

# Chapter 8

## Renewal in the Land of Eternal Spring: Teacher Educators Reflecting on Their Practice

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### ABSTRACT

*This retrospective, reflective, descriptive study involved three experienced literacy educators who travelled to Guatemala to conduct professional development workshops with preservice and in service teachers. The purpose of the research was for the educators to reflect on their own practice and to investigate the impact of this international teaching experience on their beliefs and practices about literacy education. The three separate voices of the researchers yielded new insights and emerged from their background perspectives, impressions from interactions with a range of Guatemalans involved in education, and their varied experiences in the international settings, which also included multiple school visits and teaching of Guatemalan students across the grade span.*

*What house has a roof like the sky;  
Surrounds us with warmth like a copper kettle;  
and which, like an enormous goose, rests  
upon a great foundation?  
We enter there with our eyes closed,  
And from there we depart with eyes opened to the world.  
(Alvarez & Majmudar, 2001)*

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This poem written by an unknown Sumerian poet over 4000 years ago was referring to *school* as a supportive place resting on a firm foundation, providing enlightenment, knowledge, and limitless possibilities for exploration. Similarly, we approached our study abroad experience in the “Land of Eternal Spring,” Guatemala, with a spirit of exploration and a hope for opportunities to widen our knowledge. Alongside Guatemalan educators and students, we learned about *education* in a broad sense. There were three goals for the volunteer experience:

1. To be of service to teachers in Guatemala while sharing a love of literacy with teachers who have little access to professional development or resources;
2. To gain first-hand experience working with teachers and students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds; and
3. To gain expertise in working with English language learners in order to apply that knowledge in university and public school settings back in the United States.

We hoped that the experience would afford us multiple opportunities for an investigation of our teaching practices and enable us to make informed decisions about the benefits of including a teaching abroad practicum experience for literacy educators at our respective universities. This chapter is a description of our journey through Guatemala with “eyes opened to the world” of broadened global perspectives and enhanced teaching practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Our impetus for undertaking this research project was to share with other literacy teacher educators the insights gained from this study abroad experience, one of which had a significant impact on us. Our three distinct voices sometimes intertwined as we engaged in analytical conversations about our changing perceptions of literacy, and we continually shared reactions and questions before, during, and after the international teaching experience. Tremmel (1993) emphasizes the recursive, reflective nature of teaching:

*... the way of teaching demands a long journey that does not have any easily identifiable destination ... It is a journey that I believe must include a backward step into the self and it is a journey that is its own destination. (Tremmel, 1993, p. 456)*

Continually reflecting and seeking to improve our daily habits as practitioners in the field of literacy education, this research project afforded us the opportunity to examine the space in which new learning was constructed for each of us in unique ways, yielding common themes and outcomes. This chapter will present the outcomes of the authors’ investigations into the impact of this international experience on our beliefs and attitudes and will suggest implications for other literacy researchers.

We are three literacy professors, educators who also have many collective years of experience as K-12 teachers. We hail from different regions in the United States and have slightly different experiences within the country of Guatemala. All of us, though, interacted with in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, administrators, and Guatemalan students in a variety of contexts to gain first-hand experience with educators and learners from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that were different from our own.

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