuela Normal. It is a visual representation of the economic differences in the schools.

The teacher for this school also lives in Xalapa and travels by bus to Coatapec where she either walks the remaining distance of approximately two miles to the school or when she can afford, takes a taxi as far as it will take her. Sometimes, because she is the teacher, the taxi will take her all the way to the school, but most days she has to walk from where the pavement ends.

In both La Cana and Tapachapan, the teacher teaches all grades in one room, provides physical education, and serves as the principal. It is a difficult job and often teachers leave as soon as they are able to acquire a better position; teachers at schools like La Cana and Tapachapan are usually first-year teachers who were appointed to these schools by the Department of Education. However, Lydia, the teacher at Tapachapan, has chosen to stay at this school for 14 years because she is afraid that another teacher might not stay more than a year and the children's education will suffer.

#### Escuela Naolinco

The elementary school in Naolinco houses approximately 250 students and is typical of a small city school in Mexico. Naolinco is a leather artisan town with a prominent middle-class. Many of the parents of the students in this town make leather shoes, boots, and purses that they sell to shops; others own the shops, restaurants, or bakeries. When walking down the cobblestoned streets of Naolinco, we heard the constant buzzing of the sewing machines from the homes that lined the street and we saw many leather shops where the handmade goods were available for purchase.

The school in Naolinco is a lovely facility and has significant parental support. The school has many resources that enable it to hire experienced and successful teachers. There are approximately two classrooms per grade level with each class having its own physical space and teacher. The school also has a principal and vice-principal.

#### School Visits – Conclusion

During visits to these four schools, participants saw some of the different ways that children in Mexico are educated. La Escuela Normal is rich in resources and is supported by the teachers' college. La Cana and Tapachapan are both rural, one-room schools. Tapachapan is a transient school with little parental support, while La Cana is a village school where parents are focused on providing their children an education. Finally, the school in Naolinco is representative of a middle-class school where children and teachers are afforded both resources and parental support.

#### Data Collection

The integrity of this study was maintained through triangulation. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods or sources of data to provide for consistency or corroboration of evidence (Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 2005). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “triangulation of data is crucially important in naturalistic studies. As the study unfolds and particular pieces of information come to light, steps should be taken to validate each against at least one other source (for example, a second interview) and/or a second method...” (p. 283).

The amount of face-to-face time that I spent with the participants in Mexico and the time spent with them pre-and-post immersion strengthened the study. As a member of the group, I was able to capture firsthand the words and experiences of the participants. I was able to conduct informal interviews and to ask questions during the study. My use of formal interviewing assisted me in better understanding the perspectives of the participants before the trip and to capture their stories after the experience. Document analysis of daily journals and photography provided a reflective component to the experience, as did the debriefing sessions held with the group during and after the trip.

## Interviews

Dexter (1970) suggested that an interview is a conversation with a purpose. Further, qualitative interviewing is used to inquire into what people think, why they act in certain ways, and how they feel about specific topics (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I interviewed the participants of the cultural immersion experience prior to the trip to determine their current views and after the immersion trip to capture their reconstruction of the experience and to find out how they predicted the trip would affect them in the future (Interview Protocol is attached as Appendix D).

I was interested in the effects of the immersion experience on the perceptions of the participants regarding Mexico and Mexicans; therefore, I spent time with each participant prior to the trip to gain an understanding of his or her current perspectives. In pre-immersion interviews that were held in local restaurants, I asked the participants about their previous and current experiences with racial, ethnic, social class, and cultural diversity, and I asked them to share stories from their childhood that represent the values,

cultural perspectives, and beliefs taught by their parents, teachers, and other significant adults. Another purpose of the pre-immersion interview was to gain an understanding of the perceptions participants had of Mexico as well as the mental images participants had of its people. It was also important to know why each participant volunteered for the immersion experience, what they expected to happen while in Mexico, and what they hoped to gain from the trip. Some of the participants had reservations about participating in an immersion experience to Mexico and those concerns were noted in the pre-immersion interviews. Finally, I listened carefully during participant conversations to capture additional ideas, themes, or directions for the study. I transcribed the audio taped interviews immediately after I conducted them to determine if there was a lack of clarity and if a second interview was needed. The questions for follow-up interviews were determined by the responses from the first interview. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

I interviewed each participant again upon returning from Mexico to determine if the trip had an effect and if and how participants expected the trip would affect them in the future. Again each interview was held in a local restaurant and lasted approximately one hour. Participants were asked to choose their favorite photographs from the trip to bring to this interview. I asked participants to share comments about the photographs, including why certain photographs were selected and the meanings attached to each one.

### Participant Observations

As a participant observer in this study, I traveled to Mexico with the group to “take part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the group...as the

means for learning the explicit and tacit aspects” (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002, p. 1) of their experiences on the trip. According to Lincoln & Guba (1981), “observation allows the inquirer to see the world as his subjects see it, to live in their time frames, to capture the phenomenon in and on its own terms, and to grasp the culture in its own natural, ongoing environment” (p. 193).

I traveled from Atlanta to Mexico with the participants and remained with them throughout their journey. Each day, I took notes, made observations, and asked questions. I listened for comments made by the participants and followed up with questions or by asking the participant to explain more. I participated in the school visits, group sharing, cultural events, and daily activities. I had opportunities for informal visits with the participants over coffee and during meals. During these times, I clarified comments that I had heard and posed questions in an informal and conversational manner.

Immediately upon returning to my hotel room each day, I typed field notes and transcribed audio tapes. This information was kept in a locked - and password-protected laptop computer and the audio tapes were kept in a locked safe. A back-up copy of transcriptions and copies of my field notes were saved onto a flash drive that was kept in the locked safe in my hotel room until our departure. The laptop computer stayed in my possession while traveling back to Atlanta and the flash drive was mailed from Mexico to my home address.

Approximately a month after the group returned from Mexico, a meeting was held with all participants at the home of Dr. Rose. The participants had the opportunity to share and reflect upon the cultural immersion experience. Dr. Rose led the meeting and participants shared their experiences from the cultural immersion trip. She also asked

everyone to bring photographs from the trip to share with the group. I participated and observed, took notes, and casually asked questions during this group meeting to further determine the impact that the cultural immersion trip had on the participants' perception of Mexico, its culture, and its people, and to determine any elements of a transformation of beliefs and values. Immediately upon returning home, I typed the notes from this meeting.

### Document Analysis

Learning is heightened during a cultural immersion experience when the participants reflect upon their experience (Barrett, 1993). The participants in this study were asked to keep daily journals in which they reflected upon their experiences, emotions, feelings, and new understandings that occurred as a result of their experiences in Mexico. The only guidelines given for journaling were for participants to record their thoughts, concerns, and revelations and to steer away from an account of the daily itinerary. Journal prompts were not given. Participants were given the journals two weeks prior to the immersion experience and were asked to begin journaling their thoughts on a daily basis prior to leaving for Mexico. The participants were also asked to continue journaling each day during the stay in Mexico. The journals were collected on the last day of the trip and were analyzed as a part of this study. Reading the journals provided insights that might not have been discovered in any other medium. Because journaling is a personal forum for reflection, I treated the contents of each journal with respect and dignity and employed strict ethics. Once the analysis was completed, the journals were returned to the participants.

I used still photography as another tool for documentation in this study.

Photographs by themselves cannot create meaning; the interpretation of the photograph is where meaning lies (Brown, 2005). For that reason, photographs need either written or verbal contextualization to form meaning. Participants were asked to bring their favorite photographs from the cultural immersion experience to the post-immersion interview and to the group post-immersion debriefing meeting. The reasons for choosing certain photographs over others, as well as the stories connected to the photographs, were recorded and used in the data analysis phase. Any captions for the photographs were also used to more fully ascertain the impact the immersion trip has had on the individual participants.

### Data Analysis

The purpose for data analysis is to make sense out of the data in relationship to the guiding questions for the study; data analysis is a complex and continuous process (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2005; Stake, 1995). The goal of data analysis is to reduce the data into manageable and meaningful forms so patterns and themes can be discovered (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Data analysis began as soon as I began collecting it (Wolcott, 2001).

The interviews, field notes, journals, and photographs provided the rich description necessary to answer the questions in this study. I used several approaches to organize and code information from the interviews, field notes, and documents, including the inductive and deductive processes described by LeCompte and Schensul (1999). Deductive processes were used to identify data linked to the primary results from



previous studies on cultural immersion. Similar results from this study were organized into those themes. Inductive processes were used to identify new themes and patterns in the data from the interviews and field notes, and from the analysis of daily journals, and photographs. I paid careful attention to the information to determine new patterns that had not been identified in previous research on cultural immersion.

I also used the constant comparative method of analyzing this data. Constant comparative data analysis is a method used to code data into emerging themes or patterns. The data were constantly revisited and reanalyzed until no new themes or patterns emerged (Creswell, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, I relied on the process of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) to analyze data from this study. This is a cyclical process; the coding of data leads to new ideas of what to include in the data displays. As new or additional data were added, new conclusions were drawn. The continuous process of data reduction, displaying data, and drawing and verifying conclusions was necessary to give meaning to the enormous amount of data that was collected in this study.

### Data Reduction

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), “Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions” (p. 10). Data reduction occurs throughout the qualitative research project and is not separate from analysis; it is a part of analysis. “The researcher’s decisions – which data chunks to code and which to pull out, which patterns

best summarize a number of chunks, which evolving story to tell – are all analytic choices” (Miles & Huberman, p. 11). The process of data reduction sharpened, focused, and organized data so that final conclusions were drawn and verified. This was accomplished by summarizing data, paraphrasing data, and by the selection of data. In this study, I performed data reduction on the data collected from each individual.

### Data Display

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe a data display as an “organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action. In daily life, displays vary from gasoline gauges to newspapers to computer screens to factor analysis printouts. Looking at displays helps us to understand what is happening and to do something...” (p. 11). LeCompte and Schensul (1999) noted that these visual representations assist with the analysis by linking data together and finding relationships among themes and patterns. Data displays used for this study included matrices and charts – ways that used to assemble data into organized information that was easily accessible. Deciding what went in the displays was a part of the analysis of the data. I entered the data for each participant into a display which assisted in recognizing commonalities among and across the data.

### Conclusion Drawing and Verification

While final conclusions may be drawn after data collection, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that verification is as important as the results of the study. “The meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness,

their ‘confirmability’ - that is, their validity. Otherwise, we are left with interesting stories about what happened, of unknown truth and utility” (Miles & Huberman, p. 11).

Member checks are considered to be the most important means of verifying qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Creswell (1998), “the process of member checking involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 203). Participants were given the opportunity to read drafts of the study showing how they were presented, quoted, and how their words and actions were interpreted. A copy of the analysis of the data and findings from the study was given to each participant to read for the purpose of verification. I met with each participant three days later at a local restaurant for approximately one hour to gather feedback. All comments for revision were listened to with care and concern, and revisions were made when deemed necessary. I also relied on Dr. Rose, who coordinated the cultural immersion trip. Her knowledge on the subject and her relationships with the participants assisted me in verifying the accuracy of my interpretations and conclusions.

Peer debriefing was used to validate the interpretations and conclusions from my study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined peer debriefing as “a process of exposing oneself to disinterested peers in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (p. 295). I relied on a colleague who had knowledge of and experience with qualitative research design to expose my thought processes, data analysis, and interpretation. This individual required me to explain my processes, procedures, and

themes, and asked me to verify the findings by producing the data that supported the themes. Her methods also checked for bias.

Additionally, I maintained extensive documentation- an audit trail - throughout the study. Lincoln & Guba (1985) defined an audit trail as a “residue of records stemming from the inquiry” (p. 319). The audit trail was used to verify and authenticate data from this study.

### Confidentiality and Ethics

I was granted permission from the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. As a qualitative researcher, I always reminded myself that I was a guest in the private thoughts and actions of others, and respect for all of the participants and a good code of ethics was valued and practiced. I had an intense interest in the personal views and experiences of the participants encountered before, during, and after the cultural immersion trip. Something similar to a contract of moral obligation existed between the participants and me because the participants could have risked exposure, embarrassment, loss of standing, and/or a diminished self-esteem.

After I received permission from the Mary County School District and from the Georgia State University IRB to conduct the study, I gave each participant a full disclaimer of the research process and discussed the issues of observation and reportage. Each participant signed a consent form to participate in the study. I guaranteed, through written notification, that great caution would be exercised to minimize risks, and that participants would have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. I routinely reminded the participants of that option. Additionally, I changed all of the

names of the study participants and of the school district to protect their identities.

Participants gave written permission to publish the photographs that were taken by them, as well as any photographs taken of them during the study.

Dr. Rose, on behalf of the school district, provided written documentation to each study participant, outlining all risks associated with international travel including health-related issues and safety of self and personal belongings. This study imposed no more risks than would occur during a normal day; the participants who traveled to Mexico had the same risks whether or not they participated in the study.

All data collected was stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. This included all notes, journals, photographs, audio recordings, and documents. I stored the typed notes from the interviews and field notes on a password- and firewall-protected laptop computer. The information was also stored on a password-protected flash drive that was stored in a locked cabinet. After the study was completed, the digital recordings were erased. The transcriptions and other written documents contained pseudonyms, making it possible for me to keep the documents without compromising the identity of the participants.

#### Guidelines for Dissemination of Results

I will disseminate the results of the study to the study participants and to the Director of Elementary Education for the Mary County School District. Should the school district choose to share the information from this study, I will make myself available for that purpose and to work with the district if it considers future cultural immersion trips as one consideration for providing cultural competence for their school

leaders. Additionally, the information from this study could be useful to other school districts searching for ways to effectively lead and educate Hispanic students. I will make myself available in providing information in those situations. Finally, I will explore publishing the findings of this study in professional journals.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

*The Xalapa Experience*, the name given to the trip to Mexico, provided insights into the impact of a short-term cultural immersion experience on school leaders.

Participants visited schools, spent time with students and families, visited homes, learned Spanish through immersion, and attended cultural events during the eight-day immersion trip. In this chapter, I will describe the findings from the data collected through pre-and post-immersion interviews, field notes, group debriefing sessions, photographs, and journals.

#### ¿Habla español? The Power of Communication

One theme that emerged from the study was that the participants indicated a newfound respect for the ability to communicate effectively. The participants recognized the power of communication when they struggled both to understand and to respond in Spanish in a variety of settings such as ordering food, reading the menus and signs, or trying to give directions to a taxi driver. Sylvia indicated in her post-immersion interview that she felt that her intelligence was judged by her ability to communicate.

You don't know the language, you can't communicate, and the feeling that I had...I felt really inadequate and really stupid for a lack of a better word. I just felt stupid and um, nervous sometimes – not that I would be hurt or put in jail or anything like that – but just nervous that I was going to say the wrong thing or really insult someone unintentionally just by picking the wrong word.



*Figure 1. Participants Communicating with Students.*

The participants made a connection regarding the power of communication and the disadvantage that Mexican-American families have if they are unable to communicate in English. Victoria reflected on this idea during her post-immersion interview.

You know the day that you and I sort of got lost and the town was shut down because of the demonstration and the taxi drivers just put us out on the street. I knew that we really couldn't communicate very well, and I was actually frightened for a little bit and it all had to do with not being able to communicate. It made me realize the power of communication and that those at home who can't speak English have diminished power.

Participants acknowledged that it was exhausting to try to understand and communicate in a foreign language. Sylvia shared, "I know that after I sat in the classroom 15 minutes immersed in a language that I couldn't figure out, I was just exhausted. I just can't imagine how our Spanish-speaking students must feel here." It was observed during Spanish-only conversations, that participants were unable to pay attention for more than a few minutes and that one participant fell asleep. According to



Sylvia, “It became like the Charlie Brown teacher, you know, ‘wa-wa-wa-wa-wa’ and I just thought that our students who do not speak English sit six hours or so a day in school feeling that same way.” She wrote in her journal,

While at Alfonso’s and Lydia’s house, I had a difficult time communicating. I could pick up a few words here and there, but lost interest after awhile. I can see how our students can easily tune out. That night, I went to bed with a headache.

The participants noted that, although it was difficult and exhausting to learn a new language, learning through an immersion approach was more effective than learning in a classroom setting. These participants attributed meaningful practice of the language as the reason for learning Spanish at a faster rate than they did in the *Spanish for Teachers* course they took in Mary County. Victoria shared,

One day, I went to the ticket window at the bus station because I wanted to purchase my boleto (ticket) to Naolinco but instead I told her that I wanted a botella (bottle) to Naolinco – the ticket lady just smiled and said the right word. Although I was very embarrassed in front of my colleagues, I will always remember the difference in the two words because I learned them in a meaningful way. The *experience* of learning was a strong message from the trip.

Finally, all of the participants recognized the intolerance that they and others have shown towards their non-English speaking Mexican families. Dianne shared in her post-immersion interview, “I thought, ‘Why don’t they just learn English?’ as if it was a simple thing to accomplish. I guess that I thought that they were not learning English because they didn’t want to. Now I see how difficult it is to learn a language.” Victoria appreciated that people in Mexico were gracious regarding the struggles the participants had with the language.

They worked diligently and respectfully to understand the attempts that we made to communicate. It made me wonder if we are being that gracious in

the front offices of our schools or if we act, um, frustrated or bothered when parents can't communicate with us.

The participants agreed that being immersed in the language was a benefit of the cultural immersion experience. The participants realized that it is difficult to learn a new language and found that immersion facilitated learning more effectively. There was an indication that the participants acquired a new understanding, and perhaps empathy, for their Spanish-speaking students and families because of their experiences with language immersion.

### School Visits

The participants reported that the school visits were the highlight of the immersion experience. All of the participants expressed concern about the flu, sanitation, and health safety prior to the trip; however, participants were seen giving hugs and kisses to the children and parents without hesitation. The participants immediately took the initiative to establish relationships with the students by sitting with the students in class, walking with them to the river, playing with the children, and by spending time with the children and their families. The participants were quite touched that the children had made gifts for them from their meager resources, and that the children were so excited about their visit. In La Cana, the children had made signs welcoming the participants to their village. For these reasons, the participants often tearfully described their visits to the schools and the warmth of the students, teachers, and parents. The school visits were laden with emotional experiences.



*Figure 2.* Heartfelt Hug in La Cana. This photo is my favorite from the trip because the expression on the child's face captures the genuine warmth of the students and emotional experiences of visiting the schools.



*Figure 3.* No Evidence of Fear of Flu. Dianne makes friends with a child at Tapachapan. This was the first school that was visited, yet the participants did not hesitate to embrace the students. After this school visit, there was never a mention of a concern for health or sanitation.

### *Quality of Education*

The participants indicated surprise at the quality of education found in three of the schools that were visited. Sylvia shared that she saw elements of inquiry methods consistent with Dewey's theories at Tapachapan, a rural, one-room, migrant school. She further commented, "There are schools in the United States that would learn a lot by watching the rigor taking place in this one-room schoolhouse with all ability levels of children." The participants were impressed with the national curriculum shown to them by the teacher at La Cana - another rural one-room school. The curriculum framework looked much like the Georgia Department of Education Performance Standards and included elements and essential questions. The teacher also showed the participants the curriculum written specifically for one-room schools. Each lesson provided suggestions for differentiation and ways to use children's literature to blend the content areas of science and social studies into the reading curriculum - an initiative of the Mary County schools. Sylvia commented in her post-immersion interview,

That is one thing that I would want to share with other principals. I'm like, wait a minute, they have standards – their template for standards looks just like ours. I mean that was a pretty big 'Aha!' for me and I think it would be for a lot of principals in this county or in any other county. I think that we have thought that, okay, these poor kids are in a one-room schoolhouse and certainly they are going to be opening a textbook from the 1970s and going from page one and going to page 25 and that is not it at all! In fact, it really amazed me that the children had that inquiry-based instruction going on. They had done those science experiments and they were demonstrating them in front of the class, and so, I was like, wow, they learn just like our kids learn although their conditions aren't always the same. That surprised me...that was very surprising to me.

Dianne shared that she assumed that the children coming to the United States from Mexico had been taught to "read and write but nothing more." To her surprise, the fourth-grade students at Naolinco, a middle-class school, were reading *Gulliver's Travels*

and were on the floor in cooperative groups with chart paper. The students were storyboarding, an activity that is commonly used in the classrooms in Mary County. Dianne shared that not only was she amazed at the strategies being used, but also that *Gulliver's Travels* is not taught in Georgia until seventh grade. She thought the fourth-grade students at Naolinco were doing an excellent job with this activity.



*Figure 4. Students Storyboarding at Naolinco. Students storyboarding Gulliver's Travels in Naolinco. The photograph captures the use of instructional methods and materials used in schools in Mary County.*

The participants recognized during their visits to the rural schools that the teachers in Mexico have a difficult job - walking long distances, providing their own teaching materials, teaching kindergarten through sixth grade in one classroom, and standing in line in Xalapa to pick up their paychecks. Victoria shared, "We have become

very spoiled in our teaching culture. Immersion into a culture that does as much as we do with quite a bit less was fascinating.”

### *Supervision*

The participants observed that the level of supervision in Mexican schools was more relaxed than what is expected in our schools. Students were left alone for extended periods of time, yet the participants were the only adults who were noticeably worried. Everyone commented about an incident in Tapachapan when Lydia, the teacher, and Reuben, the elementary cluster coordinator, asked if the group would like to visit the falls at Xico for the afternoon. When the group indicated that they would like to go, Lydia announced to the students that school was cancelled for the day because she was going to Xico with the guests. Parents were not notified of the change and when we drove away there were young children left unattended. Sylvia was shocked, “I can’t believe she just left without letting parents know about the change in the schedule – she just told the kids that school was cancelled, and left!”

The participants noticed a similar incident in La Cana. The students took the participants by the hand during their morning break and led them to the river to skip stones and hunt for mangos and grasshoppers. There was no other adult supervision and the children were playing by a rushing river with strangers who had just arrived to their village. Dianne commented that this level of supervision would not be tolerated in our culture. She added, “Mexican parents in the United States might be reported to the authorities for not properly supervising their children when the practice could actually be a part of their culture.”





*Figure 5. The Children of La Cana Skipping Stones. The photograph captures the school “playground” which is the river and the mango groves.*

### *Parent and Community Support*

The participants said that they were impressed with the degree of parent and community involvement in the three smaller schools. Victoria reflected in her post-immersion interview about the mothers in the poor migrant community of Tapachapan who helped the teacher once a week. “These parents mainly helped by cleaning. Lydia told me that she had to attend a class the night before our visit and that several of the mothers cleaned the building during the evening hours.” Dianne wrote in her journal, “Parent involvement was awesome at Tapachapan. The mothers provided breakfast for us. When we went back after a break, a mother was sweeping the floor.” Sylvia, also

wrote, “I could not believe that level of parent support in this one-room school in the middle of a poor area in a rainforest. Would our parents do this?”



*Figure 6. A Mother at Tapachapan Washing Dishes. The mother spent the morning cleaning, washing dishes, and squeezing fresh orange juice for us.*

The participants also noticed that there was community involvement in the village of Naolinco. While we were there, Maestra Lucy’s second-grade class was working on a play about a Mexican Revolutionary hero. Sylvia shared, “As we watched, three men from the community arrived to practice with the children. Lucy shared that the men planned to return the following Monday for the actual performance.” Sylvia snapped a photo of these men practicing a song with the students and shared it as one of her favorites from the trip. “I had to bring a picture of the musicians – I called this one, ‘community involvement at its finest.’ I could not believe how supportive the community was – it truly was a community school.” Victoria added, “Seeing those men working with



the children reminded me of the saying, ‘it takes a village to raise a child.’ The community of Naolinco takes their responsibility seriously.” Matthew noticed the importance placed on Mexican history – it was evident to him that great efforts were made for the children to know and understand the history of their country, and that the community supported those efforts.

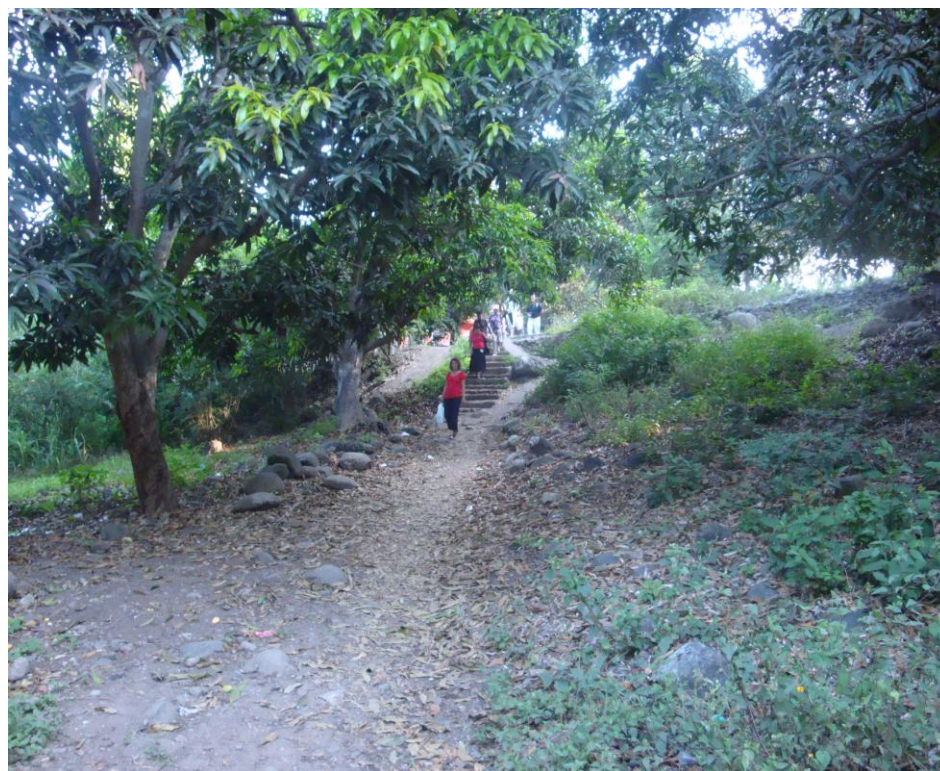


*Figure 7. Community Involvement at Its Finest. This photo captures the importance placed on education, Mexican history, and community support.*

### *The Ladies of La Cana*

The journey to La Cana was a special visit for the participants. They were impressed by the strong community support and lovingly referred to the mothers as, “The Ladies of La Cana.” The participants talked more, wrote more, took more photos, and reflected more about the visit to La Cana than they did about any other event. The trip to

La Cana, however, was difficult for the participants. They experienced the same journey that the teacher makes each day. They woke up early to board a bus for an hour-long ride to the town of Actopan where they walked the remainder of the distance to La Cana. The 30-minute walk through a mango grove and along a river ended at a swinging bridge.



*Figure 8. Participants Walking from Actopan to La Cana.*

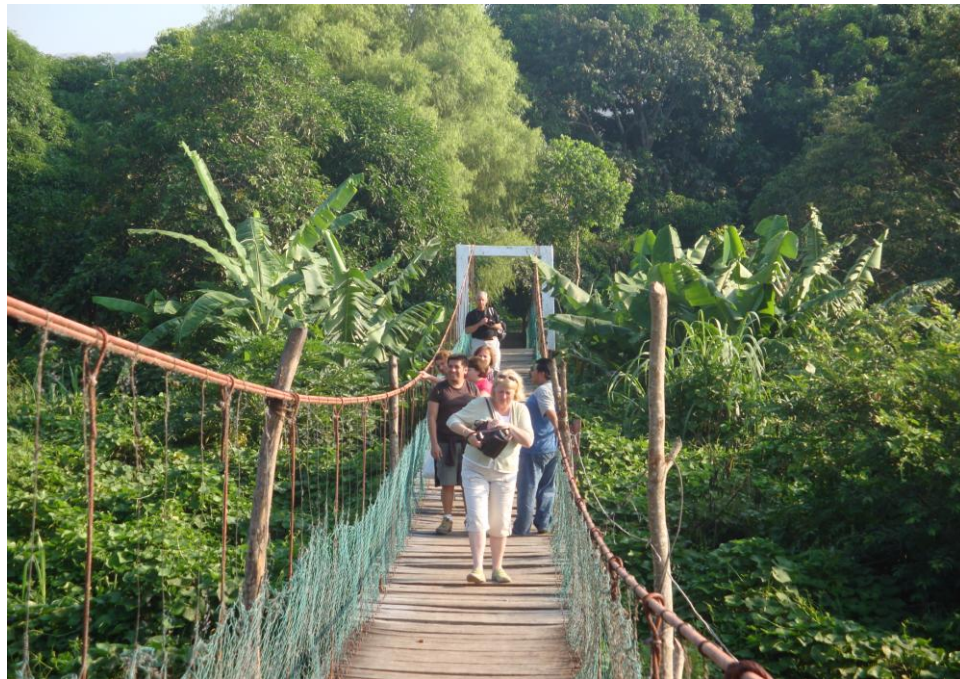
All of the participants openly expressed concern about crossing the swinging bridge. Two people admitted that if they had not been with the group, they would not have crossed the bridge. Victoria shared in her post-immersion interview,

There were so many times during this trip that I felt amazed at myself. I think my favorite photo is of the bridge to La Cana. The minute I crossed it, I ran to the riverbank and snapped a picture – I couldn't believe that I was able to do that!





*Figure 9.* The Swinging Bridge to La Cana.



*Figure 10.* The Participants Crossing the Swinging Bridge.

The Committee of Mothers from La Cana and the Mayor of Actopan formally greeted the participants and welcomed everyone to their village. The participants spent the remainder of the day playing with the children by the river or observing instruction.



The participants taught the students body parts in English through the song, *Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*. I noticed that none of the participants was reluctant to get in front of the class to demonstrate the song and enjoyed the activity almost as much as the children.



*Figure 11.* The School at La Cana. The new sidewalk is the result of a government initiative.



*Figure 12.* Participants and Children Going to the River.



*Figure 13. Matthew Visiting with the Boys of La Cana. Many of the men were away working in the United States and so the boys seemed delighted with Matthew's attention.*

Everyone responded that they loved visiting the school at La Cana and spending time with the children, but the Ladies of La Cana and the tremendous amount of parent support made the greatest impression upon them. The mothers returned at the end of the day with gifts for each guest - pottery loaded with mangos. Matthew commented, "I was so touched by the gift. These people have nothing yet they wanted to present us with a gift – the wonderful mangos from their groves." He proceeded to share how impressed he was with the involvement of the mothers in the school. He told me about the committee of mothers that was similar to our PTO (Parent Teacher Organization). He learned that the committee met with the teacher regularly to make decisions concerning the school. Dianne shared, "I brought a \$20 donation from one of my colleagues, and when I tried to give it to the teacher she told me that I would need to give the money to the committee."



*Figure 14.* Gifts for the Participants. The children of La Cana presented each participant with a gift of mangos.

At 1:00 p.m., the students were assigned homework and dismissed from school for the day. The participants gathered their belongings and prepared to leave the village of La Cana. Walking down the main street, the participants shouted “Adios!” to the residents who were waving goodbye as they stood in front of their houses.

The participants, however, soon learned that they had a surprise – an experience that they later reported to be their most valuable cultural experience. The family of Fabiola, a student at La Cana, had prepared lunch and the group was invited to the home of Fabiola’s grandparents, which was located across the street from the school. The group entered the small cinder-block home and was told that it would be cooler to eat in the kitchen. They stepped through the doorway into an open-air kitchen. There was a canvas tarp for a roof but there was no back wall. Just beyond the kitchen was the raging river - the entire back of the house was open.

Victor, the translator, and Alfonso, another teacher who had accompanied us on the trip, retrieved a large table and soon an assortment of chairs was gathered. I watched the participants as they processed these rapidly developing events. I was amazed at their willingness to eat in this home where sanitary conditions were questionable and where flies covered the food they were to eat. There was a portable sink where one of the ladies of La Cana stood washing dishes. Dianne peeked inside the sink and her eyes grew large - there were fish in the rinse water. Fabiola's grandmother explained that the fish helped keep the algae from growing. The participants gathered around the table, nonetheless, and graciously ate without hesitation. There was fresh fruit, soup, tortillas, rice, beans, homemade potato chips, beef patties, salsa, and tortilla chips – a feast in La Cana. The ladies and Fabiola's grandfather stood nearby but did not join in the meal.

Matthew, who sat beside me, whispered, "These ladies have been cooking all morning!" as he dug his spoon into his bowl of soup. Matthew soon made friends with the ladies because they were pleased that he enjoyed their cooking. He asked in Spanish, "Who cooked the rice?" One of the ladies smiled and raised her hand. He then asked, "Who cooked the soup?" and another lady raised her hand. Finally, he asked, "Who made the beans?" and Fabiola's grandmother proudly raised her hand. He smiled and said, "You three, go pack your bags; you are coming home with me!" which brought a round of giggles from all of the ladies.

We were invited to sit and relax with the family on the front porch after lunch. I sat in the front yard underneath a tree and watched the participants sitting among the family members on the porch. Occasionally, someone would try to communicate in Spanish, but most of the time the participants sat and relaxed.





*Figure 15.* The Ladies of La Cana. Sylvia took this picture of the ladies of La Cana in the open-air kitchen where lunch was served. The ladies listen intently as Dr. Rose shares about schools in the United States and how she learns more about her students by visiting La Cana. The ladies were amused that anyone could learn from them.

When it was time to leave, the participants gave hugs and kisses to the ladies and children of La Cana. As I was leaving, Fabiola's mother took my hands and said, "Please, do not forget La Cana" (translated). Victoria quickly exclaimed, "How could you *ever* forget La Cana!"

The return trip to Actopan that afternoon was especially difficult because it was so hot. Not only were we traveling in extreme heat, we were loaded with mangos and pottery. Our clothes soon became saturated with sweat. As we reached Actopan, Sylvia and I stopped briefly to take a sip of water. Wiping the sweat from her face, she said,

This is the hottest and most difficult walk that I think that I've ever made in my life – I did not know if I would make it back across that swinging bridge with my arms full of pottery and mangos (laughing). But, believe me when I say this – it is worth every step of the way...every step of the way.





*Figure 16.* Resting on the Porch at La Cana. Victoria took this photo of Matthew, Dianne, Victor (the translator), and Fabiola's family. Victoria said this photo was one of her favorites because instead of seeing poverty, she saw contentment.

The participants continued to reflect upon the Ladies of La Cana, their generosity, and their commitment to their children's education. Victoria shared in her post-immersion interview,

I have never experienced anything like La Cana. These people are so poor but I didn't see poverty; I saw contentment. And, I saw families who would do anything to provide a way for their children to have a better life. I don't know why it surprised me so much to see that level of parent support. Our Hispanic families always come to school events. But, I guess that I did not expect to see it there.

Sylvia agreed during her post-trip interview. "We equate poverty with crime in our country and to go to La Cana and see this kind of poverty without the crime and fear – it was such a shock – a good kind of a shock."

*Differences in Schools*

The participants did not feel that way about all of the schools that were visited. They did not enjoy the visit to La Escuela Normal, the laboratory school in Xalapa where the children of wealthier families attend school. Matthew said that La Escuela Normal reminded him of schools in the United States – everyone was businesslike and did not extend the warm welcome that was evident in the other schools the participants had visited. The participants preferred the rural schools even though La Escuela Normal was rich with resources, located on a beautiful campus, and well-respected in the community. Perhaps the participants felt this way because the rural schools were so different from their schools or perhaps it was because the dedication of the teachers was touching and remarkable. Maybe it was the warmth and appreciation demonstrated by the teachers, students, and families in the small villages that caused the participants to favor the rural schools.

During a group discussion, Dianne commented, “If Normal reminded us of our schools back home with its businesslike approach and we weren’t impressed with that, what does that tell us?”

The participants indicated surprise at the quality of the facility at Escuela Normal. Victoria shared that she had no idea that there were schools in Mexico that were as large as Normal and with such nice facilities. “I had the image that all schools in Mexico were poor and rural.” Another observation made by the participants about education in Mexico was the lack of equity in school facilities and materials.



*Figure 17. The Flag Ceremony at La Escuela de Juarez.*



*Figure 18. Sylvia Receives a Warm Welcome in Tapachapan. The student had made her a flower and coffee bean lei.*

Matthew noticed the facility at La Escuela Normal was far superior to the buildings at Tapachapan and La Cana, and the teachers in the smaller schools often did

not have adequate teaching materials. While acknowledging that there are disparities among school facilities and materials in the United States, the participants felt that the differences in Mexico were greater and the rural schools consistently had less. The participants brought small bags of school supplies for each child in the two rural schools and became visibly emotional when the children became excited over the gifts. Dianne shared, “To see the faces on the children when we gave them a bag of pencils and erasers, well that was priceless.”



*Figure 19.* Child Receiving School Supplies in Tapachapan. The little girl is all smiles after receiving pencils, crayons, and a small stuffed animal.





*Figure 20. Students Receiving School Supplies in Tapachapan.*



*Figure 21. The School Library at Tapachapan.*

### Additional Insights from the Cultural Immersion Experience

The data indicated that the participants gained new understandings from being immersed in Mexico. As Victoria shared in her post-immersion interview,

It [immersion] also helped in some ways to understand why they come here. Um, you know, your family will starve to death if you don't try to get across the border to send them money – then you understand it better. And, when the mother in La Cana smiled so big because her husband was home from the U.S., it made me understand, um, that it is so difficult on the families there, too, when their husbands and fathers leave to come here to work.

All participants shared that being immersed in the Mexican culture provided the confidence and desire to interact with their Mexican families and students once they returned home. Sylvia discussed this in her post-immersion interview,

I understand so much more, now. Uh, I thought about this when I was on the trip. Last year, I had a student who was eating a mango from a plastic bag with the corner snipped off. I used to think, 'That is crazy – why is he doing that?' And I really feel like how awesome it will be when I can connect with that kid when I can go up and say, 'Hey, I had mangos and, in fact, I walked through the mango grove and I got a whole dish of them and we sat and ate them!' I feel like I will be able to have a connection with the kids and the parents when they come in. I can't wait! Catherine is going to send me the book, um, Spanish for Educators, to help me with some of the language so that I can greet them when they come into my school. How cool is that going to be when I can make attempts to communicate!

### Group dynamics, risk-taking, and humor

Matthew noticed the power of participating in a cultural immersion with people that you know. I observed that as the trip progressed, the participants became closer friends – they experienced things together that they had not experienced with any of their other colleagues. Group emails were frequent after the participants returned home - I received two on the same afternoon at 4:00 when it began to rain because it rained every

day at 4:00 in Xalapa. I noticed when the participants saw each other at meetings after returning home, they would often greet each other in Spanish or recall an incident that happened on the trip. The trip developed camaraderie that continued to be evident weeks later.

Sylvia and Victoria suggested that immersion experiences promote adventure and risk-taking. They listed several examples of things they did not think that they would have done if they had been traveling as a tourist: crossing the swinging bridge, eating lunch in the home of a Mexican family in a rural village, walking alone in the rainforest at Tapachapan to explore the coffee plantations, or eating frozen yogurt purchased from a house that had bars on the window in Xico. Matthew concluded that most of the activities listed as risk-taking events would not have been an option if the participants had not been on the cultural immersion trip because a typical tourist would not have access to those opportunities.

Risk-taking experiences often caused the participants to recognize the role of humor. One example was when several of the participants complimented the Ladies of La Cana on the beef patties that they had eaten at lunch. Sylvia had shared with the group that she could not determine what all of the ingredients were but she knew there were some peppers and raisins in the patties and that the combination was simply delicious. Later, we learned that the raisins were probably not raisins but large ants, as the villagers of La Cana are known for eating “animals of the mountains,” which is what they call ants. The participants handled the realization well and it became a joke for the remainder of the trip.



*Figure 22.* Walking to the Falls. Due to the language barrier, we did not know where we were going as we followed Reuben and Lydia through the rain forest. The walk ended at a beautiful falls.

Someone almost always asked if we wanted a side of ants to go with the rest of the meal when dinner was ordered. Another incident occurred on the trip back from Xico. We had ridden to the falls in two cars –half of the group rode with Reuben in his GMC Jimmy while the other half rode in a taxi to the falls. The falls are located deep in the rain forest and so the taxi left after it dropped us off for the afternoon. Once we were ready to leave, Dianne suggested that we all pile into Reuben’s vehicle rather than waiting on a taxi. So, Reuben and Matthew rode in the front two seats, Sylvia, Catherine Rose, and I were in the middle seat and Victoria, Dianne, and Lydia crawled into the back of the Jimmy and rode facing backwards with the lid up and their feet hanging out the back. There was a lot of laughter about this arrangement, especially by the two Mexicans who were with us. Sylvia commented in her post-immersion interview, “I could not believe



that we were riding like that through a rain forest in Mexico with mariachi music blaring on the radio.”

All of the participants had an experience that was embarrassing or awkward, and I noticed that the participants often relied on humor to deal with those situations. When Victoria ordered a botella instead of a boleto, she was the one who told the story - laughing wholeheartedly. These were also the incidents that were retold to colleagues once we arrived home.

### Families in Mexico

The participants were surprised to find that the family unit in Mexico is strong. Victoria wrote, “I love the way babies to grandmas peacefully co-exist in households – no daycares, no nursing homes.” During a visit to the park on a Sunday afternoon, Sylvia and Victoria were amazed that the park was filled with families and that grandparents were included in the activities. Victoria noted that the children were spoiled on these visits – they had their faces painted, rode ponies, and ate ice cream and cotton candy. Sylvia commented, as we were walking back to the hotel, that she now saw the Mexican family differently. She said,

I often wondered why so many Mexicans would live in one household back home – now I understand that the practice is not solely for economic reasons. The family unit is strong and includes extended family members – it is a part of the culture.



*Figure 23.* Families in the Park on Sunday Afternoon. In the photograph, the young boy is eating an ice cream and is accompanied by his mother and grandmother.

### The Missionary Effect

From my experiences of participating in cultural immersion trips, I have noticed that there is the opportunity, on trips of this nature, for people to measure another culture against the standards by which they live and to want to adjust what they see to mirror those standards. During this trip, I did not witness an attitude of superiority or the notion that the participants should do something to change what they saw – to Americanize it or make it better according to their standards. In other words, the idea of bringing what we value to these villages, or what I term as the missionary effect, did not surface. The participants appreciated what they saw in the rural villages and did not spend time trying to determine how to change what they saw. For example, there were no discussions about going back with teams of people to run electricity or running water into the homes of the

poor villages. Instead, there was a genuine appreciation for what the participants saw and a mature understanding that because the villages were very different from their homes and towns, that it did not mean that the villages needed changing. There was a genuine appreciation of what was seen and experienced. As one participant shared, “I felt as if I should tip-toe in and tip-toe out of the villages so that I didn’t leave my footprints.”

### Insights from a Mango Party

The night after the visit to La Cana, the group gathered on the balcony at the hotel to peel and eat the mangos that had been given to them. The participants reflected upon the trip as they sat in a circle, munching the delicious fruit. Dr. Rose posed several questions to guide the group discussion. She began by telling the group that when an immersion trip was first mentioned to the principals in Mary County, one principal made the statement, “It is not necessary to go to Mexico for cultural immersion - we can go down to ‘Little Mexico’ [a section of Mary County where many Mexicans reside and have businesses] because there is lots of Mexican culture there.” Her question to the group was, “Why can’t we just go down to ‘Little Mexico’ for cultural immersion?” Victoria quickly responded, “I think that statement shows how much ignorance and misconception is out there if you think authentic Mexican culture can be found in ‘Little Mexico’.” Dianne concurred, “Going to ‘Little Mexico’ will not give you a glimpse into the authentic culture. Those folks have been contaminated into American ways and ideals and many aren’t first-generation Mexican and have been in the U.S. all of their lives.” Matthew smiled and said, “I don’t think that you can go down to ‘Little Mexico’ and find what we found in La Cana. I know that you can’t get that kind of a glimpse into the

culture back home.” He added, “I think that sometimes people minimize the efforts of others in order to maximize themselves and so you just have to overlook those comments.”



*Figure 24.* Group Meeting at a Mango Party. This photo captures the intensity surrounding the deep-level conversations that took place regarding perceptions, biases, and new understandings of Mexico and Mexicans, and it was not a staged photograph. The photograph was a fly-on-the-wall experience and one of my treasures from the trip.

Dr. Rose shared with the group that there is the idea that school leaders lack but need cultural competence. She asked the participants if they saw the necessity for cultural competence and if so, how they thought that it could be gained. Sylvia responded, “You have to be open to becoming culturally aware which begins with recognizing that you aren’t. I think immersion helps bring that about; I can’t wait to get back and tell my Hispanic students what I have seen and learned.” Matthew added, “I think the cultural competence piece is essential but I think that it has to begin in leadership development.

What if every school leader in Georgia had to have as part of their leadership training, several weeks say in Appalachia?” to which Victoria responded, “We are still running schools the way they were run 50 years ago and the world is changing and we aren’t.” She added, “We are still leading like we have all white kids in one school and anyone who thinks or looks or acts differently is wrong. It is essential at a school like mine that the leader has cultural awareness.”

Dr. Rose asked the group if cultural immersion had the potential to bring about cultural competence. Sylvia immediately responded, “For me, it will help to bring about awareness, but competence is something that will have to be developed over time. But without the awareness, the competence will never develop.” She paused and then added, “I think that all administrators, with or without a high Hispanic population, should be required to take part in an immersion experience.” I followed up by asking, “Do you think an immersion experience is for everyone?” Matthew responded, “Really it is, but not all people will participate. And, then you think about those who would come and see the beauty of La Cana as dirty or disgusting...you know, the stories that you hate to hear.” Victoria sighed, “Well, I just know that the power of seeing the rest of the world outside our daily lives is an amazing thing and I am totally grateful for this experience.” She added,

Obviously, it is a little frustrating to us that we are unable to get others to understand. There is still raw prejudice in our community. To me it is so clear now that there is no place for intolerance – why do others not see it?

The group ate quietly as they finished the remainder of the mangos and pondered Victoria’s question but none of the participants answered it. Their hesitance might have resulted from an uncertainty about the politically correct way to answer her question or

perhaps they received it as being rhetorical. Dr. Rose waited until the mangos were eaten and reminded the participants of the plans for the next day. Later that evening, Victoria wrote in her journal,

I feel that I have been sympathetically and sort of intuitively tolerant of the extreme plight of our Mexican children. But there is even more I can do. I am vowing to reexamine our whole structure of receiving and nurturing these students. I wish that every person involved could make a trip such as this. The power of it is indescribable.

She scribbled at the bottom of the page - almost as an afterthought - "People are really great when we take the time to get to know them – to just be aware that the rest of the human race is there."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The data indicate that the short-term cultural immersion trip to Mexico had an impact on the study participants. The volunteers for this study, however, were school leaders who were already interested in learning about Mexico and the Mexican culture. The participants volunteered because they were searching for strategies to improve their relationships with their Mexican families and students to the extent they paid for the trip from their personal funds. These were not the leaders referred to in chapter one who were making derogatory comments about Mexicans – none of those school leaders volunteered to participate in the cultural immersion trip. Although these volunteers came with some cultural awareness and were probably much closer to having cultural competence than other leaders in the school district, the immersion trip provided the opportunity for the participants to develop further insights which strengthened their cultural awareness and moved them toward cultural competence.

According to the data, the participants increased their cultural competence in language acquisition and in their understanding of Mexican culture, families, and schools. Additionally, the participants grew in their understanding and empathy toward Mexican students and families in the United States. Each participant made a commitment to make intentional efforts to reach out to the Mexican families in their schools and to continue a focus on learning Spanish. The trip also facilitated camaraderie and risk-taking among

the group members. The participants indicated that they could not have gained the cultural insights that were experienced during the cultural immersion through any other means. Finally, there were indications of transformations of values and beliefs as a result of the immersion experience.

### Transformation through Immersion

Mezirow (1981) suggested that a transformation of values and beliefs is possible when we encounter an experience that calls into question how we have been conditioned to understand life. Opportunities to discuss the experience with others and to personally reflect upon the experience are necessary components of transformation, as well. All of those elements were incorporated into this study. There is an indication that there was a transformation of beliefs and values as a result of the immersion experience, but it is important to acknowledge that transformation must survive the test of time and that the actions of the participants should reflect a transformation of beliefs. Once the excitement of the trip fades and other initiatives arise, will the participants maintain their commitment to reach out to their Mexican students and families? Is there sincerity in the transformation of beliefs, or were the participants caught up in the emotionality and excitement of the moment? One way to monitor and facilitate the progress of the participants toward meeting the needs of their Hispanic students and to observe their degree of transformation would be for the group to continue to meet on a regular basis. These meetings would also provide a forum to continue reflective discourse and to remind the participants of the lessons learned through the cultural immersion experience.



There were many examples of transformation of beliefs as a result of the cultural immersion. One example was when Victoria commented in her post-immersion interview that she felt she could retire to La Cana, the poor rural village with little electricity and running water. Concerns with health and sanitation prior to the trip resulted in removing the home stay experience, yet after her visits to the homes of Mexican families, Victoria was contemplating retirement to a Mexican village where living conditions are extremely difficult. Obviously, Victoria's perception of the Mexican family changed as her cultural awareness increased. She wrote, "I have been working with Mexican children for over 20 years yet I have learned more during these eight days about the culture, the language, and my own perceptions and biases."

Transformation was also evident when Sylvia shared in her pre-immersion interview that she was afraid to communicate with the Spanish-speaking grandparents who were helping at her school. By the post-immersion interview, she could not wait to initiate conversations with her Spanish-speaking students and families and to tell them about her trip to Mexico. She came home from Mexico more confident in her ability to establish communication with her Mexican students and their families. Sylvia spoke at the first principals' meeting after the trip to Mexico. She told her colleagues, "It [the immersion trip] was a life-changing experience. I can't tell you how much that I grew in one week." She described her visits with the schools, the children, and their families. A principal later told me that he was interested in the next trip to Mexico. He said that Sylvia had inspired him to learn more about the Mexican culture. Sylvia also shared with me, almost three months after the trip, that she had "thrown a fit" with the district so that

she was able to have a bilingual parent liaison on staff next year to help her in building relationships with her Hispanic families.

Transformation was noted in Dianne's comments about learning another language. Dianne shared that she did not understand why Mexicans in the United States did not learn to speak English, as if it were an easy task. Struggling with the language caused her to empathize with the Mexican families at her school who do not speak English. She came home from Mexico more tolerant and aware, and she planned to encourage her colleagues to be more patient and understanding.

Transformation was observed in Victoria's attitude towards the immigrant families in her school—a school with a high number of immigrant families. She said she had a better understanding about why Mexicans are immigrating into the United States whereas before she was unsure of her position regarding immigration. Victoria said that meeting the families and seeing villages similar to the ones her students come from gave her insights she could never have gained otherwise. In her post immersion interview, Victoria shared, "I'm not sure why I thought they came here – but now I understand that many of those fathers leave so that their children can survive. That must be an awful choice to have to make." She wrote, "I get it – and I would not have gotten it in any other way. I understand so much more now." Victoria also shared in her journal about her new perception of the Mexican culture,

How is it that we have here two vastly different cultures, the U.S., and Mexico? What perceptions were behind my fear of traveling to Mexico and getting the flu when I didn't feel afraid to fly to Texas or Seattle or any other city in the states where there were outbreaks? My perspective of the culture has changed dramatically. It is a rich culture in many ways – not just poverty-laden as I assumed it was.

Matthew did not struggle with the language and his prior visits to Mexico had given him insights that the other participants did not have. When Matthew decided to participate in the cultural immersion, I was not certain that he would benefit from the experience because he already appeared to be culturally competent. In Matthew's post-immersion interview I asked if the trip had an impact on him. He responded quickly and confidently, "Absolutely. I had some awareness of the culture but we need reminders and this trip certainly reminded me that I had become somewhat complacent without realizing it." Matthew later suggested that the group should continue to meet. He thought it would be a way to keep a focus on making intentional efforts to reach out to Mexican families.

Dianne shared that the cultural immersion experience caused her to reflect upon her view of the world.

I think that we are so conditioned to seeing the world in the way that we live in it – from only our eyes – that when you go on a trip like this you begin to see it differently. I guess more in an inclusive way. It helps you get past your own views of the world, I guess.

### Culture Shock and Homesickness

I did not observe participants experiencing homesickness or culture shock. The visits to the rural villages provided the greatest opportunity for culture shock but none of the participants complained or reacted in negative ways. Although Dianne was clearly shocked to find fish swimming in the rinse water at La Cana, she did not react negatively. I intentionally opened the door for complaining. I moaned about the heat and about being tired while walking back from La Cana to Actopan but none of the participants joined in the complaining – instead, they talked excitedly about the visit to La Cana.

The immersion experience was difficult – the participants were up early each morning and rarely were in bed before midnight. They experienced awkward situations and struggled with communication. It was extremely hot at times, the hotel rooms were not air conditioned, and the trip required a lot of walking. Plans were often changed on a moment's notice. The food was different from what the participants were accustomed to and, although they did not complain about the food, everyone chose to eat at McDonald's on the last night in Mexico. Victoria wrote, "I have become accustomed to grabbing my Kleenex for toilet paper, not flushing the paper, and brushing my teeth with bottled water." Even with these hardships, none of the participants complained about the difficulties or the strenuous itinerary. Dianne commented after the difficult day in La Cana, "I didn't come here for a vacation; I can rest on the plane ride home. I want to experience as much of this culture as I can in eight days."

The positive and adventurous attitudes observed throughout this immersion experience could have been caused by several factors. The participants volunteered for the trip and came with the intention to learn. The meetings before the trip prepared the participants; they were aware that the days would be long and often difficult. Also, the participants were among colleagues and may have felt that it would have been inappropriate to complain or share negative thoughts. Also, the support of their colleagues may have diminished the tendency to become homesick; the participants were not traveling with strangers - they were among friends. Additionally, the trip was only for eight days - a short time to be away from family. It was also possible that the participants did not experience negative reactions and their lack of culture shock was sincere. Then again, there is the chance that the participants' behavior was altered because they were in

the study – the participants could have been performing for the study. I reminded the participants before and after the trip that the purpose of the study was to look at the effects of cultural immersion - not to convince the superintendent or anyone else that the experience was successful. I knew these participants prior to the cultural immersion and I did not notice changes in their behavior because they were in the study.

### Culture Surprise

Although the participants did not seem to experience culture shock by reacting negatively to the culture and experiences in Mexico, they did indicate what I am calling, *culture surprise*. For example, the participants were surprised at the quality of education being provided in Mexico and that curriculum standards and frameworks, very similar to those used in Georgia, were in place in Mexican schools. The participants were also surprised to find hands-on and authentic learning taking place in the classrooms in Mexico. Teaching methods similar to those used in the schools in Mary County were observed in the Mexican schools; this was also unexpected. The participants also did not expect to find large and modern schools with rich resources like La Escuela Normal, nor did they realize that there would be modern cities in Mexico like Xalapa. The participants were surprised at how safe they felt while in Mexico and at the warmth demonstrated by the residents of the villages that they visited.

### Ethnocentrism

The culture surprise resulted in deeper levels of cultural understanding, yet why were the participants surprised by their positive findings regarding Mexico? Barger

(2004) explained that although most people claim to be open and tolerant, everyone is ethnocentric and that we make false assumptions about the ways of others because of our own limited experiences. Barth (2004) said that we are not even aware that we are making false assumptions – we have no way of knowing that we are until we encounter an event that makes us question our assumptions. Our perceptions, values, social roles, and beliefs provide important meanings and functions as we move through our daily lives, and our limited experiences are the basis for understanding new experiences - in this case the culture and people of Mexico.

It is apparent from the data that the leaders who visited Mexico assumed, perhaps from their limited experiences, that they would find substandard schools, instruction, and education in Mexico. The school visits served as a catalyst for a transformation of assumptions about education in Mexico. The participants witnessed a professional lifestyle different from their own. They observed teachers making long and treacherous journeys to work and children learning in conditions where materials are sparse – even places where the electricity does not always work. The participants saw children who walked long distances to school, and they visited with parents who made sacrifices so that their children can get an education. The participants also saw modern schools that were rich with resources. The participants were exposed to focused instruction, standards for learning, and determined teachers. Assumptions about Mexican families and children and attitudes towards education, family, and work were challenged through these school visits and the time spent with the children and their families.

The participants also assumed that most of Mexico was rural and poor, and that health and safety would be a concern during their visit to the country. By experiencing

the authentic learning experiences in Mexico, visiting beautiful cities that were safe and inviting, and establishing relationships with Mexicans during the trip, the participants were able to challenge previously held assumptions and fears about Mexico, its schools, culture, and people to be more open and reflective which is also an indicator of transformative learning. Barth (2004) shared that the most effective way to combat ethnocentrism is to acknowledge and confront false assumptions with a sincere willingness to learn about others; the participants during this trip embraced Barth's concept. The cultural awareness of the participants was enhanced by recognizing false assumptions about Mexico.

### Implications

The research (Institute for Educational Leaders, 2005, Nieto & Bode, 2008, Banks & Banks, 2007) is clear that school leaders need cultural competence to effectively lead schools. The data from this study indicate that four school leaders in Mary County, Georgia, began this school year with greater cultural competence than they have ever had. They started the year with more confidence in building relationships with their Mexican students and families as a result of the eight-day cultural immersion experience. These four leaders have spoken to other school principals who are now showing an interest in participating in immersion experiences. The notion that school leaders are stepping outside of their buildings to learn about other people will have an effect on their ability to grow as leaders. A participant commented during the study, "It has never been cool in our district to be open to the Mexican community; if more leaders are involved in these trips, then maybe it will become acceptable."

It is remarkable that these school leaders took such bold steps to gain cultural awareness. The cultural immersion trip was organized by a principal who felt compelled to take the initiative to find ways to develop cultural competence among her colleagues. There was no reward for organizing or participating in the trip other than the professional learning credits that were earned. School district leaders appeared to be apathetic about the trip other than providing Sylvia an opportunity at a principals' meeting to share about her experiences. Although the district did not discourage the cultural immersion trip, interest in and support of the professional learning experience was lacking. An optimal opportunity was missed by the school district when they did not have the four leaders who went on the immersion trip share information, photographs, and experiences with other administrators as a promotional tool for further immersion trips. There will continue to be a challenge to find ways to meet the needs of the ever growing Hispanic student population until there is an expectation from school district leaders that school administrators acquire cultural competence. Without this expectation, it will be difficult to encourage school leaders who do not demonstrate an interest in learning about other cultures to take the necessary steps toward cultural competence.

This does not necessarily mean that a school district should force its school leaders to participate in cultural immersion trips. Forcing uninterested leaders to visit another country could have detrimental effects, but there is also a problem if the leader does not initiate efforts to become culturally competent. Perhaps a manageable first step for facilitating cultural awareness in the Mary County schools would be to target the schools with a higher Hispanic student population and offer to pay for a cultural immersion trip for those leaders. There are five schools in Mary County whose Hispanic



population exceeds 70 % and obviously, it is important that those leaders have opportunities to develop cultural competence. As the immersion program expands and is noticeably valued by the school district, more leaders in Mary County might be open to participation in this opportunity. Systemic change will result when the district clearly articulates that it values and supports the development of cultural competence for its school leaders.

The data from this study indicate that a short-term cultural immersion experience to Mexico is a viable option for school districts searching for ways to develop cultural awareness for school leaders. Although the participants in this study personally paid for the trip, the cost was nominal. The entire trip for eight days cost less than \$800 per person, including all travel, food, and lodging. This amount is comparable to expenses incurred by attending national and state conferences – events that school leaders are often encouraged to attend. For a school district that is serious about developing cultural awareness, the trip to Mexico is as affordable as any quality professional learning and provides experiences that cannot be attained by any other means.

### Suggestions for Further Research

There is little research focused on methods to develop the cultural competence for school leaders although the research is clear that cultural competence is needed. The results from this study indicate that participants of a short-term cultural immersion experience to Mexico gained, at a minimum, cultural awareness - a precursor to cultural competence. Further research is needed to determine the long-term effects of short-term cultural immersion on school leaders and if exposure to authentic culture will develop

cultural competence. Once the excitement of the trip diminishes, will the commitments made by the school leaders stay strong? Longitudinal data would indicate if the short-term experience has a long-term effect.

Cultural immersion may not be an option or the best method to provide cultural awareness for some school leaders. Participating in cultural immersion requires time, funding, the willingness to travel to a foreign country, and access to classrooms and interactions with the locals. Cultural immersion in the home country would not necessarily be an option for a school in Georgia with a high percentage of Vietnamese students, for example; therefore, research is needed to determine other options to provide cultural awareness for school leaders. Handouts and lectures will not necessarily provide the glimpse into authentic culture that visiting the home country provides; research is needed to determine options for effectively developing school leaders who are culturally aware – existing leaders as well as candidates in leadership preparation programs. It should be noted that, although the participants clearly agreed that leaders in Mary County would not be able to experience authentic Mexican culture in ‘Little Mexico,’ much may be learned about their students by visiting these communities and by participating in home visits. Although the culture in ‘Little Mexico’ may not be authentic Mexican culture, it reflects the cultural norms of the students in Mary County, and developing cultural awareness and knowledge of this area would advance the cultural competency of the school leaders.

Additionally, research is needed to determine if immersion into one culture transfers into a desire to understand another one. In other words, will the school leaders who participated in the immersion trip to Mexico be more receptive and understanding of

their Vietnamese students and families and take the same steps to develop relationships with them?

The research is clear that school leaders need cultural competence, yet there is little research on effective professional learning that will prepare school leaders to understand how to meet the needs of their culturally diverse students. Attention should be given to leadership development programs and how those programs address the development of cultural competence in future school leaders. Further research is needed in this area.

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## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX A

#### HANDOUT FROM MARY COUNTY NEW ADMINISTRATOR TRAINING

##### Acculturation and the ESOL Student

An individual who moves to an unfamiliar place goes through several stages in adjusting to a new culture:

- Honeymoon – everything about the new place/culture seems great
- Shock – reality sets in and the person feels overwhelmed
- Stress – the difficulties of everyday life take over and the person begins to find ways to cope
- Adjustment – the person develops more of a comfort level with the new situation.

Although the stages are not mutually exclusive and can vary in length, most people will experience these to some degree.

Children may move through the stages at a different pace than their parents.

The stages affect school learning. A student who is in culture shock may have little energy left for learning.

## APPENDIX B

### SCHOOL DISTRICT GOALS FOR ENGLISH SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

1999	2000	2001	2002
Opening of International Center	ESOL Teacher Resource Center at International Center	Began Parent Liaison Program – 5 liaisons	Expanded Parent Liaison Program – 7 additional
Began ESOL Endorsement Program	2 <sup>nd</sup> cohort of ESOL Endorsement Program	3 <sup>rd</sup> cohort of ESOL Endorsement Program	4 <sup>th</sup> cohort of ESOL Endorsement Program
ESOL services at all schools	Completed ESOL Handbook	Established ESOL Advisory Council	Established Strategic Planning Committee
System-wide HS curriculum and text adoption	Completed beginner curriculum	Implemented beginner curriculum	Began Newcomer's Academy at 5 schools
Expanded sheltered class offerings at 2 HS	Expanded sheltered class offerings at 4 HS	Expanded data base for ESOL program	Began data clean up for student information system
Hired part-time translator	Established ESOL field in Student Information System		Collaboration with a university; Endorsements for MS/HS; TELL scholarship for bilingual paras
Approved credit en lieu of enrollment for Spanish courses		ESOL accommodations for state testing	OCR Evaluation Report
			Family Literacy Program established at 1 school

2003	2004	2005	2006
Expand Parent Liaison Program to 16	Expand Parent Liaison Program to 18	Expand Parent Liaison Program to 20	Part-time Parent Outreach Facilitator for training
ESOL Endorsement Program – 5 <sup>th</sup> cohort	ESOL Endorsement Program – 6 <sup>th</sup> cohort	ESOL Endorsement Program through RESA -2 cohorts	Unpack WIDA standards
LFS Focus Group	Classes added for Limited Formally Schooled Student	Quantitative study of Newcomer's Academy	Revised approach to Migrant services
Newcomer's Academy at 6 schools	Newcomer's Academy program evaluation	ACCESS test to begin in Spring	Begin W-APT testing as a new screening instrument
Continue data clean-up. Data for ELL Committee begun	Continue data clean-up	Partial implementation of program for LFS	Began LFS program at one school
3 school teams in CLASE Summer Institute	6 teachers visit Mexico; 1 school team in CLASE	Begin co-teaching training	Continue co-teaching training
Refined ESOL team process to facilitate more instructional accommodation for monitored students.		ESOL teachers more involved with Georgia Performance Standards training	Superintendent met with parents of ELL once
Family Literacy Program at 4 schools	Family Literacy Program at 5 schools		

APPENDIX C

HANDBOOK USED IN PRE-IMMERSION GROUP MEETINGS

# Learning about Language and Culture in Mexico

June 2-9, 2009





## Location

### Xalapa

Nestled in the mountains 4,700 feet high, Xalapa (pronounced “halapa”) has a temperate climate, with an average temperature of 64.4 degrees. It’s a picturesque city of 500,000, set in a strikingly beautiful landscape of coffee plantations and fruit orchards. The city is known for its cultural richness, with a symphony orchestra, the colorful dancing of the Ballet Folklorico, lovely parks, and a lively downtown full of coffeehouses, restaurants, and music venues. Xalapa has a traditional Mexican atmosphere coupled with modern conveniences.

Xalapa is the capital and main university center for the state of Veracruz. Although it is a sophisticated city, it is not a major tourist destination for foreigners. We like it that way, since it means we hear only Spanish on the streets, we are not handed menus in English, and we feel immersed in another society. Xalapenos (yes, that is what citizens of Xalapa are called!) are friendly, and we have developed many strong contacts with university people and public school teachers over our years of working in the area.

Visitors can take many fascinating day trips to places such as Naolinco, a town of leather artisans, and Xico, a cobblestoned town known for its beautiful cathedral, tasty mole sauce, and the highest waterfall in the region. The vibrant port city of Veracruz is an hour and a half away on the coast, and Mexico City is 5 hours to the west. The most famous archaeological site on the northern Gulf Coast, El Tajin, lies 5 hours to the north in a mountainous area populated by indigenous groups of Totonac people.

### Universidad Veracruzana

Universidad Veracruzana was founded in 1944 and is considered one of the leading state universities in Mexico. The university has 19 research institutes and 74 professional schools that offer 53 undergraduate and 82 graduate programs. UV has over 58,000

students on its five main campuses and nine satellite campuses in other cities. Xalapa is the main campus of UV, and has more than 15,000 students. There are numerous other universities in the city.

Websites to visit:

Mexico:

[www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.htm](http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.htm) (CIA fact book about Mexico with useful information)

[www.maps-of-mexico.com](http://www.maps-of-mexico.com) (maps by state and city)

State of Veracruz:

[www.veracruz.gob.mx](http://www.veracruz.gob.mx)

Universidad Veracruzana, or UV:

[www.uv.mx](http://www.uv.mx) (main site)

[www.uv.mx/museoantr](http://www.uv.mx/museoantr) (Museum of Anthropology)

[www.uv.mx/eee](http://www.uv.mx/eee) (School for Foreign Students, a part of UV)

Xalapa government and maps:

[www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/index.html](http://www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/index.html) (main site)

[www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/mapas/mapanav.html](http://www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/mapas/mapanav.html) (maps)

[www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/museos/lista\\_museos.html](http://www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/museos/lista_museos.html) (museums in Xalapa)

[www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/abrededores/alreded.html](http://www.xalapa.gob.mx/n/abrededores/alreded.html) (sites around Xalapa)

[www.mpsnet.com/mx/mexoco/veracruz/xalapa.html](http://www.mpsnet.com/mx/mexoco/veracruz/xalapa.html) (general information)

Photo sites:

[www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_travel/acogan/acjalapa.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_travel/acogan/acjalapa.html) (photos)

[www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_travel/rdudley/rdxalapa.1.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_travel/rdudley/rdxalapa.1.html) (photos)

Weather in Xalapa:

[www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com)

## THE IMMERSION PROGRAM

### Itinerary

- June 2: Fly from Atlanta to Mexico City.  
Once we arrive in Mexico City, we will take a bus to Xalapa, a five hour ride. This ride will give you glimpses into the small towns and villages in Mexico, and you will want to be on the lookout for the smoke from an active volcano.
- June 2: We will arrive in Xalapa in the early evening hours. We will check into our hotel rooms and then have dinner together. We will have time to take a walking tour of the city.
- June 3: We will visit the Escuela Tapachapan, a school located in the city of Xalapa in the morning. After lunch, we will have time to shop or visit the city market and we will have 2 hour Spanish lessons in the afternoon.  
Dinner is usually not eaten until 8 or 9 pm in Mexico, therefore you will have some free time each afternoon for resting, shopping, or enjoying a cup of coffee in the coffee shop that overlooks the beautiful park in Xalapa.  
“Diamond Alley” is a great place to find gifts to take home. We will meet for dinner to debrief. We may attend a cultural event this evening.
- June 4: We will visit the school at Naolinco on this day. We will travel by bus to Naolinco.  
We will eat lunch in Naolinco before returning to Xalapa for Spanish lessons. You will have free time in the afternoon and can choose to meet as a group for dinner or have dinner on your own.
- June 5: We will visit the one-room school located in La Cana. This will be an all day visit. We will board the bus early for the hour ride to Actopanpan and then walk to La Cana  
— wear comfortable shoes. We will not return until late

afternoon. This will be a tiring but wonderful day.  
 Be sure to spray yourself with bug spray that  
 morning – mosquitoes are horrible. We will have  
 dinner together and a group debriefing session.

June 6: Today we will travel to Puebla – it is the home of the  
 Talefera Tile Factory. This is a great place to purchase  
 pottery, to have lunch, and, of course, visit the cathedral.  
 It will be about a 3-hour bus ride to Puebla.

June 7: Today we will travel to Xico to see the waterfalls and  
 cathedral. It will be a leisurely day and there are several  
 good restaurants in this small town. You will return for  
 Spanish lessons in the afternoon and we will attend a  
 cultural event in the evening.

June 8: We will visit Escuela Normal which is located on the  
 teachers' laboratory campus.  
 You will return for Spanish lessons in the afternoon and  
 some last minute shopping. We will have a farewell  
 dinner with our friends that evening.

June 9: We will board the bus around 5:00 a.m. to ride back to  
 Mexico City.

#### Notes:

While in Xalapa, you will want to visit Café Colon to purchase coffee.  
 The coffee beans are often still warm from the roaster when you pack  
 them in your suitcases to come home.

Bring candy to make goody bags for the children at La Cana &  
 Tapachapan. Small items like bottles of bubbles or small toys will also  
 be a big hit. There are approximately 30 students at each school.

### School Visits:

The visits to the four schools will give you a range of sites (urban and rural) and socio economic situations. We will talk before and after each visit about our purposes for going there, what we hope to observe, and what we can learn as educators by observing and talking with the students and teachers. This aspect of the experience has been truly valued by previous participants!

We will visit the following schools:

**The Escuela Normal:** This school is part of the Teacher's College and is located on a beautiful campus in Xalapa. Each teacher has a physical classroom and there are multiple classrooms per grade level. There are cubicles attached to the classrooms that serve as observation rooms. It has been apparent in past visits, that the Mexican Department of Education is very proud of this facility. There is a charming pre-kindergarten facility located on the campus and you will want to visit this delightful area.

**La Cana:** La Cana is a one-room school located in an isolated village near the town of Actopanpan. We will take a bus from Xalapa to Actopanpan which is about an hour-long ride. Once in Actopanpan, we will walk through the small town to a path that leads along the river and through a mango grove. This 30-minute walk will lead us to a swinging bridge that leads to the village of La Cana. There are approximately 120 residents in La Cana and the school houses Kindergarten through sixth grade students. Remember bug spray on this trip – you will need it. Also, wear very comfortable shoes as you will be walking for most of the day.

**Tapachapan:** Tapachapan is a transient school and the parents of the children are migrant coffee plantation workers. The children walk up to 2 miles one way each day to attend school. This is a very poor area and on one of my visits, the teacher taught all day with no electricity. The school is located near Coatapec alongside a beautiful river.

**Naolinco:** Naolinco represents a middle-class school. It is a nice facility located in the town of Naolinco, a leather artisan town. Each teacher has a physical classroom and there are two or three classes per grade level.

### Spanish Class:

You will have four or five sessions of your Spanish class from 2:00-4:00 each time. The teachers will require you to practice speaking as much as you can, and you can use a dictionary or a translator to help you with your lessons.

### Debriefing Sessions:

You will be experiencing a lot of new and exciting activities during this short stay in Mexico. The debriefing sessions are a time for us to reflect, openly and honestly, two times while we are in Mexico. Once we return to the States, we will meet again to share photos and stories of our journey together.

### Journals

Each day, you will write in your journal about what you are learning in regard to your main questions about culture and your profession as it is practiced in Mexico. You can write about other aspects including your feelings, responses, emotions, and insights.

You will give the journals to Jo Dinnan on Tuesday, June 9<sup>th</sup> if you are participating in her study. The journals will be returned to you at the debriefing session in the states.

## GETTING THERE

### Packing

- Mark your luggage inside and outside with your name, address, and phone numbers.
- Pack casual clothes, and not too many. Laundries are everywhere and cheap to use. Shorts are okay for weekends but not okay for walking around town, visiting schools, or visiting our hosts in Mexico. Jeans are also okay for weekends and evenings, but not okay for visiting schools.
- Comfortable shoes are a must and tennis shoes are fine.
- Other items to bring:
  - Hand sanitizer
  - Small pack of wipes
  - Headache medicine
  - Antibiotic cream and band aides
  - Imodium

Tissues (you will need this for bathrooms)  
 Camera  
 3 or 4 bottles of water, packed in your suitcase  
 Shower shoes  
 Bug spray  
 Small backpack for carrying things to schools, etc.  
 Small umbrella  
 Small Journal and Pens  
 Pepto Bismol pills or chewable tablets  
 Sunscreen  
 Sunglasses  
 Money – exchange it in Atlanta or at the airport in Mexico City  
 Spanish Dictionary or a Franklin Translator  
 Hair Dryer  
 Prescription medication must be in bottle from pharmacy

#### Clothes:

- Slacks/capris/skirts
- Comfortable shirts
- Sweatshirt or jacket – it can get cool in the evening
- Jeans
- 2 pairs of comfortable walking shoes
- Shorts
- Nightclothes, underwear, socks
- One nice outfit (skirt, etc.) for cultural event

#### Do Not Bring:

- Laptop (you can, but not recommended)
- Food
- Electrical appliances other than hair dryer
- Blankets, sheets, towels
- Expensive jewelry

You will be limited to 1 bag to check and 1 bag to carry – pack wisely and conservatively. You will purchase items that you will want to bring back so remember that when packing.

Bring:

- Passport
- Airline Ticket or receipt for electronic check-in
- Picture I.D.

#### Customs Information:

The airline attendant will have the appropriate forms for declaring items.

You can't bring back: flowers, fresh fruit, vegetables, meats, cheeses, and some other items.

### TRANSPORTATION IN XALAPA

About Buses:

- The Xalapa city bus system is quite cheap, usually costing less than 10 pesos. It can be quite confusing to figure out, however.
- If you want to visit a nearby town, such as Coatepec or Naolinco, you will have to catch a regional bus. For example, you would go to Terminal de Banderilla for a bus to Naolinco, and to Mercado los Sauces for a bus to Coatepec or Xico.
- The long-distance bus system in Mexico is much better than ours, with comfortable Mercedes-Benz or Volvo late-model buses. TVs are on board. Ticketbus, a downtown window, will sell you tickets to anywhere.

About Taxis:

- Taxis charge by the car, not the person. For \$2 or \$3, you can travel anywhere in the city for a group of 4 or 5 people. Tipping the driver is appropriate. Always take the name and address of the hotel with you when traveling around the city.
- Taxi drivers often drive erratically – you might expect cutting in and out of traffic.

About Being a Pedestrian:

- In Xalapa, pedestrians appear to have no right to cross the streets. Always expect the unexpected, and be sure to look out for motorcycles careening around a corner.
- Xalapa traffic, especially anywhere downtown is HORRIBLE. Until well into the night, the streets are full of cars, trucks,



motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians. Do NOT do what locals do – which is to walk into the middle of the busy street when one side of the street is clear of cars, stand there while vehicles whiz by them within a whisker's length of their feet, and finally trot briskly across when the other side of the street clears. Just be patient and wait for an opening, at a place which is not on a curve so that you can see clearly.

- At a traffic light, walk when the sign indicates “pase” and do not cross when it indicates “alto.”

### MONEY

- You should bring a credit card and/or an ATM card. Credit cards are accepted in certain restaurants and shops, but not all.
- I do not suggest traveler's checks. You can exchange money at the Atlanta or Mexico City airports. There are ATM machines in many places around Xalapa. Use the ATMS in the downtown area during the daytime, which are quite safe. You will need to insert your ATM card into a slot to enter the area, and all the money you get will be in pesos. Ask for an odd amount so you will get some 100 peso notes and not just 200 peso notes. Your bank at home will assess a small fee for making a foreign withdrawal so take out enough at one time so that you do not keep being assessed fees.
- You will need money for:
  - Meals: \$3 - \$7 per meal
  - Taxis: \$2 - \$3 per day
  - Buses: \$3 - \$5 per trip
  - Souvenirs

### COMMUNICATION

- Internet cafes are all over Xalapa. They cost less than \$2 per hour so they are quite cheap to use for emailing home each day.
- If you want to use the phone, be sure you know how to use your long distance provider when calling from Mexico. For local or long distance calls, you can buy a phone card.
- Many cell phones from the U.S. do not work to make calls from Mexico.
- Xalapa is one hour earlier than Eastern Standard Time in Georgia.

### SAFETY INFORMATION

- Xalapa is quite safe in terms of violent crimes, especially in the central areas where people congregate until late at night. As always in a city, you should not go out unaccompanied at night in outlying areas.

### HEALTH INFORMATION

- We recommend that you make sure that your tetanus shot is current.
- Do not drink tap water; ONLY drink bottled water while in Mexico. Be careful about eating fruits or vegetables that could have been washed in tap water. We do not recommend that you eat food from a street vendor. It is safe to eat in restaurants – the food is quite delicious.
- Xalapa has good hospitals with well-trained physicians and nurses. If there is a health problem, Dr. Carolos Blazquez, the physician on call by the School for Foreign Students will be contacted. His information is  
Hidalgo No. 10, Centro  
C.P. 91000  
Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico  
Ph: 011-52-28-817-36-14

### FOOD AND ENTERTAINMENT

- Good coffeehouses:  
For low prices, the best and largest café lechero in town, is the Tierra Luna on Calle Diego Leno. The molletes and breakfast items are tasty.

Café Lindo and Café Chiquito downtown are somewhat more expensive but have good coffee and plenty of room to sit and talk or read.

Café Latino, across from EEE-UV, is higher priced but the service is excellent and the ambience is inviting. There are many other coffeehouses.

- Good traditional food and ambience:

La Churreria near the Hotel Xalapa is beautiful inside and it overlooks a park. It has great churros, the Mexican hot chocolate and pambazos (sandwiches) are tasty, and the prices quite low.

La Casona del Beaterio is downtown on Calle Zaragoza. There is a lovely inner courtyard, good café lechero, and delicious dishes like the “huevos al la Mexican” (scrambled eggs with onions and tomatoes).

La Sopa is in Callejon de Diamante, the “hippy alley” downtown where people sell beads, jewelry, and more. This place has the best food for the money.

La Fonda is located on the corner of Callejon del Diamante. Sit upstairs and enjoy the “café de olla” which is coffee served in a small clay pot, while you look at the colorful walls and watch the people outside on the main street.

La Casa de Mama is on Calle Avila Camacho, a main street. The food is a bit pricier but they have a good selection and excellent cooks.

La Gavia is a bit further away but is well worth the taxi ride for the great surroundings and the good fish.

## PARKS

Parque Normal is in the center of town and has numerous levels which feature large sculptures and people sitting or strolling all hours of the day. There is a coffee house at the back of the upper level that overlooks the southern part of town, a movie theater, art exhibits, and a bookstore.

Parque Bicentenario, which I think of as the “make-out park” because of all the young Mexican couples who frequent it, has bright purple walls and meandering paths that curve around beautiful flowering bushes and wrought-iron benches.

Parque Macuiltepec is a more open, large park north of downtown, with a great view of the city and an indigenous archaeological site.

Los Lagos is an area just south of downtown that has an art gallery and a walkway around three lakes that connect the district with Universidad Veracruzana. It is a great place to take a morning run or to just walk.

Parque los Berros is a tree-filled park south of downtown where locals offer pony rides for kids on the weekends. It is lovely and relaxing.

## **CULTURE**

### **Greetings and Manners**

Mexicans greet their friends and sometimes even new acquaintances by lightly shaking each other's hand and at the same time touching cheeks (the right cheek) and lightly giving a kiss on the cheek (an "air kiss"). When men are greeting men, they do the handshaking part, and often friends will also lightly hug each other. In Mexico, men don't seem to have the U.S. male's desire to strongly squeeze another man's hand. In any case, let your Mexican friend or acquaintance take the initiative in making any hugs or "air kisses," but do not shy away from people who greet you in this manner.

Mexicans are very polite in everyday activities. Be sure to say "Buenos días," "buenas tardes," or "buenas noches" (sometimes, just say "buenas") when meeting someone like a taxi driver or waiter. "Gracias," "por favor," "con permiso" (when walking in front of someone or between two people), "hasta luego" or "nos vemos" (when leaving), and to use your formal manners.

Learn to say a few basic expressions, such as mucho gusto (it's a pleasure) when you are introduced to someone. When you see someone for the first time in the morning, you can say "Como amanecio?" (How did you wake up? or how are you feeling?) The response to this question is "bien" (fine).

### Time

Time has different meanings in different societies. It is not uncommon for people in Mexico to arrive after the agreed upon time for a social event.

### Eating

People eat their evening meal, the cena, around 9:00 at night. It is a light meal, because the big meal is called comida and is eaten about 3:00 in the afternoon. Meals normally take longer to eat than in the U.S. since people talk and sit around a bit.

Waiters consider it rude to present you with your check because, as we just said, it is expected that you can sit as long as you want to talk with your friends. So when you are ready, just hold up your hand to get their attention, and say, "La cuenta, por favor" (the check, please).

### Privacy and Space

Often in Mexico, people will stand closer to each other than in the U.S. and they will express feelings of affection for their friends verbally (in flowery language) or by a hug. And privacy is not as emphasized as among certain groups of people in the U.S. By that, we mean that people spend most of their time with family and friends, when not working.

### Churches

There are numerous churches in Xalapa, among them Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and, of course, Catholic. Be sure to walk inside the main Catholic Church downtown. You may want to visit it on Sunday morning.

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Pre-Immersion Interview Questions

1. Why did you volunteer for the cultural immersion experience?
2. What do you expect to happen during the trip?
3. Tell me about your experiences in leading schools, including the demographics of the schools that you have led.
4. What has been your experience of working with Hispanic students and families?
5. Tell me about growing up – your family life, school life, friends, church, family expectations.
6. Describe what you expect to see and experience in Mexico – what do you think it will be like during the immersion trip?

#### Post Immersion Questions

1. Tell me about the cultural immersion trip.
2. If you could pick one story from the trip to share with another school leader, what would you tell them?
3. What was the most insightful thing that you learned from the trip?
4. What was the most difficult thing that you encountered on the trip?
5. What was the most rewarding moment of the trip?
6. Has the trip had any type of impact on you?

7. How do you think the trip will affect you as a school leader, if at all?
8. Would you recommend this trip to other school leaders as professional development?