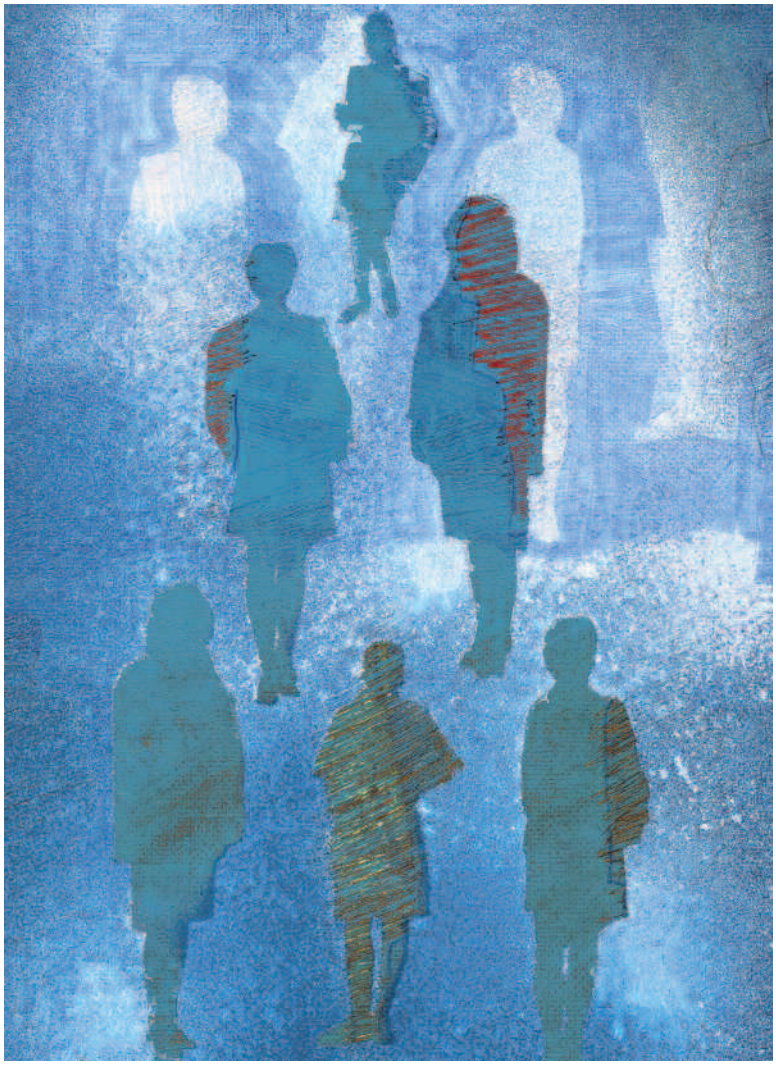
Soy la Otra

A white middle-class American woman experiences being "the other" and learns lessons that apply to U.S. schools

BY J. LYNN McBRIEN

Preparing to hop into yet another cold shower, I reminded myself that I had only four days to go and that the chilly water could be a plus — a way to cool off after a day on the equator without air conditioning. Even so, I seriously considered leaving the Central American paradise a day or two early. Although I have traveled extensively, my three weeks of language and cultural immersion were resulting in exhaustion and good old-fashioned homesickness.



As a professor who teaches social foundations of education in one of the top five states receiving immigrants, I'm always looking for ways to help my mostly white, middle-class female students understand and empathize with students of color and those whose first language is not English. So when my university offered me the chance to participate in a two-week Spanish language immersion program in Panamá City, Panamá, I welcomed the opportunity. To complete the experience, a colleague invited me to observe an undergraduate service learning program he had created in a Costa Rican city struggling with drug and prostitution problems.

Although I had four years of high school and college Spanish, I'm far from fluent. I saw this as an opportunity to experience language and cultural immersion. Before leaving, my group spent four afternoons acquiring basic language skills with a professor who spoke to

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us only in Spanish. My primary research is with refugee students who are resettled in the U.S., and this small preparation reminded me of what many refugees told me they learned of English before departing for the U.S.

Even opportunities to work closely with immigrant students can't compare with a personal experience of *being* the "other," the outsider, or the minority student.

Language, however, is but one challenge. Navigating a new culture, longing for acceptance, acclimating to new roles, and forging a new identity are other formidable tasks every newcomer child faces as part of resettlement. Added to these obstacles are often more onerous tasks, such as healing from major psychological or physical trauma, as is frequently the case for refugee students.

¿POR QUÉ IMPORTA?

Much research has demonstrated the critical importance of teacher awareness and understanding of diverse students in facilitating these students' achievement (Goldstein 1988; Igoa 1995; Irvine 1990; McBrien 2005; Suárez-Orozco 1989). Creation of such awareness includes cognitive knowledge, affective (emotional) shifts, and practice of new behaviors based on cognitive and affective learning. My students read excerpts from Kozol, Kohl, Freire, McIntosh, Tatum, and others. We watch "Eye of the Storm" on Eliot's brown eyes/blue eyes experiment, "Books, not Bars" on the inequitable treatment of youth of color in the juvenile justice system, and "Children in America's Schools," a documentary based on Kozol's work in poor schools. We analyze case studies that contain issues with immigrant students, gay students, and social and academic inequities.

Such activities provide the cognitive component for acknowledging diversity and the need for increased social justice. But experiences that can promote affective and behavioral change are more difficult to provide. Researchers have suggested such experiences can come from living and working among communities of color (Hartsock 1987); "contact theory," or engaging in "equal status" relationships with people of color (Allport 1954); or "drawing on their own perceived experiences of marginalization" (Johnson 2002; Paley 1995). When teaching at a private Southern university, I required students to complete 15 hours of tutoring at an inner-city school or the refugee center where I conducted research, providing the kind of experience that Hartsock suggests. My students' journal entries reflected significant changes in their expectations, beliefs, fears, and awareness (McBrien in press). Working with K-12 students in such settings allows preservice teachers to understand children in ways that traditional school settings do not allow.

But, even opportunities to work closely with immigrant students can't compare with a personal experience of *being* the "other," the outsider, or the minority student. In spite of years of working with refugee students and families, I was never able to experience the fears and frustrations of living in a new culture with an unfamiliar language. When I've studied French, Spanish, Japanese, and Russian, I've had the luxury of studying for my own intellectual growth or to enhance a travel experience. I haven't had to learn a language to survive. I had the benefit of learning from teachers who share my first language; I haven't had to learn from teachers who knew nothing of my language. I chose to learn about the cultures of Spain, Mexico, France, Russia, Japan; I didn't have to embrace those cultures in order to succeed. I could remove myself from them at will; I never had to be fully immersed in the cultures or countries with no hope of returning to my own culture when I felt exhausted, isolated, or depressed. I saw these differences as gaps in my learning, particularly as I teach about language acquisition and cultural immersion. This was about to change.

¡BIENVENIDOS A PANAMÁ!

Our group of 11 faculty and staff departed in late June and were immediately confronted with cultural differences concerning attention to detail and to time. Though there were only minor flight delays, our hosts planned insufficiently for meeting us at the airport with inadequate transportation to our hotel. Thus, we were delayed on arrival. The schedule indicated there would be a welcome dinner, but by the time we reached our hotel, it was too late, so we were left to negotiate the city on our own.

I chose bed over dinner and was happy to escape to the quiet of my room. But I was unable to find a control for my air conditioner, and I couldn't seem to communicate the need to the desk clerk. Rainy season on the equator is steamy, so my limited skills led to an uncomfortable first night. The next day, I

learned that the air conditioner's controls were somewhat hidden in the wall. The desk clerk had tried to tell me that, but I had been unable to understand his instructions.

The next day we were scheduled to tour an indigenous village, but we did not have an English-speaking host. I could understand much of the information when our guide spoke slowly, but I had more difficulty speaking. On the other hand, I didn't understand everything, so what I sometimes thought I understood was incorrect. For instance, at one point a group member asked me to translate what was just said and I proceeded to give an English version. Another group member looked at me quizzically, and I asked, "Am I right?" He said, "No, not really," and went on to give a more accurate translation. I wonder how often such incidents occur with refugee and immigrant students who are trying to understand the key points of a lesson. How frustrating to think one understands and to be wrong, especially when grades or test scores are involved.

The following day, we were all tested for placement in ability groups for the next two weeks of lessons. I was disappointed when I was put with two others who had less experience than I.

As a student, I was used to being in the top group. This experience caused me to empathize with refugee students I knew who were intelligent children, yet had to experience failure and low placements when they entered U.S. schools. I thought of Layla, a Kurdish student who told me she had to take a quiz her first day of school when she spoke no English. She had been a precocious learner during her refugee years in Iran and Pakistan, but after her first day in an American school, she returned home and said, "Mom, Dad, I quit. I'm not going to school anymore," because of her feelings of failure. Layla persisted, however, and she went on to a private women's college as a premed student with a four-year scholarship.

Initially, I thought the "mistake" of my placement would be recognized early in the week, but I soon realized I was just where I needed to be. I understood my teacher, but I struggled to speak. I found myself wanting to be quiet, hoping that after enough time I would finally reach an ability to recall and not just recognize words. Igoa speaks of the "silent phase" in her important work, *The Inner World of an Immigrant Child* (1995). Our days were highly scheduled, with four hours of Spanish instruction every morning, followed by an afternoon lecture or cultural experience. I could hardly believe how exhausted I became after just two hours of class. No English was spoken, and I was using all of my energy to understand and be understood. No wonder it is common for immigrant children to fall asleep in school during the afternoon!

After exhaustion came frustration. I was reduced to speaking in simple phrases without the complexity and nuance that I needed for effective communication. Many times I relied on group members who were more competent than I, but that meant relinquishing control. In a country that prides itself on acceptance of racial diversity, I stood out in Panamá with my especially pale Irish skin. I was overcharged by taxi drivers, and I was not competent at the non-U.S. custom of bartering for sales items, meaning that I paid more than I should have for purchases. I went through money too quickly.

The exhaustion, frustration, change in diet, and climate brought yet another challenge: illness. I found

myself fighting bronchitis the second week of class. In Panamá, a doctor's scrip for prescription drugs is not required. Several health professionals on the trip offered guidance on an antibiotic and other symptom relievers, which I easily obtained at the local *farmacia.* This ready access to strong drugs could have deadly consequences. But, in a country where low-wage workers are plentiful and expendable and where patients can wait hours to see a doctor, I could understand the practice of self-medicating. In contrast, I could imagine the frustration of immigrants in the U.S. negotiating the maze of insurance, paperwork, primary care, and specialists before receiving relief.

¿CUARENTA O CALIENTE?

Of course, many moments of success and enjoyment mixed with the chaos. Both of my *maestros* were encouraging, as they were employed solely to help students learn a second language. Had they been trying to teach us the history of the country or the geology of the Panama Canal, with no concern for our success in Spanish, relationships might have been different. So often in my work with refugee students, they tell me that their favorite teachers are their ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers, from whom they find the most support and empathy.

Our common language gave us some reprieve from the difficulty of negotiating in a strange land, a strange language.

Members of my group also encountered moments of hilarity in linguistic mistakes. There was the time that our driver told Jane he was 50. Thinking he looked much younger, Jane meant to reply, *"¡Cincuenta! ¡Parece cuarenta!"* (50! You look 40!) Instead, she said, *"¡Parece caliente!"* (You look hot!) And there was the time when I meant to say something about we women (*mujeres*) but instead used *"muertes"* (dead people).

We were able to share these incidents because we reverted to English when together. Our common language gave us some reprieve from the difficulty of negotiating in a strange land, a strange language. How often I have seen staff in schools and service organizations insist that children use English only. Reasons for this rule have included the belief that children will learn faster if forced to forsake their own language and the fear that children are saying inappropriate things that teachers or staff cannot understand. My limited experience indicated that first language use was more of a comfort and that the belief that it is being used to mock the person in authority is more xenophobic than realistic. Perhaps when it is forbidden, it is more likely to be used against persons in authority out of rebellion, anger, or frustration.

ADIOS PANAMÁ, HOLA COSTA RICA

After two weeks in Panamá, I traveled to Puntarenas, a seaside city and major western Costa Rican port, site of the service learning projects.

For me, the new challenges were navigating from site to site on buses and in taxis without clear knowledge of the directions or what I should be paying for transportation. Puntarenas is not a tourist town, so most residents do not speak English, and there were dangerous barrios I needed to avoid. I relied heavily on pairing up with the program director or his students, but that significantly reduced my independence and ability to create my own daily schedule. As a result, I also had little privacy or quiet time, something I value to keep up my good humor and stay rested. Again, I liken this to the immigrant experience. Uncertainty and fear of being "a stranger in a strange land" necessitates reliance on others with at least some more acquaintance with the environment. The dependence equates to reduced independence, more frustration, and more exhaustion.

By midweek I found myself feeling homesick, longing for an earlier departure. The poignant difference for me was that I would be going back to my home and familiarity in just four days. The immigrant and refugee children and families with whom I work in the States have no such choice. For refugees especially, return to their homeland could also spell persecution, torture, war, or death.

During my last two days in Puntarenas, I was able to go to a public school in one of the low-income barrios. By U.S. standards, *la escuela* was in total pandemonium. Classrooms opened into a central concrete play area in the middle; windows were bars, not glass, to allow for air flow, so even when play wasn't occurring, the noise level was high. During recess, the decibel level was ear-splitting. One of the favorite games appeared to be one of human tug of war, in which a child was pulled by other children by both arms and legs.

Mentally I was contrasting this scene of energy and laughter to U.S. schools, where such scenes would

surely be met with reprisals and trips to the principal's office. I thought of the tremendous difficulty faced by children immigrating to the U.S. from schools in which they were allowed to be exuberant and boisterous to a school in which they would suddenly have to maintain silence in orderly lines for bathroom breaks, water fountains, lunch lines, and classes. If they behaved in ways that were normal for them in their Costa Rican classes, they would surely be punished and thought of as problem children in U.S. schools.

If I could, I would include at least two weeks in a non-English-speaking, nontourist area for all of my education majors.

The author found that dependence on others meant reduced independence, more frustration, and more exhaustion as her travels took her into nontourist areas of Costa Rica to visit schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER LEARNING

Of course, my short venture to a place in which I was not the racial or ethnic majority was a personal, reflective journey, not an empirical research project. I gained a slice of perspective into feelings of isolation through the inability to communicate or understand the culture or be able to assimilate into the ethnic majority of a country. I was not in typical tourist areas where I could rely on English. I was separated from the people I loved the most, who comfort me when I need it. For a short span of my life, I was able to experience the role of being "the other."

That experience has helped me empathize more with immigrant and refugee children who sit, frightened and tired and confused, behind thousands of desks in U.S. schools, hoping to find a teacher who understands. If I could, I would include at least two weeks in a non-English-speaking, nontourist area for all of my education majors. I wish they could have a few hours of daily immersion language instruction, then navigate the environment on their own in small groups with little information about the area aside from instructions on particularly dangerous areas to avoid. Cognitive knowledge about the experiences of refugee and immigrant children and families is helpful in creating teacher empathy, but it's not a substitute for experiencing firsthand the confusion, fear, and emotions of being the outsider. K

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