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# Chapter 6

## Preservice Teacher Reflections about Short- Term Summer Study Abroad Experiences in Italy

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter studies 21 preservice teachers' blog reflections about working in an Italian classroom and living with a host family during a four-week study abroad program in Northern Italy. During the program, preservice teachers were required to blog about their experiences living and studying abroad using personal blog sites. To encourage more candid reflection about the program, the blog posts could be related to any aspect of the program preservice teachers chose to reflect on. After setting the context of the study through description of the study abroad program and its requirements, the authors present qualitative findings regarding preservice teachers' (a) thoughts related to their observations of Italian classrooms, (b) thoughts related to becoming an Italian language learner, and (c) lessons learned from the study abroad experience. Findings discuss preservice teachers' reflections on making sense of educational and cultural differences, experiences as Italian language learners, and opportunities for professional and personal growth.*

### INTRODUCTION

Preparing teachers to serve culturally diverse students is an important component of teacher education programs, particularly in today's rapidly changing cultural landscape (Howard, 2003). However, teachers often have a deficit-based view of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers may view these students as possessing shortcomings in language and learning rather than

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valuing the unique cultural and linguistic traits they bring to the classroom. Following Howard's (2003) suggestion that teacher educators must re-conceptualize how preservice teachers are prepared to better serve CLD students, this chapter describes a four-week study abroad program that immersed preservice teachers in Italian school and family settings. Specifically, the program sought to engage preservice teachers in an enriched perspective-taking experience through study abroad that provided first-hand experience as second-language learners in culturally and geographically foreign home and school settings.

Study abroad programs that involve intense personal experiences in a culture may have the potential to help preservice teachers explore cultural issues and develop the dispositions needed to implement culturally responsive teaching. Directly interacting with others from a host country creates opportunities for preservice teachers "to broaden their cultural knowledge, learn how others view the world from an insider's perspective, develop a global perspective, and increase their understanding of the value of multicultural education" (Cushner, 2009, p. 158). Teachers who are sensitive to the culture of their students, who are aware of cultural norms, and who are guided by culturally responsive pedagogical principles are more likely to create a classroom environment in which the social and academic needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students can be addressed (Sleeter, 1995). That is, CLD students are better served when their teachers believe that all students are capable learners who bring knowledge and strengths to the learning environment. Specifically, teacher education programs should engage preservice teachers in activities that help them to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to develop cultural awareness and to implement culturally responsive teaching. To develop cultural awareness that may lead to pedagogically appropriate practices, preservice teachers must engage in "a cognitive and affective process or activity that

1. Requires active engagement on the part of the individual;
2. Is triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience;
3. Involves examining one's responses, beliefs, and premises in light of the situation at hand; and
4. Results in integration of the new understanding into one's experience" (Rogers, 2001, p. 41).

This chapter provides rich descriptions of such activities through a study of preservice teacher's thoughts and experiences, gathered through analysis of personal blogs written during the program, as they participated in a study abroad program for education. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how preservice teachers perceived their experiences in an immersive study abroad program focused on cultural and second-language learning in Italian families and schools.

## **RELEVANT LITERATURE**

A developing trend among 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher education programs has been to move beyond the traditional course-based approach to multicultural education to a push for internationalization, such as supporting global thinking, redesigning curricula to include foreign language competencies, fostering global literacy, and encouraging students to participate in study abroad experiences (Armstrong, 2008; Quezada & Cordeiro, 2007). Cushner (2007) argued that while study abroad in general is beneficial for all students, international field experiences are particularly salient for preservice teachers. Scholars have noted numerous positive benefits from such experiences. These include both personal changes such as development of self-confidence and flexibility (see Cushner, 2007 for a review) and growth as a

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professional, such as in teacher beliefs, the strengthening of teacher self-efficacy, and the development of pedagogical strategies for teaching language (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009). In particular, Trent (2011) explained that “teacher identity construction” (p. 178) has emerged as a major focus for scholars researching preservice teachers field experiences.

Perhaps in part because of requirements and time constraints related to completion of a teacher-education program, short-term international experiences have been particularly attractive to many colleges and universities. While the definition of “short-term” varies from program to program, typically the term is used to describe experiences of six or fewer weeks (Thomas, 2006). During such programs, preservice teachers often engage in an intense practicum experience, often focused on teaching English. Because the time spent abroad is limited, often this experience is accompanied by concentrated preparatory work at the students’ home institution prior to leaving the country (Willard-Holt, 2001). Willard-Holt noted that “while certainly not a replacement for extended cross-cultural experiences” (p. 516), short-term fieldwork results in expanded cultural knowledge, personal growth, and interpersonal connections. Pence and Macgillivray (2008), while noting that their study supported Willard-Holt’s findings, also remarked that “the importance of self-reflection as a part of an international field experience cannot be overstated” (p. 24). Participants in their study kept a daily journal while abroad, which focused primarily on management/student behavior, curricular differences, parent involvement, and culture/socioeconomic class.

While clearly there are benefits, some scholars have raised concerns that short-term international field experiences might cause problems. For example, Gleeson and Tait (2012) suggested such limited time interferes with the “developing professional identities” (p.1145) of participants. Because preservice teachers experience the international context for a limited period of time during a short-term program, some might tend to dichotomize their classroom experiences, becoming defensive towards pedagogical practices in their home country and antagonistic towards perceived negative practices observed during their international field experience. Trent (2011) also noted the development of “oppositional stances towards particular types of teachers” (p. 192) during short-term international practicum experiences as a concern. He offered several solutions to help mitigate this trend, including preparatory academic work focusing on teacher identity construction and support for self-reflection after returning to their home institution. Like Pence and Macgillivray (2008), Palmer and Menard-Warwick (2012) suggested that reflective journaling, coupled with enough time to process their experiences through discussion, might better help students avoid such quick comparisons by developing empathy, a critical cultural awareness, and a critical consciousness.

In short, the literature suggests that opportunities to be immersed in a different culture, through homestays and teaching in local schools, are critical experiences if the goal of the short-term program is to help preservice teachers begin to develop cultural awareness and the dispositions of culturally responsive educators (Cushner, 2007; Marx & Moss, 2011). Santoro and Major (2012) reported that “the dissonance created by being outside their comfort zone in regard to the physical environment and communication practices” (p. 318) helped preservice teachers in their study begin to discuss learning about people from other cultures. Santoro and Major as well as Lee (2009) described the benefit that a study abroad context brings to understanding second-language development, noting in particular the importance of a homestay experience and interactions with the local population; both activities can help encourage reluctant language learners to attempt to communicate in their new environment. It is

their attempts to communicate that helped the preservice teachers to develop empathy for their future English language learners (ELLs) since they, too, will be trying to adjust to a different culture than their own. Marx and Moss (2011) also suggest that this opportunity to be the “cultural outsider” may be the “essential element in the process of developing intercultural sensitivity” (p.43).

## **BACKGROUND AND PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

This chapter describes a well-established four-week summer study abroad program based in Northern Italy. In 2001, this program began taking preservice teachers to Italy to provide them with rich cultural experiences and educational opportunities. Since then, it has provided over 300 preservice teachers, from several four-year universities in the United States, with a cross-cultural experience. We use the term preservice teachers in this study to describe students enrolled in a teacher preparation program who have not yet completed all requirements to gain certification. Because these preservice teachers come from different universities in multiple states, their field experience and course experience varies slightly, but we set in place guidelines for acceptance to somewhat mitigate some discrepancies across universities.

To be accepted into the program, participants must be at least a sophomore, be a student in good academic standing, complete an online application, and then participate in a face-to-face or phone interview to be sure they understand the expectations of the program and that the program is a good fit for their career goals. After acceptance, participants attend several meetings over a five-month period to prepare them to live with a host family and to observe and teach in an Italian school. This preparation includes choosing and reading a book to help them to understand either the Italian culture or its history. Participants also read articles about culturally and linguistically diverse learners, culturally responsive teaching, and they learn how to objectively observe classroom environments. Additionally, they read about second language learning and with guidance from the program directors, they plan English lessons that they might teach to Italian students. We explain that the teaching component of the experience will be related to English-learning, but we also stress to preservice teachers that many of the teachers will not speak fluent, proficient English. Thus, the preservice teachers will be, in many ways, language learners during this experience. Participants also learn basics Italian words and phrases by attending a non-credit class in Italian language class or engaging in self-study. Finally, participants engage in activity that moves them out of their comfort zones, such as by role-playing in scenarios that actually occurred in previous years of the program. Such an activity helps them to prepare for the discomfort they may encounter due to the cultural differences. While in Italy, each participant stays with and becomes a part of an Italian host family, and each participant is placed in a class to work mornings with Italian teachers and students. Participants keep a blog during the program, and they write about and reflect on their experiences living with a host family, observing in an Italian class, teaching English to Italian students, and learning Italian, as well as other experiences. Completion of blog posts counts toward students’ final grades in the program. We also used this data to analyze and understand participants’ thoughts about their experiences to make informed program decisions so that we, as faculty, may better support and make meaningful experiences for future participants. We describe this analysis in the following section.

## **METHOD**

Blog postings were examined to better understand preservice teachers' thoughts about their experiences during the four-week study abroad program. The research team focused on findings from three research questions:

1. What are participants' thoughts related to the Italian classes they observed?
2. What are participants' thoughts related to becoming an Italian language learner?
3. What lesson(s) did participants learn from this experience?

The following section describes the preservice teachers who participated in the program, the context of the study abroad program, and how the data was collected and analyzed.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Sixty-nine preservice teachers from five universities in the United States, three universities in the Southeast and two universities in the Midwest, participated in the Italy study abroad experience during the 2011, 2013, or 2014 program years. Participants from the 2012 program were not included because the program ended unexpectedly early due to earthquakes. Most participants were majors in early childhood education, elementary or middle/secondary education; a few were majors in special education or music education. While the majority of these preservice teachers were enrolled in undergraduate programs, six participants attended the program while pursuing master's degrees.

While the blogs of all 68 study abroad participants were read as a part of the process of developing coding categories, a subset of 21 preservice teachers were the participants of this study. Seven preservice teachers were randomly selected from each of the three teaching levels: preschool (ages 3 – 5 years); elementary schools (grades 1-5); and middle schools (grades 6-8). Their blogs were analyzed for this study.

## **CONTEXT**

As mentioned previously, during this four-week study abroad program, each participant lived with an Italian host family and worked in an Italian school. On some afternoons, as part of the program requirements, participants visited schools or cultural sites and attended a weekly meeting with the program directors. The weekly meetings provided opportunities to begin to reflect on and discuss what they were observing and experiencing in their home and schools. Program faculty considered this opportunity to interact with others, including the professors, important because as Cushner (2007) suggested, "When learning a second culture, one comes into immediate conflict between the culture of the self and the new culture...Reconciling these differences is critical to successful adjustment and subsequent learning" (p. 37). On "free afternoons" participants spent time with their Italian families, peers, and/or traveled via train to nearby cities. Also, as part of the program, participants visited Venice one weekend and Florence another weekend.

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- **Italian Families:** Living with a host family is a unique aspect of this study abroad and participants essentially became another member of their host family. They ate meals with their family, engaged in various activities with their family from the mundane such as grocery shopping and running errands to special occasions such as celebrating a child's First Communion or attending a performance at the theatre. Participants also traveled one weekend with their families to, for example, a popular amusement park or nearby cities.
- **Italian Schools:** Program faculty placed students in schools based on their grade-level preference, which most often aligned with their major. However, secondary education majors experienced placements in middle schools because Italian high school students are typically preparing for high-stakes exams while our students are in the Italian schools. Thus, during the program, participants observed and worked five mornings a week or about 70 hours in an Italian preschool, elementary, or middle school. The students were also expected to teach English several times during the program. How much each participant taught varied based on several factors, such as the age of the Italian students, the teachers' preferences, and, to some degree, the participants' attitude. In addition to being placed with one class, each participant typically had the opportunity to visit and teach in other classes as well.
- **Italian Language:** Participants are not required to speak Italian to participate in the program; therefore, they encountered challenges based on language differences in the home, school, and community. While some host families have at least one family member who speaks English, many participants are placed with families with limited knowledge of English. Thus, regardless of their family placement, participants grappled to communicate with all members of their host families.

As noted, most Italian teachers do not speak fluent English. However, since English is taught to Italian students beginning in preschool, there are teachers of English within each school. Preschools often employ an itinerant teacher of English, while elementary schools usually have a teacher of English on staff. These teachers typically have other teaching responsibilities and their knowledge of English varies. On the other hand, middle schools employ full-time teachers of English, who are typically proficient in English. Consequently, participants placed in preschool and elementary school generally interacted with non-English speaking teachers, while participants placed in the middle schools often spent some time collaborating and teaching with a teacher of English.

In short, while participants received some Italian language preparation or they engaged in self-study prior to their departure for Italy, essentially they spoke no Italian upon arrival and interacted primarily with Italians who spoke little or no English. This aspect of the program allowed participants to understand, through first-hand experiences, what it was like to be the Italian language learner in a family, school, and community.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

While preparing for the program, participants created personal blogs using various blog sites (e.g., [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) and posted two reflections related to readings prior to departure. Participants also were expected to blog about their experiences while in Italy. Specifically, they were asked to post at least eight times during the program, and to describe and reflect on their experiences related to

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1. Living with their Italian family,
2. Learning Italian, and
3. Teaching English to Italian students.

Furthermore, students were asked to post one final reflection within two weeks after returning to the U.S. These topics were intentionally general and open-ended so that participants could blog about aspects of topics they found important and relevant to them given their placements. Also, to encourage participants to consider their blog as an authentic reflection tool, they were told how to make their blog site private so that they might post more candid and open reflections about their experiences. Thus, participants' blogs were not accessible to their host families or cooperating Italian teachers, but were available to family and friends to whom participants invited to view their blog.

It was anticipated that the blogs would provide interesting insights because each participant lived with his or her own Italian family and was placed in his or her own Italian classroom. Accordingly, each participant might approach, interpret, and reflect on the cultural and linguistic differences in a unique manner based on his or her experiences. That is, unlike other study abroad programs in which college students stay in dorms with other Americans or English-speaking college students, attend lectures that are often facilitated by English-speaking instructors, and participate in whole-group activities, this study abroad afforded each participant with many experiences and challenges that they encounter from a more individualized experience because they lived with host families and worked in Italian schools.

Using a qualitative approach to analysis, the researchers engaged in multiple steps (Gibbs, 2007) to determine coding categories beginning with a preliminary examination of the blog data by reading through all entries from the 69 study abroad program attendees to determine potential coding categories. After comparing category notes, they reconciled any differences through consensus. Next, the blogs were organized into the grade-level grouping taught by the participants: preschool (ages 3-5 years); elementary (grades 1-5); and middle (6-8). A subset of seven blogs from each grade-level category was randomly selected for the final analysis. Using a co-created codebook based on the refined categories, researchers analyzed this subset with the constant comparative method to look for themes in the data.

## **FINDINGS AND KEY ISSUES**

The following three themes emerged from analysis and are presented:

1. Making sense of differences,
2. Experiences as an Italian language learner, and
3. Opportunities for personal and professional growth.

### **Making Sense of Differences**

Comparing a foreign culture to one's own is common when traveling abroad (Santoro & Major, 2012), and participants made many comparisons between American and Italian schools, and, to a lesser extent, between the American and Italian families. These comparisons provide insight into participants' beliefs about teaching, as well as their personal beliefs and values.



## Teaching

While all participants made comparison between Italian and American classes, what participants discussed and how they presented practices (e.g., positive or negative light) were often based on the grade level in which participants were placed. In general, participants placed in preschools (ages 3 – 5 years) described instructional practices in a positive light, whereas participants placed in elementary (grades 1-5) and middle schools (grades 6-8) tended to focus on classroom management and interpreted these practices somewhat negatively as they tried to make sense of their observations. Observations and reflections based on grade-level placements are presented subsequently.

## Preschool Placements

This study abroad program took place in a city in close proximity to Reggio Emilia, a town known for its preschool education, and many of the Italian preschool teachers hosting an American preservice teachers followed a philosophy similar to the Reggio Emilia approach. Five key principles to the Reggio Emilia approach include

1. A class-based curriculum developed from children's interests and enacted through an ongoing project,
2. A belief that children use many symbolic languages to construct meaning,
3. The use of the physical environment to shape learning,
4. Teachers as learners, and
5. Parental involvement as a civic responsibility (New, 2007).

Most participants requesting to be placed in a preschool were familiar with this approach through their university coursework. They were excited to see the Reggio Emilia approach in action and responded positively to the instruction practices they observed. For example, Sasha wrote,<sup>1</sup>

*I read about the Reggio approach to curriculum...after spending two days in the preschool, I have continued to ask myself why American schools have yet to incorporate this style of teaching into classrooms. The Reggio approach is truly is breathtaking; the entire school works as one unit in order to allow students to explore and learn at an individualized pace. With this hands-on, interactive learning style, students are given the opportunity to incorporate their home-lives and unique personalities into each aspect of the day. Each student is eager and interested in learning, and now that I have arrived, they are extremely enthusiastic about learning English specifically.*

Likewise Renee wrote,

*[My preschool] is a very child-centered school, which is wonderful in my opinion. Different from the United States, the lessons that the teachers execute are all based on the children's interests. In the US, the lessons are often times made without the children's interests in mind. For example, at [my Italian preschool], the children expressed their interest for dinosaurs, so the teachers have separated the kids into smaller groups, and each day the small groups go and make the different kinds of dinosaurs out of recycled materials. It is awesome!*

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While these experiences highlight the importance of considering children's interests when developing curriculum and providing instruction, participants also critically considered other differences between Italian and American schools. As Renee noted,

*The kindergarteners [in the United States] learn more skills compared to the kids in Italy. The kids in Italy are learning about how to work with each other and I think that really is a good idea. Kids should learn how to work with each other early on, but I also believe that they should learn some of their basic skills as well. I think there should be a mixture between the two in the classroom.*

Reflections such as Renee's, allowed participants to identify aspects of the American education system they valued and to consider what other aspect of education that might be important but are lacking in American schools. By experiencing another educational system, participants were able to think more deeply about what they believed were strengths and weaknesses of the American school system.

### **Elementary and Middle School Placements**

Whereas participants placed in preschools reflected primarily on the type of instruction and learning that took place in classrooms, participants placed in elementary and middle schools focused more on classroom management. For example, Robyn described,

*The schools in Italy seem to be just as diverse as American schools. [However], the children seem louder and more physical (they get away with shoving and hitting more). ...When the class gets too unruly the teachers tend to bang on their desk with their hands or an object and they yell. "BIMBI," which means "children". I am not saying that the children or teachers are bad or doing anything wrong, but it is far less rigid in rules and customs than American schools.*

Similarly, another participant wrote, "Teachers discipline differently here than in America. I have witnessed teachers let things get 'out of control' (according to my standards) and then decide to yell and scream at the class." Such comparisons illustrated how participants attempted to consider classroom management in light of their beliefs and experiences. While differences in classroom management styles certainly weighed heavily on participants, some participants began to consider that the idea of giving students freedom versus providing structure or as Robyn mentioned "rigid rules and customs." Furthermore, some participants began to consider how such a dichotomy might be viewed and valued differently in Italian and American school, and what implications this might have on teaching and learning. For example, Hillary considered the freedom that Italian teachers gave to students but wondered how much students could learn under such circumstances. Specifically, she wrote,

*It was really interesting to see how the teachers managed their classrooms. I feel like the children had a lot more freedom and could express themselves a lot more than the students in America. [However], the children had a lot more down time and sometimes I felt like they would not be prepared for their next grade level.*

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As participants spent more time in the Italian schools and as they continued to reflect on their experiences, participants began to rethink their beliefs about students' behaviors and teachers' actions. Samantha's final blog post highlights such a change:

*Kids are the same no matter where you are in the world. They love to run, play, yell with their friends, and befriend their teachers. When I was in my Italian school, I would have kids pin me to walls whenever they saw me walking through the school...even when teachers were present...even when they were supposed to be in class. At first, I found this completely out of control behavior that would not be acceptable in America. I still find it odd that students were not disciplined for running out of their classes, but I can now accept that they were being kids. They were ecstatic to have an American in their school and it took some time for the school as a whole to adjust to this exciting change.*

Samantha, like other participants, continued to try to make sense of students' behaviors and why Italian teachers' allowed those behaviors. Through her reflection, Samantha realized that the Italian students' behavior were due, in part, to her presence in the school and their excitement to interact with her. Also, she recognized that Italian teachers are more tolerant of students' behaviors or have the view that "children will be children." Thus, while Samantha stated that such behavior would be unacceptable in American schools, she viewed such students and teachers behaviors with more understanding.

Likewise, Sara also considered why an Italian teacher might use a certain classroom management practice and why such practice might not work in American schools.

*The teacher had to leave to use the bathroom, when she did she put one student in charge to watch the class. They were in charge of writing names down of people who talked and weren't doing their work. I liked this method a lot, but in the USA I think it might be hard to use. The students in the USA are more accustomed to teasing and I could see people calling this student a teacher's pet, or trying to bribe them not to write their names down. In Italy students have the same teacher every year of elementary school and the students stay in the same class, there is less bullying and people are more respectful.*

Sara appreciated the management style the teacher used and she recognized that it worked because the elementary schools engaged in looping. That is, teachers and students remained together for five years and developed different types of relationships, while this approach might not work in American schools based on the relationship the teacher and students develop. Thus, some participants were beginning to understand that schools' structures, along with cultural values, influence what instructional practices are or are not enacted.

In sum, participants placed in preschools focused on more on child-centered teaching and instructional practices, and participants placed in elementary and middle school classrooms focused more on class management and how it might influence learning. Further, participants' used comparison as a primary method to consider and to make sense of the Italian classes they were observing. In turn, these comparisons allowed participants to consider the strengths and weaknesses of both Italian and American educational practices, and the types of practices that they might implement in the future teaching.

## **Cultural Beliefs**

Because participants typically shared their blogs with their American family and friends, participants often described their daily activities. Occasionally, this led to comparisons between and reflection on Italian and American culture. Most often, participants discussed time and family meals.

With respect to time, participants noted on how Italians viewed time differently compared to Americans. For example, Lydia wrote, “The way Italians view time is very different from Americans. Time is not relative here; things get done when they [get done]. I experienced this at the train station; we realized Italian trains are always late.” While Lydia withheld judgment, another participant clearly appreciated the “it will get done, when it gets done” approach. That is, when describing his typical days in Italy, one participant noted, “I am enjoying the slower pace of life! I am never in a hurry, yet I always have a full daily schedule.” On the other hand, some participants found the slower pace frustrating. For example, in one entry Darcy stated, “We went to get lunch, and it just takes sooo long for all of [the food] to get here. I don’t like wasting all of my time just waiting. I want to see things.” However, in another entry, she commented, “I realized that Italians like to take their time and never be in a hurry. I was raised to be always in a rush.” Indeed, cultural comparisons allowed participants to reflect on their own life style and values.

Eating meals with their families was another topic that participants wrote about and indicated was important to them. For example, Hillary wrote, “I really liked and enjoyed how for dinner we were all together. It was really nice having that time with [my family] to talk about different things.” For Samantha, family meals were a pleasant respite that helped her to balance the minor differences that she initially found challenging. Samantha blogged, “My family always eats dinner at the table and has a two course meal. This is one difference I really do appreciate [with my Italian family] because often [our busy American] schedules get in the way of my family gathering around the table for a long meal.”

In sum, cultural comparisons, like educational comparisons, allowed participants to identify lifestyles that were both similar and different than their own. While they recognized that some practices made them feel uncomfortable, they appreciated others. Thus, working in schools and living with families allowed participants to make both educational and cultural comparisons, which in turn seemed to help participants to develop sensitivities to differences among Italian and American behavior. Furthermore, some participants began to recognize that beliefs and values influence behaviors in both cultures.

## **EXPERIENCES AS AN ITALIAN LANGUAGE LEARNER**

This study abroad program allowed participants to experience what it is like to become an Italian language learner as they were immersed in a family, school, and community. Prior to departure, participants were told that families were not required to speak English and that the instruction in schools would be in Italian, and strategies for communicating were discussed and practiced. However, despite the fact that participants knew that they would be language learners, they were surprised by the fact that more Italians did not speak English and by the challenges they encountered as they tried to communicate with Italians. Participants frequently discussed their language experiences in relation to living with their host family and working in schools

## **Family**

Despite being overwhelmed by the language differences, participants recognized that their Italian families were trying to help them feel welcomed and they viewed these interactions, though stressful or awkward, positively. For example, as Renee wrote, “My family invited their extended family over for a reception after [my Italian sister’s first communion] ceremony. I met both sets of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. It was a little overwhelming with so many Italians around, and it was hard for me to communicate because no one could understand me. But, nonetheless, everyone was so welcoming and made sure to say ‘Ciao Renee!’ as they left.” Likewise, Hillary appreciated that her family was actively helping her to learn Italian when she wrote, “My host Dad everyday would try to teach me new words in Italian. I loved when he tried to teach me. Then the next day he would ask what he taught me the following day so I would remember.”

Many participants also took the initiative to learn Italian and as Jo soon discovered, “my best friend throughout the entire trip was definitely my dictionary!” In addition to their Italian-English dictionary, a program requirement, participants discussed other ways of communicating such as their increased use of gestures to express themselves, as well as appreciating the Italians’ more natural use of gestures when communicating. That is, participants defaulted to other compensation strategies (Oxford, 1990), which involved making educated guesses as to meaning from contextual clues and using non-verbal actions like gesture and mime. For example, Cody described his use of contextual clues in a dinner conversation with his Italian host mother, who spoke very little English. When his host mother shared stories about her sons as young children, Cody was able to determine the overall narrative by characterizing them as what he knew about “classic mother stories [that were] embarrassing for their children.” However, he did note that this strategy resulted in the loss of some details, “Of course, there were a few moments that got lost in translation, so we had to wait for [his host brother’s] return to discuss those.” Cody also described nonverbal compensation strategies involving expressions by noting, “This Italian adventure is helping my acting skills. My facial expressions and gestures have been flowing like never before. Lots of smiles and thumbs up.”

Finally, participants often handled the language differences by simply accepting the situation and keeping a sense of humor. For example, Lydia described the following situation that she and another participant encountered while traveling with her family to an amusement park.

*[Another participant] and I decided to do the Green (easiest) route [for zip lining], because we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. After we got our harnesses, helmets, and gloves on, we went to the briefing area. Since it was in Italian, [the guides] told us to read the poster [about zip lining]. So, here we are getting instructed on how to swing from tree to tree 50 feet in the air, in a foreign language. Thank goodness Italians speak with their hands, because without that I don’t know what I would have done!*

Language differences allowed participants to engage in self-reflection, which helped them to better understand the situation and to grow as individuals. Here, Kasey described walking with her Italian sister after school to her host parents’ office, located in an unfamiliar part of town:

*The language barrier has been pretty manageable, but sometimes they forget to translate parts of plans to me, so I have no idea what is happening. As a Type A person who likes to contribute to the plans, this was probably the most difficult aspect of the program for me to adjust to. When you are aware of the*

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*schedule, dealing with a language barrier is much less stressful. I have really had to learn to go with the flow. I have been working on this for a few years now, but I really had no choice in this program--the only other option was to be continuously on edge.*

Language differences also helped some participants to understand just how daunting it is to learn another language. Even with success, they realized that they still had much to learn, as Cody wrote about a car ride with his Italian father.

*Today after the meeting I was picked up by only my father--who, I think it is important to know, speaks absolutely no English. My brother...had a guitar lesson, and he is my translator between me and the rest of my family. To only make the situation more unsettling, I left my book bag at the house containing my translation dictionaries. Needless to say, this was an interesting ride home. I tried to use Barbara's suggestions of subject-verb, which came out "Io scuola bene." My father was thrilled and even gave me a "Bravo!" in response. We laughed together, but I should hang my head in shame at my Italian. I probably sound like a five year old. Even though I'm sure five year old Italians speak better English than I do Italian. I really want to improve. I just have problems remembering [words], especially with everything else I have to remember. This is one huge learning experience; I'm learning that to be true more and more each day.*

While it is understandable participants would find the language differences challenging, not all participants described attempts to communicate with their family. In fact, a few participants seemed to indicate the burden should be on the family. For example, as one participant noted in an early post, "It's just hard being thrown into a family, especially when nobody really speaks English," yet, in her remaining blog entries, she never discussed her attempts to learn Italian. Rather, this participant wrote about her family's limited knowledge of English and their attempts to communicate to her in English.

Participants certainly struggled to both understand and communicate in Italian, yet their experiences with their families were overwhelmingly positive. Further, by stepping outside of their comfort zone and attempting to communicate with their family, participants discovered new insights about themselves as individuals and as second language learners.

## **SCHOOL**

Again, despite being told that few Italian teachers would speak English, some participants still expressed their dismay that teachers did not speak English. For example Blair wrote, "Then I found out that no one in the class spoke English, not even the teachers." Furthermore, because of the language differences, blog entries at the start of the program often indicated participants' initial feelings of tediousness and frustration in school because they could not understand what was being said or what would happen next. Likewise, Jo described observing middle school classes as "really overwhelming and very tiring" and another middle-school participant described his Italian classes as "boring."

However, when faced with the reality that Italian teachers and students spoke Italian and they did not, participants began to understand what it meant to be an Italian language learner. As Hillary wrote, "I was the child with a different language and culture thrown into a school not knowing how to speak

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to anyone.” Consequently, participants recognized that they were experiencing some of the same challenges ELLs encounter in American schools and they found the experience humbling, as Renee wrote,

*These past two days have been exciting, but completely emotionally draining. It's been hard for me to regulate some of my emotions, but I am hoping that it gets easier with time. I have already been humbled in recognizing how hard the Italians try to speak [English to me]. It's interesting to think about how they work so hard to communicate so that we understand, but in America we often times don't even think to try to communicate in a way so that other people--not from America--can understand. I look forward to continuing to try and speak to my family in [Italian], since they are trying so hard to speak [English]. I'm nervous--and excited--for what is to come, and I hope that this experience is truly one that I will carry with me, forever.*

While some participants felt comfortable in their class despite the language difference, other participants did not. This may have been due, in part, to the grade levels in which students were placed. For example, Kirstin wrote about her preschool class, “Although [there are] language barriers with the teachers and the children... we always have great time together. On Wednesday, when I was leaving the school in the afternoon, the kids all came to hug me and kiss me! I was melting and felt love at that moment.” Similarly, Sasha said about her preschool teachers, “Although there is only one teacher who speaks very little English, I again feel at home and a strong sense of connection.” On the other hand, Robyn, who was placed in an elementary school, blogged, “I don't think that the English teacher tried very hard to communicate with me about a lot of things, so I didn't have as much understanding between me and the students as I would have liked.” While it is understandable that participants would want and expect help from the teachers of English, they did not always consider that these teachers might not be fluent in English and, therefore, might be nervous or uncomfortable talking with a native English speaker.

As they did with their families, participants used various strategies to communicate with teachers and students. For example, participants occasionally communicated by using a shared language other than English as Jo reported, “Some of the teachers don't speak English so we speak French to one another instead, which was exciting for me to be able to communicate with them and use my French!” Use of gestures and speaking slowly were other communication strategies. Hillary wrote about school, “After the first few days they understood that I didn't understand so they spoke really slow for me and tried to act things out for me. My host Mom and Dad would act things out, too.” At times, participants also relied on the Italian students to help them with the language differences. For example, Lydia blogged, “When I am in the classroom with the teacher who does not speak English, there is a boy there to help me. He knows great English and is always happy to translate. This boy is from Ghana, and he told me that many people in Ghana speak English.”

Of course, there were a few participants who did not describe their attempts to communicate to teachers or students, but rather described how teachers or students tried to communicate with them. For example, a participant wrote, “One of the little girls drew me a picture. It was funny because she kept trying to talk to me, and I didn't know what she was saying... she showed me a book with some pictures and told me the names of the characters and also pointed out blonde hair in the book, and then pointed to mine... I didn't really know how to respond, obviously, so I just kind of smiled” or similarly, “The kids keep trying to talk to me, but of course I don't understand Italian, so I just stared at them.” While

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such posts were disheartening, they do demonstrate a lack of awareness or initiative by some participants. That is, while most participants were aware of and appreciated the effort that the Italians made to communicate with them and they tried to reciprocate, several participants made few, if any, attempts to communicate in Italian.

Despite the language differences, time in the Italian schools encouraged deeper reflection about teaching and learning. For example, one participant reflected:

*I had no idea what chromatography was going into the lab, but I can honestly say that I think I know what it is now even though the lab was [presented] in Italian. I was able to learn pretty easily through experience and observation from the lab, which I found interesting from a teaching perspective. I never realized how much experience and hands-on activities can contribute to the understanding of a subject.*

Thus, becoming an Italian language learner seemed to help participants to think more deeply about teaching language learners and what kinds of instructional practices might be beneficial. However, participants sometimes observed instructional practices that made them angry. For example, Gail blogged about her observations of how one teacher interacted with a foreign student new to the class:

*In the first grade classroom, I was particularly frustrated with the teacher's method of "dealing" with the new student from Pakistan who spoke no Italian. I noticed that the student sat by himself without any schoolwork on his desk and would simply wait and try not to fall asleep because he was unable to understand the teacher's directions. She simply ignored him and when I asked if he had an English workbook she kept pointing at him and then saying that he was a bad student and did not care to learn Italian or English. Regardless of whether or not the student understood what she was saying, he could tell that it was a negative conversation. That should never be acceptable from any teacher.*

Although the full context of this situation is unknown, as it was told from Gail's point of view, she was able to empathize with the student and to consider more fully the role of teachers and how they should treat language learners, and provide appropriate instruction.

Indeed, while reflecting on their experiences as Italian language learners, participants considered how they might interact with English language learners in their future teaching. For example, Lydia wrote that she would "be more understanding and patient with those that do not know English, because I know that it is frustrating to try to communicate in a language that is unknown to you." Also, Carrie's reflection captured the emotion of many participants' blog posts about becoming an Italian language learner and it underscores potential of this experience:

*When I was in Italy, I didn't know Italian. Did not knowing Italian make me stupid? No. Not knowing Italian helped me learn that I wasn't stupid, I just wasn't always being presented with information in the correct language [for me]. As a teacher, I need to understand that my ELL students aren't stupid, they just need to be presented information in the correct way [that will help them to learn].*

Participants in this study became Italian language learners in the homes, schools, and community. While their experience was initially overwhelming and stressful, as time went by, most participants embraced the differences and learned ways to communicate with their family and their teachers and



the students. This experience helped participants to gain greater insights and perspectives into learning another language, which they related to experiences that English language learners encounter in the U.S. and to how they will strive to support their future students.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH**

Finally, participants wrote about the lessons they learned, both personally and professionally, by participating in this study abroad program. For example, after returning to the United States, Samantha wrote:

*I learned that I am more independent than I originally gave myself credit for. I can [manage] an entire weekend in a foreign city without supervision and [without] getting lost! I can learn the basics of a completely new language in a matter of days, or at least enough to allow me to communicate with family, teachers, and students. I can now say I am a much stronger person.*

There is no doubt that their experiences in the study abroad changed participants' perceptions of themselves. Most often, participants realized that it was when they were pushed beyond their comfort zone, they grew in ways that made them stronger and more resourceful individuals.

Participants also reflected on how the study abroad helped them to develop their skills and confidence as teachers. For example, one elementary participant wrote,

*I feel extremely confident going into my student teaching in the fall because of how I handled my lessons in my elementary school in [Italy]. I took the techniques I learned in my classes and practicum experiences (along with the tips I have picked up from my older sister, who is a first grade teacher) and put these techniques to good use in a completely foreign school system.*

Spending so much time in a classroom, particularly as an observer, may have helped some participants to more realistically consider the challenges and grind teachers face each day and that they too would encounter. Cody captured this sentiment when he wrote, "As much as I would want to say 'This would never happen in my classroom,' the reality is that there will surely be awful days."

## **DISCUSSION**

Our analysis revealed insight into preservice teachers' thoughts about observing a non-English speaking school and becoming a second language learner in a family, school, and community. Further, we gathered lessons the preservice teachers learned from these experiences. We focus on these insights in the discussion that follows.

Our findings suggest that participating in a program designed specifically for students who are education majors does help preservice teachers grapple with issues related to teaching, culture, and language and communication (Santoro & Major, 2012). Participants encountered, as Rogers (2001) suggested "unusual or perplexing situation or experiences" that allowed them to examine their "responses, beliefs, and premises in light of the situation at hand" (p.41) and to relate those new understandings to who they are as individuals, as well as to situate experiences in their future teaching.

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Blogging did create an opportunity for participants to engage in self-reflection, a process needed to become an effective teacher. For example, as Lee (2009) and others have found, self-reflection was particularly evident when discussing issues of language and communication; their challenges, attempts, and acceptance of their limitations; as well as a growing awareness of the issues ELLs encounter in the US and how they might support future language learners. Further, self-reflection seemed to explain how participants came to compare the Italian and American educational systems less judgmentally in terms of transcendent “good or bad practices.” Instead, analysis suggested that participants began to reflect on deeper cultural and linguistic explanations and how certain practices in the Italian schools might or might not be implemented into their own teaching. Thus, the present study supports research that participation in a study abroad program encourages participants to develop cultural and self-awareness (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Marx & Moss, 2011). This participation may lead to personal and professional growth that supports PSTs in the realization that teaching is more than a set of skills but rather “a moral endeavor” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 182).

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The obvious limitation of the present study is that it represents findings from only one study abroad program with experiences that may be difficult to arrange in other programs. For example, placing students in local schools and with host families creates logistical challenges and requires having competent local assistance. Such opportunities may not be an option for some study abroad programs. That raises the question as to whether similar results might be obtained in less complex programs, perhaps with school visits rather than school placement, housing in dormitories or hotels rather than home stays, or a shorter period of time studying abroad; although research indicates that preservice teachers can benefit from a short study abroad (Willard-Holt, 2001). Finally, this study abroad is a well-established program with a strong network of teachers and families, many of whom have participated for several years, and it receives support from the community. Therefore, participants may have had a unique experience compared to less well-established study abroad programs.

While only a limited portion of the findings from this study abroad were reported, they do support and validate efforts to promote and design study abroad programs specifically for preservice teachers. These findings suggest that such programs, at least those that immerse participants in the culture of the host country and its education system, enhance self-reflection that can support cultural awareness that may lead to pedagogically appropriate practices (Lee, 2009; Rogers, 2001), which typically underlies the rationale for such programs.

To better understand the potential of a study abroad experience, such as the one reported in this chapter, it is important to explore preservice teachers’ beliefs and values related to teaching ELLs following their experiences as a teacher and language learner in a study abroad program. Further, what, if any, are the longitudinal effects of participating in this study abroad? This question is particularly important to address. Although preservice teachers believe that their participation will influence their future teaching (Gray et al., 2002; Willard-Holt, 2001), studies are needed to follow preservice teachers into their first years of teaching. Finally, this chapter reports one program, yet when developing a program, it is important to ask, what components of a program are more or less effective in advancing the goals of preparing preservice teachers? It may be that a more fine-grained, perhaps formative approach is needed to tease out those variables and experiences that make the most difference or that perhaps even interfere

with or undermine our goal of preparing teaching. These questions and possibilities need attention to expand our understanding of how study abroad programs can enhance preservice teachers' views of and beliefs about language and learning, and teaching and diversity.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In sum, this study highlights the value in actively engaging preservice teachers in culturally and linguistically immersive study abroad experiences so that they may explore their pedagogical and cultural beliefs and how those beliefs may influence their future instruction. Through the blogging component of this program, preservice teachers were required to actively consider their experiences in a study abroad program and how those experiences may be useful in better reaching language learners and supporting a culturally inclusive classroom. Considering our findings, we provide two primary recommendations for those interested in study abroad.

First, teacher educators should consider developing study abroad programs in non-English speaking countries, particularly those that can arrange for preservice teachers to have field placements in local schools and, ideally, home stays with local families. It is logical to assume that the benefits documented are due in no small measure to these components of the program. Communication difficulties that participants encountered and the support they received from their host families and the schools provided powerful experiences that allowed the participants to engage in self-reflection, which may be at the root of their deeper understandings and their broadening perspectives, as others have found (Lee, 2009; Marx & Moss, 2011). Further, the communication challenges participants encountered on a daily basis helped them to better understand the challenges that ELLs face, and how draining it is to listen, process, and attempt to communicate in a language that is not your first language. Communication challenges may have also helped to highlight cultural differences because simple differences could not be quickly or easily explained. The dissonance or discomfort these challenges created and the opportunities to reflect upon them may help foster preservice teachers development of intercultural awareness (Marx & Moss, 2011) necessary for one to become a culturally responsive educator.

Second, teacher educators directing a study abroad should consider strategies for facilitating discussions that will help preservice teachers to reflect more deeply on their experiences, particularly in light of cultural and linguistic differences. Purposeful discussions around cultural differences that occurred during program meetings, to some extent, may have precipitated our findings. Because overgeneralization or reductive thinking about a cultural group is recognized as a common problem in education (Howard, 2003), and participation in study abroad programs may inadvertently foster negative effects (Santoro & Major, 2012; Willard-Holt, 2001), purposeful discussions are particularly important. Therefore, to minimize possible negative effects, study abroad directors might remind preservice teachers often that they cannot draw firm conclusions about any educational system based on their experience in one class or school, and they cannot draw firm conclusions about a society based on their interactions with one family or a small group of individuals.

Short-term study abroad experiences can, and do, impact preservice teachers both professionally and personally. If space for reflection is built into the program design and facilitated by program directors, this impact can result in significant, positive growth. In her final blog post, Sasha shared a conversation that she had with her Italian father that addresses both the personal and professional growth that may participants described after completing the program. She wrote,

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*Last week, as my host father asked me many questions, one of which was if this program met my expectations. I hesitated before answering; I thought about the goals I had set prior to leaving [the United States] and what I wanted to accomplish while abroad. I then answered: this program has been everything I could have dreamed about and so much more. I then elaborated, this experience was not easy; I had to face many difficult situations, which I believe is a main purpose for this program. If this teaching experience had been easy, what would I have gained as a professional and individual? I can confidently say that the barriers I have had to overcome have made me a stronger person and a more knowledgeable, globally aware educator.*

Sasha's reflection, like most participants' reflections, demonstrated that over time, she viewed her experiences, both the positive and the negative, with greater understanding. While not all participants had such insights, most participants, by far, viewed the challenges and frustrations as opportunities to grow and learn both personally and professionally. Such reflections highlight the potential study abroad programs to prepare preservice teachers for their careers as educators.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Blogs:** Originally referred to as web logs, blogs are online journal entries, typically visible to a larger audience on the Internet, that are reflective in nature.

**Cultural Awareness:** The ability to be aware of, understand, and empathize with cultures unfamiliar to one's own.

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**Host Family Placement:** The placement of students with Italian families to provide housing during a study abroad. Host families engage students in cultural and recreational activities to incorporate them into Italian family life.

**International:** Referring to another country or nation outside of one's native country.

**Preservice Teacher Education:** Refers to the educational preparation of students preparing to become classroom K-12 teachers but who have not yet received initial certification to teach.

**Qualitative Research:** Research that entails collection and analysis of descriptive, rather than numerical data.

**School Placement:** The placement of students in PreK-8 classrooms in Italian schools. Students are placed with teachers of English to provide a field-based educational learning experience.

**Second Language Learners:** Students whose first or native language is different from the language spoken in the country in which they now live or are visiting.

**Travel Abroad:** The act of traveling to a country different from one's native country.

## **ENDNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> This and all names are pseudonyms.