

Chapter # 3

DEVELOPING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PRAXIS THROUGH A CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY IMMERSIVE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Being an effective educator within culturally and linguistically diverse schools requires a rich understanding of how to support students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Historically, teacher education programs have not fully addressed strategies to leverage students' cultural identities and linguistic strengths. Pre-service teachers, particularly those from rural and homogeneous communities, often have limited exposure to diverse populations. However, classrooms today are increasingly global, with students speaking multiple languages and families embodying different cultural norms. To bridge this gap, learning about the intersection of school, community, and families from diverse perspectives is critical. This mixed methods study aimed to provide pre-service teachers with unique and practical experiences to prepare them for teaching students from culturally and linguistically rich backgrounds. Data were collected through daily reflections with open-ended questions and Likert-scale questionnaires. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, while quantitative data were examined through descriptive statistical methods. Findings suggest that immersive experiences broadened pre-service teachers' understanding of diversity and equipped them with strategies to create inclusive learning environments. These results highlight the importance of experiential learning in preparing future educators for success in increasingly diverse classrooms.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, cultural competency, international teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a complex endeavor that requires educators to possess both content and pedagogical knowledge. Part of this pedagogical knowledge is an understanding of the role students' culture plays in the classroom (Klug, 2021). These cultural aspects include such things as their attitudes, beliefs, language, faith, and customs. Given the diversity of classrooms globally, it is important that pre-service teachers have cross-cultural experiences to help them prepare for the reality of teaching. They need to perceive and value cultural diversity in a more positive and strengths-based way and to view peoples of other cultures without stereotyping (Cushner, 2007; Papadopoulou, Palaiologou, & Karanikola, 2022). This means that teacher preparation programs, and the schools that host pre-service teachers for field-based practicum experiences, have a substantial role in helping pre-service teachers understand these complexities. However, many pre-service teachers have limited experiences working with students from cultures other than their own or in supporting students whose home language is different than that of the primary language spoken in school. This means these pre-service teachers are potentially at a disadvantage when they step into their own

classrooms as the teacher of record and need to work with students whose language and culture do not match their own. However, when they are immersed in a different culture, they can develop important skills such as global competency, intercultural sensitivity, and foreign language abilities and pedagogies (Rahatzad, et al., 2013; Wilcoxon, Steiner, & Bell, 2022). Thus, the purpose of this project was to better understand how a culturally immersive field experience promotes intercultural learning and competence, confidence in their teaching in different contexts, as well as pre-service teachers' personal growth.

1.1. Field Experiences in Teacher Preparation Programs

Traditional teacher preparation programs often include some, albeit sometimes limited, opportunities for pre-service teachers to work with K-12 students and to gain experience with designing and delivering instruction as well as assessing learning. Field experiences continue to be one of the most effective strategies for increasing pre-service teachers' effectiveness (Education Commission of the States, 2003; Mak, Yang, & Yuan, 2023) but they often occur during the final stages of their training and only in select schools or contexts. Because of this, pre-service teachers have limited opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the interplay between teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. As early as 1995, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recognized the importance of these culturally rich experiences and mandated teacher education programs to provide global and international education (NCATE, 1995); it continues to be of importance today (Romjin, Slot, Leseman & Pagani, 2020). This means that teacher preparation programs have an obligation to the profession, to pre-service teachers, and to the communities they serve to ensure that teachers have the academic and cultural competencies to support all children (Ladson-Billings, 2016). In fact, by under-preparing pre-service teachers for teaching within culturally diverse contexts, negative stereotypes around race, culture and poverty can be reinforced (Santoro, 2014). This further highlights the importance of culturally immersive field-based work.

Furthermore, field experiences create opportunities to develop practices and dispositions that substantially impact teacher effectiveness. For example, field experiences allow pre-service teachers to apply theory in real settings (Bartolome, 2017) and understand the nuances of complex practices such as facilitating whole-class discussions, responsively attending to classroom management incidents and reinforcing classroom norms. All of these complex teacher actions require opportunities to practice, rehearse, or otherwise try out complex teaching practices in authentic situations (Lampert et al., 2023). Likewise, field experiences help shape pre-service teachers' identity, confidence and self-efficacy (Ateskan, 2016) all of which impact their effectiveness as teachers.

1.2. Building Cultural Awareness and Competencies

When pre-service teachers have opportunities to directly interact with people who do not share the same cultural traits or beliefs as they do, or who speak different languages as their first language, or are culturally different within real-life settings, it can promote self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. When such experiences are combined with classroom instruction, pre-service teachers develop a more robust understanding of culture and language, and the role they play in teaching and learning (Macqueen, Reynolds, & Ferguson-Patrick, 2020). However, this awareness of culture, and the role teachers have in creating meaningful interactions and shared cultural interactions, means that pre-service teachers have had experiences where they reflect and think about their own beliefs, values, biases and judgements within an unfamiliar context (Sarı & Yüce, 2020). As they critically analyze their own culture as well as become aware of how human differences are used by

people in power to rationalize inequality and maintain their position of authority in society, they are better able to see students as individuals, coming from different contexts and situations (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). They then can see that a one-size-fits all method of teaching is potentially ineffective, and come to see that a student centered approach to teaching is necessary.

Teachers' intercultural competence is necessary to teach all students effectively, as teachers must recognize that culture shapes how individuals see themselves and the world around them. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to understand other people across cultural barriers and includes the attitudes, knowledge and skills required to function effectively with those from cultures different from our own (Smolcic, 2013). One way teacher education programs can build cultural awareness and intercultural competency is through immersive field experiences in schools with students from different cultures. In doing so, pre-service teachers have opportunities to interact with other people and to learn about other ways of thinking and being (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). Given the cultural differences often found between teachers and their students (King & Butler, 2015), such interactions become increasingly more important prior to end-of-program, field-based experiences. In addition to an increased intercultural competency, Willard-Holt (2001) found that even in short-term international experiences, participants develop greater global awareness, flexibility and reflectivity in teaching along with a heightened sense of professionalism in collaborating with colleagues and teaching students in other countries. Such professional dispositions are also the hallmark of effective teachers.

Essentially, field-based work in teacher preparation, when viewed through the lens of diversity in culture and language, is essential for developing culturally responsive skills, fostering cultural competence, and preparing future teachers to navigate the complexities of diverse classrooms. As such, the purpose of this project was to better understand how a culturally immersive field experience promotes intercultural learning and competence, confidence in their teaching in different contexts, as well as pre-service teachers' personal growth.

2. DESIGN

This study used a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2020) as it allowed for interpretations of participants' perceived experiences. The mixed methods approach allows for the development of understandings based on multiple qualitative data sources as well as descriptive statistics. This project is in its second year, and the data and findings in this paper are from surveys and reflections from both years of the project.

2.1. Methodology

The study included data from daily reflections with open-ended questions as well as Likert scale type questionnaires. Likert type questions (scale 1-10) asked each day can be found in Table 1 and other open-ended questions can be found in Table 2. Emphasis was placed on the interpretations and meanings that the researchers had towards developing intercultural learning and competence from these qualitative data in order to identify key themes (Patton, 2014).

Table 1.
Daily reflection questions with Likert response.

Q1. How comfortable did you feel working with students who speak different languages in the classroom?
Q2. How comfortable did you feel engaging with people who do not speak English?
Q3. How comfortable did you feel being in an international setting where English is not spoken?
Q4. How well do you understand the host nation's culture?
Q5. How comfortable would you feel working in an international school?

Table 2.
Open-ended daily reflection questions.

Q6. Based on your experiences today, what are 1-2 things you better understand about Dominican Republic culture, the people, or their way of life?
Q7. Discuss something that happened today that you will share with others?
Q8. When you think about what you did today, what was something that made you feel outside of your comfort zone? What did you learn from that situation?
Q9. What is something that happened today that will impact your understanding of being a professional educator?
Q10. What else do you want us to know as it relates to what we did today?

2.2. Participants and Setting

Participants included 19 pre-service teachers from two years' experiences. In this chapter, we refer to the cohort from 2023 as Cohort 1 (n=11) and the cohort from 2024 as Cohort 2 (n=8). All participants attended a university in a more rural and mountainous region of the United States. Of these 19 participants, 14 of them were focusing on early childhood/primary education (Cohort 1 = 9 elementary; Cohort 2 = 4 elementary/1 early childhood). The remaining six were focused on secondary education (Cohort 1 = 3; Cohort 2 = 3). Additionally, while 14 of the 19 participants had traveled outside of North America, only six (6) had been outside of North America. Participants varied in their progress of completing their program; two were sophomores, 13 were juniors, and 4 were seniors. Additionally, three participants fluently spoke the language of the host nation, which is Spanish. Table 3 shows the focus of the day's activities for each of the cohorts.

Cohort 1 had fewer days in classrooms and a dedicated day to cultural excursions (museums, tours, shopping), where Cohort 2 had more time to acclimate post arrival with unscheduled activities, and had an additional day in classrooms. For Cohort 2, cultural experiences were shorter and spread out over the week. Cohort 1 had four (4) total instructional days in classrooms, and Cohort 2 had five (5) total instructional days. In addition, Cohort 2 took fewer independent excursions than Cohort 1, when given time to explore on their own.

Table 3.
Daily activity focus for each cohort.

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Day 1	Travel/Arrival (Sunday)	Travel/Arrival (Sunday)
Day 2	In Classrooms (Monday)	In Classrooms (Monday)
Day 3	In Classrooms (Tuesday)	In Classrooms (Tuesday)
Day 4	Cultural Excursions (Wednesday)	In Classrooms (Wednesday) Cultural Excursions (Wednesday evening)
Day 5	In Classrooms (Thursday)	In Classrooms (Thursday)
Day 6	In Classrooms (Friday)	In Classrooms (Friday)
Day 7	Cultural Excursion (Saturday)	Departure/Travel (Saturday)
Day 8	Travel/Departure (Sunday)	

The host school, the American Island School (AIS), is a private American curriculum school located in the Caribbean and includes students from pre-kindergarten through grade twelve with nearly ninety-eight percent of graduates going on to pursue a post-secondary degree. Approximately 60% of students are citizens of the nation with the other 40% representing nationalities from 31 other countries. While English is the primary language of instruction at the school, nearly 70% of all students are English Language Learners. Though all teachers and school directors speak English, support staff (e.g. custodians, lunch personnel) do not all speak English. Therefore, participants needed to communicate to non-English speakers, particularly during lunch. During instructional hours, participants were placed with one cooperating teacher and were asked to support the teacher throughout the day. By the end of the week, participants were supporting the teacher of record by teaching multiple-mini lessons or an entire class period.

While the majority of the time was spent at AIS experiencing what it means to teach within an internationally, culturally and linguistically diverse context, participants also had opportunities to independently engage with the community. This often meant going out for meals together without university faculty, visiting cultural heritage attractions or museums, or visiting local markets to make purchases. During these times, participants were faced with interacting with locals and trying to communicate their needs or wishes despite not being fluent in the local language. This allowed for participants to further consider the intersection of families and communities within the broader school community.

2.3. Limitations

Due to the low number of participants and the nature of qualitative data, the findings from this study are not broadly generalizable. It is left to others to determine the extent to

which this study aligns with other cases or contexts. However, given the increase in cultural and linguistic diversity of students in schools globally, it is possible that understandings from this study may be applied to other relevant or similar contexts wherein further insights can be developed (Patton, 2014).

3. FINDINGS

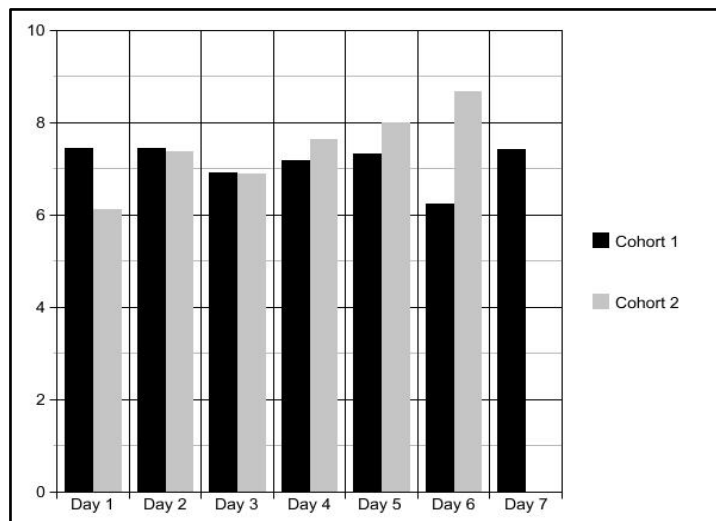
Both the qualitative and quantitative findings are based on the daily post experience reflections. Quantitative data was summarized by question, day and then by cohort. From the analysis of the qualitative data (open ended questions), several themes emerged but for the sake of this chapter, only two of the more prominent themes are shared. These two themes focus on a personal change with respect to: 1) identity, self or professional purpose and 2) an awareness of culture in teaching and in learning.

3.1. Changes in Comfort

Responses to survey questions for both cohorts showed that for all questions, pre-service teachers self-assessed higher at the end of the experience compared to the first day; as might be expected. The pre-service teachers felt more comfortable over time working with students who speak different languages in the classroom (Q1), felt more comfortable engaging with people who did not speak English (Q2) and being in an international setting where English was not spoken (Q3). Additionally, the pre-service teachers felt they gained a better understanding of the local/national culture (Q4) and felt more comfortable working in an international school context over the course of this experience (Q5). As shown in all figures below, Cohort 2 showed a more substantial positive gain over time compared to Cohort 1 despite having initially lower scores in all questions.

Figure 1.

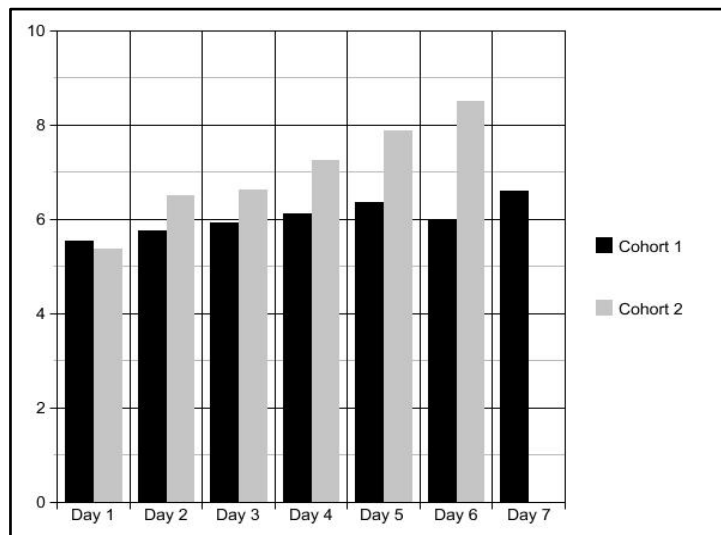
Q1: How comfortable did you feel working with students who speak different languages in the classroom?



With respect to comfort and confidence engaging with others who speak another language (see Figure 1), pre-service teachers from Cohort 1 initially self-assessed higher than Cohort 2 in these three questions, most notably in Question 1. When cohort data is desegregated for Question 1, Cohort 1 is generally consistent across all days with small variations from day to day; scores do not change much over time. However, Cohort 2, while lower than Cohort 1 on Day 1, shows a more positive upward trend across days with a higher overall score on Day 7.

Figure 2.

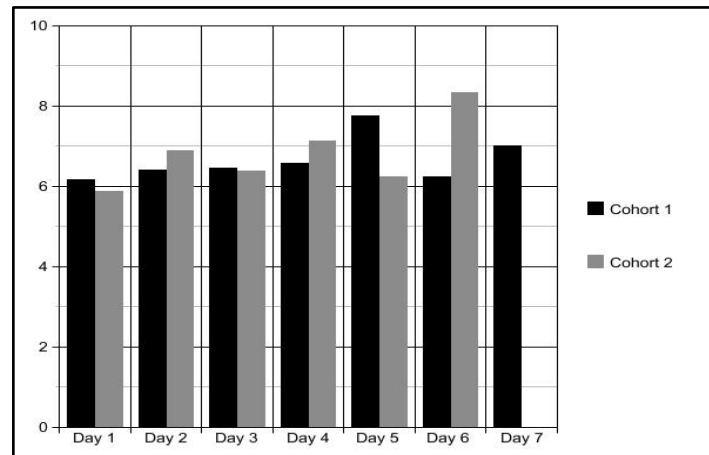
Q2: How comfortable did you feel engaging with people who do not speak English?



For Question 2, which focused on pre-service teachers' comfort with engaging people who do not speak Spanish, be that in the school community or the local community, Cohort 2 again showed a more positive upward trend over time compared to Cohort 1 (see Figure 2) even though Cohort 1 had an additional day to interact with people in the local community, as previously shown in Table 1. While the change for Cohort 1 showed a slightly positive gain over time, the small changes are minimal at best and even show a drop in their overall comfort on Day 6.

Figure 3.

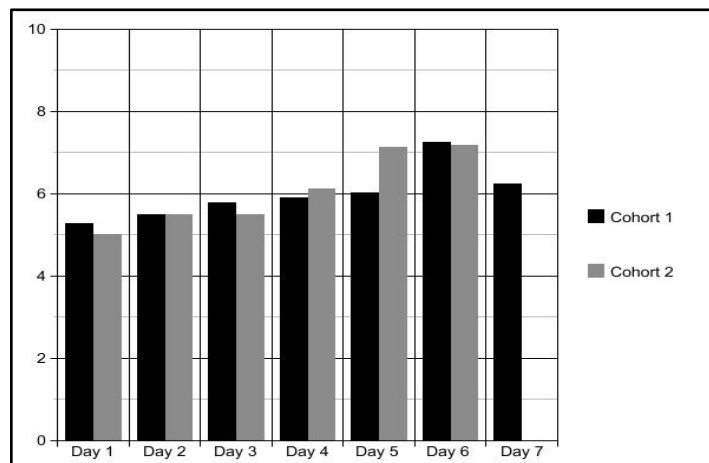
Q3: How comfortable did you feel being in an international setting where English is not spoken?



As for pre-service teachers' comfort with being in an international setting where English is not spoken, the responses generally show a positive increase over the course of the experience, with a slight drop for Cohort 2 on Day 3, and a drop on Day 6 for Cohort 2 (see Figure 3). While the scores for Cohort 2 twice dropped from the previous day, the growth from the first day to the last day was greater than Cohort 1. This is a continuing trend, with respect to their interaction and engagement with others who do not speak English, across all three questions. And while the average score for Cohort 1 would show that they also had a positive change in their self-assessed comfort levels, there is a clear outlier on Day 5; most scores across days generally show little to no change.

Figure 4.

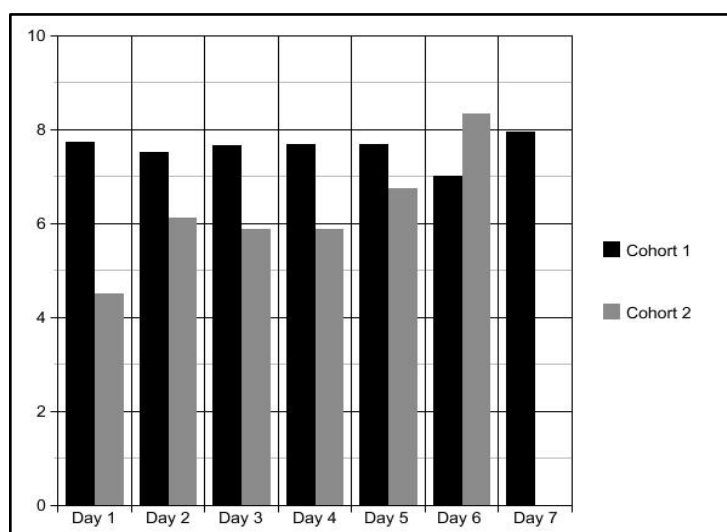
Q4: How well do you understand the host nation's culture?



With respect to pre-service teachers' understanding of the host nation's culture, both cohorts generally self-assessed a greater comfort over the course of the first six days (see figure 4); both show a positive increase in their perceived understanding over time. However, Cohort 2 had a noticeable increase on Days 5 and Days 6, which were the final two days of their immersive teaching experience, while Cohort 1 had a noticeable difference on day 6. While it is unclear why this increase occurred on the last day, it may be related to their final day with students in the classrooms; reflecting on a positive experience within the local and national culture. While there is a drop on Day 7 for Cohort 1, the cultural experience on Day 7 had them interact in more personal ways with people who were not financially secure. The pre-service teachers' interactions with these individuals, and the resulting reflections on what day to day life may be like for these people, may have influenced their scores for that day.

Figure 5.

Q5: How comfortable would you feel working in an international school?



Lastly, when considering pre-service teachers' level of comfort working in an international school (see Figure 5), Question 5 shows the teachers from Cohort 1 self-assessed higher at the beginning than Cohort 2, but Cohort 2 again showed more growth over time. Likewise, Cohort 1 had generally consistent scores that show little to no change over time and Cohort 2 showed a more positive upward trend in their scores across the immersive teaching experience.

Collectively, the quantitative data indicates that changes in scores for Cohort 2, across the experience and regardless of question, followed a similar pattern; there was a clear upward trend for all questions. Whereas for Cohort 1, changes in scores across time were either marginal or relatively unchanged. While the structure of the experience was similar for both cohorts, there are some notable differences, discussed below, that may shed light on this data.

3.2. Change in Identity, Self and Professional Purpose

Through analysis of the qualitative data, some major themes emerged. The first major theme is in relation to participants' perceived change with respect to their purpose in the profession or in how they perceived themselves. Collectively, participants wrote about this experience as being a major transformative process that had an impact on them in one of these ways; it was reported often as a "life changing" experience. Many also wrote about a new found joy for teaching. "There is a fire in my heart once again for teaching," and they came away "with a new outlook and renewed passion for teaching" wrote two participants. This suggests that even short-term immersive experiences can impact pre-service teachers' views of teaching.

Others recognized a substantial change in their own identity or shift in their own self-confidence. One participant stated they came back "no longer quiet and small, but confident." Whereas another wrote that "when I got off the plane, I was not the same person who got on the plane a week prior." Others indicated they were surprised with themselves because they were in new situations and had to adapt to these situations, which took a kind of courage that they did not know they had. "I just had to jump in, [I] have to be brave." These reflections indicate that personal growth, confidence, and nuances in identity can also be developed and strengthened within intense and immersive field-based experiences.

Others discussed more subtle, and perhaps a more profound understanding about commonalities across cultures. One participant reflected on an evening sitting in the plaza watching families interact and the children at play and how this reminded them of a greater connection regardless of culture and language.

"As I watched these people living their lives and enjoying an evening with family and friends, I was struck with gratitude for this opportunity. I had spent an entire week getting to know the people. I attended their school, ate their food, tried to speak their language, and learned about their history, music, and dance. This significant moment at the plaza was a point of reflection and understanding about what it means to be human."

Collectively, this immersive experience impacted each participant's sense of self, identity and their personal purpose, which were not inherently a focus of the project.

3.3. Cultural Awareness in Teaching and Learning

The second major theme centered on a cultural awareness, specifically in aspects of teaching and learning that they did not previously have or did not fully appreciate prior to the experience. While this immersive experience was only one week long, it seems to have been enough for them to understand the important role community, culture and language play in teaching and learning. One participant wrote "I learned what it was like to feel like an outsider and to be in the minority" whereas another reflected that "I will hopefully be able to help students of diverse backgrounds feel accepted, loved, and welcome because I know better what it's like to be in a new place and to stick out." This awareness of cultural diversity and individual differences is something that can be included in coursework but can be difficult to fully process without experiencing it first-hand.

Some developed a more practical understanding of how culture and language impact learning. One participant elaborated on this when they wrote "our culture is what drives us. This culture also [gives] students a sense of identity and purpose. For this reason, it is my profound belief that a child's culture should be embraced in the classroom." Others pointed out how being able to speak to all students was something they had taken for granted. "I now understand what it is like to be in a school setting where the language that is spoken is not your native language," which was something they had not previously experienced. Others wrote about how they began to understand what it meant to create a successful learning

environment for English Language Learners because they were able to have discussions with teachers about specific interventions and then immediately try these interventions with students. "I saw a struggling student learn a new skill and saw the happiness he felt when he knew he could do it." This pre-service teacher went on to state "this is what I want to be able to do for all my students when I become a professional educator."

Likewise, participants were able to also see that along with cultural differences, there can be cultural similarities even when there are appearances of differences. "These people were just like the people I interact with on a daily basis at home. I could see the light of humanity in their eyes. As different as everything felt, it also felt much the same." And as simple as it may sound, several talked about how they began to realize that despite where children live, what they wear, or what language they speak, they share many things in common; "No matter where you go, kids are kids." From this shift in perspective that "even though we are all different, we are more similar than we realize," participants recognized that their role as a teacher remains the same regardless of a child's culture or language.

4. IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

All pre-service teachers, without exception, reported the trip had impacted them in a powerful way, and that they had experienced significant personal and/or professional changes. Culturally immersive experiences empower pre-service teachers to apply the theoretical knowledge they gained from coursework in authentic educational settings to better understand the interplay between theory practice. This seems to also be the case with respect to culturally responsive teaching. And while traditional teacher preparation programs are often designed to balance theory and practice, some teaching attitudes, beliefs, and skills may be challenging to learn without a more immersive experience wherein pre-service teachers and students can learn from each other (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Likewise, complex topics, such as culturally responsive teaching, require experiences in which one is not from the dominant culture but these experiences need not be semester-long study abroad experiences (Jones & Bond, 2019); short-term immersive experiences can also impact one's cultural awareness. Shorter trips can also be beneficial since they can increase the number of pre-service teachers who can participate. Likewise, participating pre-service teachers can also share their learning with their peers back home which may lead to an even further reaching, and rippling effect on the global education of many future students.

While there may be differences between individual students (i.e. comfort traveling abroad, life experiences, age or purpose for participating) and different characteristics for each cohort, the natural group dynamics that are formed when people meet for the first time, the implication of these influencing factors on the data are unknown. However, there were some notable differences between the structure of the experience that may have impacted the data and thus the implications gleaned from the data.

For example, the experience for Cohort 1 occurred after the end of their academic year and the pre-service teachers had few other personal obligations to attend to and no additional academic obligations. This may have created a more "vacation-like" experience for them in some ways. Whereas for Cohort 2, the experience occurred during the middle of the academic term and the pre-service teachers more often returned to the hotel to work on other academic obligations for other courses, and were more immersed in learning as part of their academic program.

Also, for Cohort 1, the two cultural excursions were equally spaced across the immersive experience, which then disrupted their time and exposure to students, teachers and working within an international school context. Cohort 1 only had four days at the school,

compared to the five for Cohort 2, and these four days were broken up with a cultural experience in between. While additional cultural experiences may seem to be a beneficial opportunity to learn about the host nation or to interact with others who speak a different language, it is unclear that this was the case when comparing the two structures for the two cohorts. In fact, the data from this small study might suggest that a more cohesive and continual experience in the school may have helped the pre-service teachers grow across all areas of the project.

Additionally, for Cohort 2, enhanced cultural and language challenges were encouraged. For example, the faculty leaders of the experience told the pre-service teachers that they could not rely on the Spanish speaking pre-service teachers in the group to order lunch or dinner. While all teachers and professional staff at the school spoke English, the custodians and lunch servers rarely did. The pre-service teachers were instructed to interact with these people however they needed to in order to get what they needed, such as what they wanted for lunch, or they could ask a student at the school to help them. The intent was to force them to have experiences interacting with others even though they could not speak the language. While this was intimidating and created a level of anxiety at first for the pre-service teachers in Cohort 2, they eventually expressed great pride in ordering their lunch, something as simple as “may I please have chicken and rice” by day three. Something as simple as ordering lunch, and the initial uncertainty that came with this “challenge,” may have helped the pre-service teachers in this cohort be more confident and comfortable in culturally immersive experiences.

5. CONCLUSION

One aspect of effective teaching includes being culturally responsive and possessing a cultural competence to support all students. For some pre-service teachers, their limited experiences working with students from culturally, linguistically or ethnically diverse settings means they have ways of thinking about teaching and learning that are underdeveloped. When teacher preparation programs and the schools where pre-service teachers are placed for field-based practicum do not work to address these deficiencies, pre-service teachers are then at a potential disadvantage. With the shift in student demographics changing in schools across the globe, the need to prepare pre-service teachers for different kinds of diversity becomes even more important. This study showcases the impact that even small, immersive opportunities can have on pre-service teachers’ cultural competencies, empathy, and awareness of students’ cultural and linguistic strengths. And as such, the potential to “open minds” to the possibilities of culturally responsive teaching takes root.

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Short biographical sketch: Wendy Ruchti is currently an Associate Professor of Education in the College of Education at Idaho State University. She graduated with her Bachelor's Degree in Zoology with a teaching certificate and went on to teach middle school science and mathematics for many years. She received her Master's and Ph.D. in education from the University of Idaho. Wendy moved to higher education at ISU's College of Education to share her learning and experiences in the classroom to support and mentor preservice teachers. Her research focuses on supporting teachers and principals in schools seeking STEM Designation in Idaho.

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Short biographical sketch: Dr. Cory A. Bennett is a Professor of Education and Chair of the Department of Teaching and Educational Studies within the College of Education at Idaho State University. His research centers on mathematical discourse, creating classroom cultures of reasoning, and developing instructional leaders' praxis. He works with educators and educational leaders, both locally and globally, to advance understandings of teaching, learning, and leadership to create effective and high quality educational systems.