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Guatemala Volunteer

Week 9+

Competency: Global Citizenship ~ Self-Awareness Level 4: Perceives one’s personal style, prejudices, projections, and habits of mind that both shape and impede our own understanding; shows awareness of what one does not understand and why understanding is so hard.

Since returning home to Minnesota, I have noticed how my experience abroad has changed my global perspective. My daily routine has not change, but how I view those I encounter throughout my routine has been transformed. My mind is more open to considering the roadblocks and struggles individuals face in their daily lives. Before my Guatemalan experience, I had never been in an environment where white individuals did not make up the majority and English was not the primary language spoken. The experience of being a member of the minority was one I would not have fully experienced in the US. I had thought my level of empathy for others was high before I left. For example, I could previously recognize the hardship I observed others experiencing and put myself in their shoes based on my observations. I have since grown in empathy through considering hardships that may go unseen and I am not able to observe directly.

After an immersed experience with language, I have an insight into a portion of the unseen struggles individuals face in a new environment especially when language is a changed factor. My empathy has grown in the sense that I have felt the emotional drain that can come from simply functioning and communicating in a language that you do not feel proficient in. When speaking with my family or the girls at the orphanage, I remained focused for a substantially shorter period of time in conversation because of the mental stamina I lacked with the language. It took me longer to respond and converse with my family and at times I felt it was easier to simply nod and smile instead of sharing my ideas and experiences. This draining of energy and short attention span that I experienced led me to question the unseen obstacles multilingual students may face in the classroom. This includes how multilingual students are required to learn language in addition to the content and cultural expectations they are expected to adapt to. When learning the language, they may interpret directions differently or semantics used in class materials. At the end of a school day, it may be helpful in their adjustment to interact with peers, but they simply may prefer to be wit family or in a home where they do not need to constantly fret over their language or how they measure up to the new expectations put upon them.

Before my experience I had never felt mentally drained to this extent after simple conversation or the feeling of frustration when trying to share a simple story about my family with those I wanted to connect with. The feeling of fatigue and frustration almost daily was a difficult hurdle to tackle and even though I never fully overcame those feelings, the new experience made me realize I had never before been mentally challenged in my personal life to this extent. The routine I established with the children I lived with greatly helped my adjustment to the culture and prevented me from simply cutting out the difficult interactions with my family because of language.

Each day I would go to my volunteer placement, attend Spanish class, return to my home for meals, help with the kids’ homework, then play cards or watch a movie with my host siblings. During the time I spent helping with homework assignments in various subjects, I would ask questions meant to deepen understanding. After the first week of these homework sessions, I noticed that all 3 of the children only wanted to know if their answer or guess was correct. They would get slightly annoyed when I would answer their question with another question meant to lead them to the correct answer. When the youngest got particularly annoyed with me, I asked what she does for tests where there is no one to tell her if her guess is correct and she relayed that the teachers would simply give in after she asked enough questions. I know that this is the case in some US classrooms, but hearing the response from the 8-year-old that attended a well-known private school was surprising to say the least. With the two other siblings, their responses were along similar lines. My faith that all primary and secondary educators care for their students’ learning for future reference had never been directly challenged like this and my cultural perspective on education shifted slightly.

This shift was brought about by challenging my existing perspective that each educator should be dedicated to their students’ learning. I had never before witnessed a student-teacher environment or relationship where this was not true. I wanted to believe that each educator was dedicated to teaching and challenging their students as I am, but this was a naïve precognition. My previous belief could have caused many problems in my future work environment and classroom where I would place unfair expectations on my colleagues and their work ethics. I understand that not everyone holds the same beliefs but dedication to learning was one I had thought reasonable. Moving forward, I am more comfortable with interacting and collaborating with other professionals that may be driven by other motivators, but do not understand what better motivation could there be than serving others. This lesson is one that I must remind myself of as I prepare to enter the professional education system.

This experience and adjustment to different cultures and ways of living pushed me firmly into my zone of proximal development. I knew I would be uncomfortable and challenged. Many obstacles I was able to predict but there were other that I had not. An unexpected learning experience came with my readjustment and only builds my confidence in continuing my personal growth spurred by this experience long after my time in Guatemala ended. The ability to empathize with a larger population of my future students and collaborate with my colleagues when we do not share the same motivation will help me continue to grow as a professional educator.