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The Friendship Journey: Developing Global Understanding in the Middle Grades

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The goals of developing a global perspective are consistent with the faith-based values of Catholicism. The primary goal is to prepare students academically, morally, and socially to participate in a globalized world that constantly faces new problems. A key component of this is the understanding that other people, who may appear on the surface to be very different from themselves, have differences which have value and similarities which unite us. The purpose of this article is to present one Catholic school's attempts to prepare its students to meet the challenges of citizenry in an international community and to describe the impact of those efforts. The questions we explored are: (a) Does a student-focused, cultural exchange program enhance American students' global perspectives? Does a student-focused, cultural exchange opportunity enrich students' cultural understandings? Findings from this study revealed that students gained an appreciation for diverse cultures through social interaction. While the pre- and post-test survey data revealed some changes in students' beliefs and attitudes, interviews and observations provided substantial evidence of students' evolving awareness and respect for other cultures. The tangible connections formed produced young people who have a greater appreciation for our global community.

Keywords

Global citizenship, cultural exchange programs, faith-based values, student leadership

Picture a small parochial school situated in a neighborhood of a large Midwestern city. In your mind's eye, you see the iconic image of uniformed students—kindergarten through eighth grade—waiting for the school day to begin. In every classroom and hallway are visual displays of world geography, politics, economics, religion, language, music, and/or art.

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Students are developing an understanding of the geo-political and cultural features of the world, as these issues are integrated into every content area in the curriculum. Students are learning to speak Spanish and Chinese. Add to this image eighth-grade students preparing for an end-of-the-year geography exam of 800 questions—and learning Latin. Today’s visit finds the students preparing for the arrival of students and teachers from China, Poland, Germany, Holland, Ukraine, and Togo. In the upcoming week, the school will open its doors, homes, and hearts to visitors who will be joining them in The Friendship Journey. The school community is committed to providing students the experiences that prepare them to live in harmony in a world that respects differences among people. Community members believe that The Friendship Journey will help students recognize that the world is much bigger than their local community.

Each year, Nativity School, a small Catholic K–8 school on the east side of Cincinnati, Ohio, participates in an international education program called The Friendship Journey. The program began in 1979, when the school joined the International School-to-School Experience (ISSE) and exchanged student delegations with Olinca School in Mexico City. Through ISSE, schools in two countries form a partnership, each designating a team of young ambassadors—students aged 10 to 12—to serve as representatives of their respective countries. The team is invited to visit its partner country for approximately three weeks. Visiting students live with families of like-age learners and attend school with their hosts. With the help of one or two adult coaches (typically teachers), the students experience and understand other cultures on a first-hand basis. The exchange empowers them to find common ground, share ideas, and build friendships with peers and adults in the host country. At the heart of its mission, ISSE is about fostering peace through understanding. The organization is nonprofit, nonpolitical, and non-religious.

The school’s early experiences with ISSE were overwhelmingly positive. It became clear to school leaders, teachers, and parents that the program supported the school’s curricular goals. In addition, despite the nonreligious orientation of the ISSE program itself, the school community found that the program supported Nativity School’s religious values, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and grounded in the principles of Christian social justice. What began as a wonderful opportunity to learn about other cultures through first-hand experiences developed into a school-wide commitment to global education that would impact all areas of the curriculum. Today, the school

has formal partnerships with Torkinmaki School in Kokkola, Finland, and Long Cheng Middle School in Liuzhou, China. These partnerships provide opportunities for students to learn with and from their counterparts in other countries to enhance understanding of different cultures and traditions and to deepen their appreciation of the world beyond their immediate communities.

Preparing students to be active members of the global community is an important part of Nativity School's mission. Although it is important to note that the annual Friendship Journey is just one element of a comprehensive approach to global education, the five-day event is a seminal experience in the school's commitment to developing young people who will "contribute to the local, national and global villages in which they will live" (Church of the Nativity of Our Lord, 2013). As the principal of the school noted, the Friendship Journey provides "an opportunity for personal growth and development, [allowing students] to realize that we are all part of this world together" (B. Herring, personal communication, September 27, 2010). The present article reports findings from a mixed-method study evaluating the outcomes of students' participation in the 2010 Friendship Journey—a five-day event in which the Nativity School hosted student delegates from Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands. This article illuminates key components of the event that helped prepare students for the challenges of citizenry in an international community and describes the impact of those efforts. Two primary research questions guided the investigation: (a) To what extent does a student-focused cultural exchange opportunity enhance American students' awareness of global connections? (b) To what extent does a student-focused cultural exchange opportunity enrich students' cultural understanding?

Much has been written by theologians, scholars, researchers, and education experts about the importance of integrating global understanding into social studies curriculum. Today's global society presents numerous opportunities for young people to come together and discover their cultural similarities and appreciate their ethnic differences. Too often, though, we do not take advantage of these opportunities. Through the efforts of the organizers of the *Friendship Journey*, we observed the positive impact of a structured cultural exchange program and, it is hoped, witnessed the birth a more peaceful world. The following section provides background on the design of Catholic school curriculum and educational programs that support intercultural competence. The section concludes with a discussion of the early adolescent years as an ideal opportunity for developing international awareness, intercultural socialization, and intercultural competency.

Review of the Literature

Both the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) advocate a focus on skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare students for responsible participation in a democratic society and in a global community in the twenty-first century (NCSS, 2010; USCCB, 2005). Although each organization brings a different perspective to the challenge of preparing students for global citizenship, both acknowledge that creating conditions that allow children to explore the world, experiment with different perspectives, and investigate new ideas while maintaining a rigorous emphasis on content knowledge is a formidable challenge for educators.

The USCCB's (2005) teachings on elementary and secondary education emphasize that, for Catholic educators, this challenge is not only academic, but also spiritual. Indeed, the charge to "teach all nations" (Mt. 28:19) is implicit in the Church's focus on cultural diversity and its mission of promoting intercultural competency. The USCCB (2005) values young people of the third millennium as "a source of energy and leadership" in the Church, the nation, and the world (p. 8). To that end, the USCCB (2005) is committed to providing academically rigorous and doctrinally sound programs of education and faith formation. Recognizing the changing demographics of the Church and Catholic school communities, USCCB (2005) has likewise committed to "erase any lines of prejudice and bias that may exist and create welcoming communities" for people of diverse cultures (p. 9).

The *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (NCSSS) (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010) are organized around 10 themes that "represent a way of categorizing the human experience" (p. 14). Three of the themes suggest the importance of first-hand experiences with people of other cultures. Within the first theme—culture—"Students come to understand that human cultures exhibit both similarities and differences, and they learn to see themselves both as individuals and as members of a particular culture that shares similarities with other cultural groups, but is also distinctive." (p. 21). In the fourth theme—individual development and identity—students explore, identify, and analyze "how individuals and groups are alike and how they are unique, as well as how they relate to each other in supportive and collaborative ways" (p. 24). Within the last theme—global connections—students explore questions such as, "What are the benefits from and problems

associated with global interdependence? How might people in different parts of the world have different perspectives on these benefits and problems?” (p. 29).

Guided by both USCCB and NCSS, Catholic schools endeavor to teach students how to participate ethically in a global society. Going forward, we will briefly discuss Catholic schools’ philosophies toward global education and intercultural competence. Afterward, we will describe some programs that enable Catholic schools to meet these goals (e.g., International Baccalaureate Programme) before turning to look specifically at adolescents’ needs (e.g., 21st century skills) in developing intercultural competence.

Teaching Globally in Catholic Schools

Pope John Paul II viewed children as the hope for the future. In “Reflections on Working Toward Peace,” an address delivered at the Vatican City Celebration of the World Day of Peace in 1995, he stated:

It can hardly be hoped that children will one day be able to build a better world, unless there is a specific commitment to their education of peace. Children need to “learn peace”: it is their right, and one which cannot be disregarded. (p. 6)

Furthermore:

Besides the basic education provided by the family, children have a right to a specific training for peace at school and in other education settings . . . Everything possible should be done to help children to become messengers of peace. (p. 9)

For children to explore the meaning of peace, they need a setting in which learning peace is as valuable as learning academics. Archbishop J. Michael Miller saw Catholic schools as just such a place. Miller (2006) wrote, “Catholic school cannot be a factory for learning of various skills and competencies designed to fill the echelons of business and industry” (p. 24). His vision of the Catholic school was one in which education was not viewed as a commodity, but rather as a school for and of the human person. Furthermore, Archbishop Miller (2006) believed, “A Catholic should be inspired by a supernatural vision, founded on Christian anthropology, animated by com-

munion and community, imbued with a Catholic worldview throughout its curriculum, and sustained by gospel witness” (p. 17). The implication is that children educated with a worldview and sustained by their faith become global citizens more capable of acquiring and sustaining world peace.

Supporting the mission of intercultural competency. Bringing the perspectives and concerns of other cultures and people to light is among the key mission responsibilities of the Committee on Catholic Education (USCCB, n.d.). Catholic schools are unique places in which students are provided the opportunity to grow both academically and spiritually. Cook and Simonds (2010) have described the Catholic school as “a place where adults and young people can come together and explore life in a unique setting that embraces the spiritual part of reality as a way to understand fully the human situation in the world” (p. 323). To accomplish this goal, children must engage with people who are similar and different from themselves.

Building relationships with people from other cultures provides a way for students to experience the dignity of each and every human being, regardless of differences (Byron, 1998). Groome (1998) proposed “a dedication to inclusive hospitality and global solidarity” (p. 415) as a characteristic of Catholic Christianity that embodies the philosophy of Catholic education. Providing opportunities for inclusive hospitality and global solidarity in Catholic schools presents a model for students to practice in their adulthood. Likewise, Cook (2008) has urged Catholic school leaders to promote the universality of the Catholic faith through a greater emphasis on global awareness and solidarity, multicultural perspectives, and international relationships. He suggested that Catholic schools could lead the nation in this area (USCCB, 1997).

Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has recognized the importance of ecumenical outreach and promoting relationships with people of different cultures and religions. Pope Benedict XVI promoted ecumenical dialogue and offered the metaphor of the Courtyard of Gentiles as a means of appreciating multiple religious viewpoints and building unity among people of diverse religious beliefs. One week after his installment, Pope Francis established his commitment to ecumenical discourse to an audience of representatives of churches, ecclesial communities, and different religions. He reached out to people of other faiths to emphasize common bonds and break down artificial barriers. “For my part, I wish to assure you that, in continuity with my predecessors, it is my firm intention to pursue the path of ecumenical dialogue” (Pope Francis, 2013). Franchi (2014) argued that the principles of the Courtyard of the Gentiles, an initiative championed by Pope Benedict XVI,

offer Catholic education “an innovative means of dialogue with other ways of thinking” and “a new mode of engagement with those who hold other world-views” (pp. 71–72).

Children who are educated about global concerns in a faith-based school can acquire an understanding of the world couched in their faith. Faith-based educational systems teach students to think for themselves, to be open to truth (wherever it can be found), and to practice God’s universal love and compassion for all people. To instill the desire to become a “person for others” is among the foremost goals of Catholic education (Weitzel-O’Neill & Torres, 2011). This view is in keeping with USCCB in 1997:

At a time of dramatic global changes and challenges, Catholics in the United States face special responsibilities and opportunities. We are members of a universal church that transcends national boundaries and calls us to live in solidarity and justice with peoples of the world. As Catholics and Americans we are uniquely called to global solidarity. (p. 1)

Developing global perspective is essential to understanding the interconnectedness of the human and the natural environment. Furthermore, it allows students to recognize the interrelated nature of events, problems, and ideas. Hanvey (1978) suggested five dimensions of a global perspective that can, theoretically, be integrated across the school curriculum regardless of the age of the student and discipline of instruction: (a) perspective consciousness (a person’s awareness that his or her view may not be universally shared); (b) state-of-the-planet awareness (understanding world conditions); (c) cross-cultural understanding (awareness of a global society and of cultural diversity, as well as awareness of one’s own culture); (d) knowledge of global dynamics (a modest understanding of how global systems operate, especially the interconnectedness of things); and (e) awareness of human choice (the final link).

The International Baccalaureate Programme. Global awareness is a theme that has traditionally been a part of the Catholic curriculum and central to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme. According to a 2012 study on the IB Programme in Catholic schools, “American Catholic schools that adopt the IB generally discover the program fits with the school’s mission and that students are better prepared to engage the world from a Catholic perspective” (White, 2012, p. 192). Although they strive to develop young people’s cultural competence and sensitivities, Catholic schools have not

adopted the IB Programme at the same rate as their public school peers. According to White (2012), the cost of formally adopting the IB curriculum is prohibitive for many Catholic schools.

As communication and collaboration technologies have made it easier for people of different cultures to work together, the importance of preparing young people to work in a global society has become more apparent. Traditional approaches to international studies celebrate what is unique and different in other cultures. However, if students are to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed for responsible participation in a “multicultural, democratic society and globally connected world, [they] need to understand the multiple perspectives that derive from different cultural vantage points” (NCSS, 2010).

21st-century skills. Responsible participation in a global society requires emphasis on “21st-century skills,” an approach to curriculum that is not without controversy. Critics of this movement have warned that “soft skills”—problem solving, teamwork, communication, creativity, facility with technology, and a willingness to embrace cultural diversity—are emphasized at the expense of traditional content knowledge (Hirsch, 2011; Mathis, 2013; Ravitch, 2009). However, Rotherham and Willingham (2009) have suggested that the goals of embedding 21st-century skills and maintaining high expectations for deep content learning are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the authors of *Framework for Twenty-first Century Learning* (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009) contended that students understand academic content at much higher levels when 21st-century themes are interwoven into core subjects (English, world languages, arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, government, and civics). As such, the theme of global awareness means “learning from and working collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue” (p. 2).

Supporting Global Awareness among Elementary and Middle School Students

The elementary and middle grade years are ideal for students to develop an understanding of both their uniqueness and their relationship to the world. Cary (1992) suggested that students at these levels are naturally curious about the similarities and differences among people. Interest in racial and ethnic differences begins early. Between the ages of six and nine, children

begin to identify their own racial group as “better than the out-group” (Semaj 1980, p. 76). Young children are already aware of societal attitudes toward different groups (e.g., housing patterns, dating, and marriage mores). Research also indicates that children in this age demographic can think critically about social patterns (in which they have sufficient experience) and can become actively involved in discussion and inquiry (Ragan & McAulay 1973). This learning becomes the foundation for students’ understanding of themselves as individual members of a particular culture that shares similarities with other cultural groups. Learning the delicate balancing act of maintaining individual cultural identity—while assimilating into a larger, global society—is important in this phase of children’s development.

Researchers have found that a lack of global awareness in young students can lead to damaging future practices, such as stereotyping (Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001). However, studies have also indicated that stereotypes can be successfully reduced, and social perceptions made more accurate, when people are motivated to do so (Fiske, 2000; Neuberg, 1989). Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) found that taking the perspective of others to form a better understanding of their culture and ideals could mitigate bias and stereotyping. The National Council for the Social Studies (2010) recommended the following strategies to confront potential stereotyping and to help elementary students develop global knowledge and understanding:

1. Use an interdisciplinary approach within and beyond social studies and make links to multicultural education.
2. Take advantage of technology, including Internet and e-mail.
3. Utilize primary sources from other countries, from constitutions to literature to artifacts.
4. Include internationally experienced persons: students, teachers, parents, and others in the community.
5. Emphasize interactive methodology, such as a model United Nations and cross-cultural simulations and role-plays.
6. Address global issues with an approach that promotes multiple perspectives and intellectual honesty and action.
7. Encourage new avenues for research in the international arena and encourage teachers to participate and/or make use of this research in their classrooms.

Cushner (2007) recognized the elementary and middle school years as a critical period for developing international awareness, intercultural socialization, and intercultural competency. Deardoff (2004) referred to intercultural

competency as the knowledge of others; the knowledge of self; the skills to interpret and relate; the skills to discover and interact; and the valuing of others' values, beliefs, and behaviors. According to Hanvey (1978), cross-cultural competency is the most difficult dimension to develop because most elementary and middle school students have few if any opportunities to meaningfully interact with people from other cultures. Yet, Cushner and Karim (2004) found that firsthand experience is the critical component in the development of intercultural competency. Olberding and Olberding (2010) found that peace building and exchange programs for elementary and middle school-aged students enhanced the "global competency" of the participants.

The goals of developing a global perspective are consistent with the faith-based values of Catholic education. Both aim to prepare students academically, morally, and socially to participate in a globalized world that constantly faces new problems. To meet this challenge, educators must develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and compassionate young people who want to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. A key component of respect is understanding that differences have value and that similarities can unite. Given the importance of preparing students to function as world citizens, ready to join the global workforce, Catholic educators must determine how best to provide students with opportunities that nurture this type of learning and awareness while leveraging the unique qualities of the Catholic faith and characteristics of a Catholic school.

Context of the Study

Nativity School

Nativity School was a small parochial school founded in 1921 and located in an urban neighborhood in a large Midwestern city. The school enrolled approximately 425 students, ages five through 13. Nativity had a diverse student population: 74% Caucasian, 13% African American, 2% Latino, 2% Asian, and 8% multiracial. A majority (68%) of the students were registered parishioners; 32% of students are nonparish members. Of the nonparish members, 29% belonged to a faith other than Catholicism. Approximately 25% of the population attended school with the aid of financial vouchers.

The mission of Nativity School was to provide students with a high quality education that integrates global studies and technology throughout the curriculum. Academics at Nativity are deeply rooted in the Catholic

faith and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nativity was recognized in 2005 by the United States Department of Education for its academic excellence, and received the Blue Ribbon School Award. Nativity has also been recognized as an exemplar school with traditions, practices, and an effective culture valuing academic, spiritual, and social development (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Global Education at Nativity School

Beginning in the 1979–1980 academic year, Nativity embarked on a strategic plan to provide opportunities for its K–8 students to engage in meaningful interactions with junior high students from around the globe. Nativity joined the International School-to-School Experience (ISSE), which allowed Nativity and Olinca School in Mexico to exchange student delegations. Since 1980, Nativity has worked with schools in 22 different countries to provide students authentic international experiences, including hosting two Friendship Journeys and student exchanges with Ecuador, China, and Finland. The school's world language program has been expanded to provide students in kindergarten through eighth grade with Chinese and Spanish language instruction. Latin instruction is received by students in grades seven and eight.

Nativity's work with global education was recognized locally in 2005, when the school was inducted into the Greater Cincinnati International Hall of Fame. At the time of this study, Nativity had developed formal international partnerships with two schools. Nativity began its formal partnership with Torkinmaki School in Kokkola, Finland, in 1995 and with Long Cheng Middle School in Liuzhou, China, in 2007. In *Connecting Across Cultures: Global Education in Grades K-8*, Buchino and Herring (2011) chronicled the Nativity School Friendship Journey, providing a roadmap for schools seeking to integrate global perspectives into the curriculum, engage parents and community, and implement a program that allows students to forge friendships with like-age peers around the world.

Nativity followed the Archdiocesan curriculum and enriched it with an integrated global perspective. Teachers embedded global geography and awareness of current global issues into every subject area. Instructors collaborated to develop a continuum of meaningful curricular experiences across the content areas—from literature to art, science to social studies, music and physical education to world languages and religious education. In addition, the school-wide focus on one geographic area each month enabled students to develop geographical knowledge and understanding. Eighth-graders

competed for the coveted Amerigo Vespucci Award, which is presented to the student who demonstrates the greatest world map skill knowledge on a 646-question exam.

In-depth study of political and physical geography offered a context for current events, literature, earth science, and history. “The study of world languages opens the door to the history, traditions, literature, and the arts of other cultures” (B. Herring, personal communication, September 12, 2010). Students learned Spanish because the faculty believed it is becoming the country’s second language; Chinese, because of the increasing political and economic importance of China; and Latin, because it is the basis for Romance Languages and provides a foundation for students who will study medicine or law. Altogether, these studies lay a foundation for global understanding.

The Friendship Journey, 2010

The Friendship Journey observed in this study officially commenced on September 27, 2010, in an auditorium packed with students, visiting delegations from four countries, parents, and local and state dignitaries from government and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. It culminated on October 1, 2010, with the Culture Show—a blaze of traditional costumes, cultural songs and dances, and an unmatched enthusiasm of international friendship and multicultural appreciation. It was the second Friendship Journey hosted by Nativity School; and delegations of multidenominational students and faculty from Germany, Ukraine, Netherlands, Poland, China, and Togo were invited. The school and its community invested two years of planning, preparation, and fund-raising to bring the 2010 Friendship Journey to fruition.

At the last moment, Nativity received disappointing news from China that the government withheld the passports of the delegation, prohibiting it from travelling to join the other delegates. The Togese delegation was still waiting for its passports to arrive when the first delegation entered the opening ceremony carrying its national flags. The frustration and disappointment was recognizable, but it did not deter their focus on welcoming the other delegations. The delegations from Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands arrived days before the official opening ceremony. Host families and visiting delegations met at the airport and participated in a day of welcoming activities commencing with Sunday Mass, a visit to a local historical site, and an afternoon picnic at a local park. By the time the first delegation arrived

at Nativity School on September 27, host students and parents and visiting delegates had spent days together becoming acquainted.

The seventh- and eighth-grade students and the visiting students and faculty met each morning and afternoon in the school cafeteria before and after the school day. Initially the students clustered in their familiar groups, eager and excited about the upcoming events. The Nativity principal described the mix of emotions on that first day:

Certainly in the beginning there is a bit of hesitation. Who are these people? I have never met them. We may have exchanged an email or two, and I have seen a picture of them. But I don't really know them. To welcome them into my home, or to meet them in the classroom, or see them in the cafeteria, to have lunch with them opens that door to increased understanding and increased familiarity. But once the familiarity is established—once they know them and can call them by name—the door starts to open and you can see the relationships starting to form. (B. Herring, personal communication, September 27, 2010)

As the week progressed, students began to form friendships. As researchers, we found it difficult to distinguish between the Nativity students and the visitors. All students who participated in the *Friendship Journey* enjoyed the before-and-after school meetings. During these meetings, they laughed, sang, danced, and joked with their new friends. It was both a joy to witness burgeoning friendships and hopeful to observe young people of diverse cultural backgrounds eager to visit with one another.

Study Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach, with findings based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The research questions focused on understanding the participants' perspectives and experiences of the Friendship Journey and the impact of this experience on their awareness of global connections and cultural understandings. All participants (n = 188) were given a research consent form; the responses of those who declined to participate were eliminated from the final data analysis.

The quantitative data set was collected using pre and post surveys consisting of 12 statements ranked on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither disagree or agree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*). The sur-

vey items, developed in collaboration with the school administration, sought to identify changes in the students' attitudes toward global understandings. The survey was administered to second- through eighth-grade students one day before and one day after the Friendship Journey events. Classroom teachers administered the survey during social studies classes.

Qualitative data collection included eight open-ended questions on the student survey and semistructured interviews with the principal and representative teachers at each grade level ($n = 12$). Additional qualitative data were collected during five semistructured focus interview sessions with seventh- and eighth-grade students ($n = 78$). The researchers observed approximately 30 hours of Friendship Journey events and recorded field notes to capture elements of the planning process, classroom interactions, informal student-to-visiting student and teacher-to-visiting teacher interactions, and formal ceremonies. Researcher field notes represented a substantial part of the qualitative data set; however, open-ended survey questions also informed the findings.

Qualitative data were examined using an open coding process, in which the researchers first examined each data set to look for recurring themes and patterns. In the first cycle of coding, data were labeled with descriptive summary and *in vivo* codes to capture the evocative meaning of participant responses (Saldana, 2009). In the second cycle, patterns were identified and like phrases, ideas, or summary statements were grouped. In the third cycle of analysis, researchers applied thematic filters, using key concepts from relative literature and language from the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (2010). Four categories of responses emerged: (a) overcoming language barriers, (b) differences and similarities, (c) stereotypes and biases, and (d) world perspectives. The qualitative findings in this study have been organized according to these four themes.

Results

Survey Results

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether students' perceptions of international students changed during the Friendship Journey. Mean scores were calculated for all 12 of the pre- and post-test survey items. For eight of the survey items, there was no significant change. However, results indicated significant differences for four items (see Tables 1 and 2). The

pretest results ($M = 4.42, SD = .717$) for *I avoid people who are different from me* were significantly greater than post-test results ($M = 4.19, SD = .743$), $t(201) = 3.55, p < .01$. Pretest results ($M = 2.60, SD = 1.68$) for *I do not know anyone from another country* were significantly higher than post-test results ($M = 1.53, SD = .96$), $t(199) = 8.24, p < .01$. Pretest results ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.18$) for *I am nervous when I meet people who speak a different language than I speak* were significantly higher than post-test results ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.14$), $t(199) = 2.29, p < .05$. Pretest results ($M = 1.53, SD = .053$) for *It is important to learn about other countries* were significantly lower than post-test results ($M = 1.83, SD = .063$), $t(197) = -4.46, p < .01$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Paired Samples

	Item	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>
Pair 1	Pre: I avoid people who are different from me.	4.42	202	.717	.050
	Post: I avoid people who are different from me.	4.19	202	.743	.052
Pair 2	Pre: I do not know anyone from another country	2.60	200	1.681	.119
	Post: I do not know anyone from another country	1.53	200	.956	.068
Pair 3	Pre: I am nervous when I meet people who speak a different language than I speak	3.45	200	1.176	.083
	Post: I am nervous when I meet people who speak a different language than I speak	3.22	200	1.135	.080
Pair 4	Pre: It is important to learn about other countries	1.53	198	.752	.053
	Post: It is important to learn about other countries	1.83	198	.883	.063

Table 2

Paired Samples T-Test

	Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	95% CI				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	.233	.931	.065	.104	.362	3.554	201	.000
Pair 2	1.070	1.836	.130	.814	1.326	8.241	199	.000
Pair 3	.225	1.391	.098	.031	.419	2.288	199	.023
Pair 4	-.308	.972	.069	-.444	-.172	-4.459	197	.000

Note. CI = confidence interval of the difference

Whereas there was significant change in the above-mentioned questions, post-test mean scores for two questions (*I avoid people who are different from me* and *It is important to learn about other countries*) were still 1.40 and 1.83, respectively. These results seem to suggest that these students were still hesitant to engage with people from other cultures. Furthermore, these data highlight the importance of the semistructured interviews and focus groups and the results those sessions revealed.

Given that the survey measured responses at the ordinal level using a Likert scale—and that the independent variable consisted of matched pairs—researchers conducted a Wilcoxon test to evaluate whether students' perceptions of international students changed during the Friendship Journey. The results indicated a significant difference for the following seven items: (a) *I avoid people who are different from me* ($z = -3.321, p < .01$), (b) *I do not know anyone from another country* ($z = -7.113, p < .01$), (c) *I am nervous when I meet people who speak a different language than I speak* ($z = -2.485, p < .05$), (d) *I enjoy studying about people from other countries* ($z = -2.282, p < .05$), (e) *I enjoy meeting and getting to know people from other countries* ($z = -2.483, p < .05$), (f) *It is important to know the location of countries, oceans, mountains, and capital cities* ($z = -1.956, p = .05$), and (g) *It is important to learn about other countries* ($z = -4.289, p < .01$).

Table 3

Wilcoxon Test

Item Pair	<i>z</i>	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Post: I avoid people who are different from me – Pre: I avoid people who are different from me	-3.321 ^a	.001
Post: I do not know anyone from another country – Pre: I do not know anyone from another country	-7.113 ^a	.001
Post: I am nervous when I meet people who speak a different language than I speak – Pre: I am nervous when I meet people who speak a different language than I speak	-2.485 ^a	.013
Post: I enjoy studying about people from other countries – Pre: I enjoy studying about people from other countries	-2.282 ^a	.023
Post: I enjoy meeting and getting to know people from other countries – Pre: I enjoy meeting and getting to know people from other countries	-2.483 ^a	.013
Post: It is important to know the location of countries, oceans, mountains, and capital cities – Pre: It is important to know the location of countries, oceans, mountains, and capital cities	-1.956 ^b	.050
Post: It is important to learn about other countries – Pre: It is important to learn about other countries	-4.289 ^b	.000

^aBased on positive ranks. ^bBased on negative ranks. ^cWilcoxon Signed Ranks Test.

The significant change (see Table 3) demonstrates that the Friendship Journey experience positively impacted the students who participated in this program. The survey revealed that being exposed to cultural differences could spark a desire to learn more about people from other countries. This significant finding supports the Catholic Church's global awareness and solidarity, multicultural perspectives, and international relationships (Cook, 2008). The results from this survey also support that the goals of developing a global perspective are consistent with the faith-based values of Catholicism.

The nature in which this survey was developed prevents us from drawing any large-scale generalizations. No studies were conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument. As such, readers should view any conclusions solely based on the survey with hesitation. At the same time, we feel that the weight of this study came from the stories told by the students who participated in the Friendship Journey experience. The long-term social impact of making friends with people from another country is difficult to measure in a quantitative format. Next, we present findings from our analysis of the qualitative data.

Qualitative Findings

Overcoming language barriers. The qualitative data set included semi-structured focus groups designed to provide students an opportunity to talk about the Friendship Journey experience. In these sessions, participants reported that they had some initial trepidation and concerns about interacting with visiting students because they viewed language differences as a barrier. Representative comments included statements such as "I was really nervous because I didn't know what language they spoke" and "It would be hard to talk to them." However, students learned that they could communicate in ways that transcended the language barrier. One student described her initial fears in this manner: "I was nervous and shy at first but then when my person was like at our house for a couple of days, I got to know more and it was like we had known each other for a really long time."

Many students shared that the best way to begin conversations or exchanges was simply to smile at the visitors. As one student profoundly stated, "Smile is the universal language." Other students remarked that it was beneficial to focus on activities that they both enjoyed when spending time with one another. "We couldn't really talk that well, but we could do activities that we both really knew well and it was just fun." Some students found

that common interests were a bridge that helped build the beginning of their relationship. One learner described her connection to the visiting students in this way:

I thought we had a lot of the same personalities and they were like open to us and stuff so we could kind of say, 'I like elephants' and they would say, 'Oh, I like elephants, too' and then we would just get along and learn things about each other.

The seventh- and eighth-grade students had the greatest level of participation and opportunities to interact with the visiting students. However, the faculty designed the week's activities to ensure that all Nativity students had the opportunity to meet and work with as many of the visiting students as possible. All seventh- and eighth-grade students and the visiting students were assigned to heterogeneous teams for the week. The faculty decision to form heterogeneous teams that would remain together throughout the week was strategic. Visiting other classrooms as a team gave students an opportunity to bond within their groups while exploring diverse points of view. Each team participated in four different science lessons in four classrooms over the course of the week. On the first day of the Friendship Journey, Principal Bob Herring explained the team strategy thusly:

What we are trying to do is to bring students together, bring students together in a fun atmosphere, a good place, in order to build relationships across national boundaries. We are going to do this through science, through exploring different scientific concepts. Students in kindergarten through eighth grade will have the opportunity to meet students from different countries, from different cultures, from different traditions, and they'll be able to foster those friendships, those relationships through exploring different concepts in science. (B. Herring, personal communication, September 27, 2010)

The science lessons delivered during the Friendship Journey focused on topics of study from the grade-level curricula. Topics ranged from life science (first-grade exploration of earthworms) to earth science (sixth-grade study of plate tectonics) to physical science (fourth-grade study of forces of motion). Researchers noted in their observation logs that teachers conducted the science lessons with a serious focus on academics, clearly stating the academic

expectations and intended outcomes of the science learning. The students appeared to be serious in their focus and intellectually engaged. One sixth-grade teacher commented on the authenticity of the experience:

It is just always amazing to me when you put young people together and allow them to share about real things. The interesting conversations they have and the real learning that happens which is the stuff that I can't write in my lesson book. When they interact together, even when there is a language barrier, they understand one another and come up with the most interesting learning experiences. I am always surprised.

Discovering connections through the study of science topics also helped students to connect socially. One fourth-grade teacher, whose students were studying force and motion, noted that students quickly found points of mutual interest:

I think they become very comfortable so they start to find similarities, like, 'I want to use a pair of shoes too,' or 'My name is Elana and your name is Elana, and we are from separate countries.' And I think they also find they see some universal interests. They all want to have fun and they just jump in and work as a team with just a brief introduction. I see them say, 'Hello,' to one another in the hallway more often afterwards because they still see themselves as part of the same team.

The schedule also provided students opportunities to interact over lunch and recess, during art and music classes, and during an afternoon "field day," in which teams of students participated in a variety of physical activity competitions.

Structured activities planned by the faculty—such as science experiments and field day activities—provided authentic and meaningful opportunities for the students to learn about one another. One student observed, "Well the whole thing was around science and that was cool and we got to learn about other peoples' culture and them and we also learned more about science and stuff." Many of the students shared that the opportunity to work with the visitors to accomplish a problematic science experiment effectively provided both a purpose for interacting and a platform for meaningful exchange. One student explained that his initial perception of the visitors being very different from him and other classmates was disproved during their work as a team

to conduct a science experiment: “They were like the exact opposite of what I thought. They all came to our class to do an experiment, and we were like we knew each other for like our entire lives.” Another student shared that she was able to appreciate and value the differences between herself and the visitors while working together during class activities: “I felt it was good because we were able to participate with them and really get to know them and learn they aren’t so different. But they do have differences, and that makes it a little more interesting.”

Differences and similarities. Many of the students expressed that they had had preconceptions about the visitors when they first saw them and prior to meeting them: “Before you get to know them you make some stereotypes as soon as you see them.” Some of the students were initially focused on superficial differences, such as the way the visitors dressed or their hairstyles. One student recalled, “Also some of the clothes they wore. Like when I first saw them I was like ‘that’s a little odd,’ but then when I started talking to them I realized that it didn’t even matter that they were similar to me and different.” However, the students as a whole seemed to easily put aside the differences in appearance and focus on the visitors as people whom the students were genuinely interested in getting to know, not strangers. Comments such as the following were representative of the upper level students at the conclusion of the Friendship Journey experience:

I think that you like saw the differences at first but then you saw the similarities. But you still kind of knew they were different. They were there but . . . you didn’t really focus on those. You just kind of focused on getting to know the person for who they were.

The students seemed to accept the differences as cultural definers and focus on the similarities. One student concluded, “Well, they are all people and they all have emotions and you know we’re part of the same people and we’re all equal except for the fact that they speak different languages and have different customs.” Other students made similar comments, suggesting that they accepted and respected the cultural differences while capitalizing on the similarities as way to find common ground:

But, what is it that makes us similar is what’s important. You can base your conversation on that, or you can talk about the differences but it’s not in a mean way like, “You’re wrong. You can’t do that.” You try to find a way to mix them both so you can bring peace between you two.

Students appeared to understand that differences between themselves and the visitors existed but that the similarities could foster communication. Friendship or peace could be achieved through respectful recognition of their similarities and differences. One student summed up his experience in this way: “Really if we get to know a little bit, at least a little bit about every single culture, then we could probably bring peace throughout by mixing all the differences to find some neutral way between everyone.”

Many of the students expressed that the experiences of interacting and communicating with the visitors helped them advance their “knowledge of similarities among humans” to a genuine belief and understanding that God made all people equal. One student expressed his moment of insight in this manner:

I thought it was kind of cool to . . . see or like meet people that live, you know, far away but like the same things you do, or are interested in the same things you are. I mean, it’s one of those things where you’re always told—I mean you kind of know it—but it’s one of those things where you don’t believe. You’re like, ‘Yeah sure, whatever,’ and then you actually figure that out and it’s like, ‘Oh, wow!’

The Friendship Journey provided many students the opportunity to experience people with cultural, geographic, and economic differences and to recognize these people as being very similar to them. One student compared her preconceptions to the reality of her experience in this way: “Well, when you hear the word *foreign* you kind of think really different like in a lot of ways, but when they came they were like friends.” Students reported that their positive experiences with becoming acquainted with the visitors incited their intellectual curiosity to meet more people from other cultures and to learn more about their own culture. One student remarked, “It kind of makes me realize that there are other countries out there that are, that have differences with us and similarities, and it would be good to meet, or know something about each one and respect their country.” Many of the students expressed the idea that the experience of getting to know someone from another culture could help prepare them for traveling to (or living in) another country. The following comment is representative of this impression:

I think it’s very important to know about other people’s cultures and the way they live so that if you want to go to a different place, you’ll

know how they live and won't think it's different and weird, just think it's different. It's great that people don't live all the same because that's what makes people unique, and I think that it's really cool that people from all over the world get to have different lifestyles and have other ways of living.

Stereotypes and bias. Aside from comments some students offered about being aware of the differences in the visitors' appearances, the students appeared to be very open-minded and accepting of diversity among people. The following is a typical comment in this category: "We meet a lot of people from different countries that we might have had stereotypes about them, but then we learned that they're actually similar to us and that they do the same things as us." Although no student admitted to holding stereotypes, learners at Nativity saw the Friendship Journey as an opportunity to prevent the development of stereotypes they regarded as prevalent among other people. One student described the benefits of the Friendship Journey thusly:

A lot of people think that people from different cultures are like aliens. So when they come to our school we think, oh, I don't want to get to know them because they're aliens. It's nice to have this Friendship Journey because you get to know them and you get to know that they're not much different than us and that they have characteristics and personality and that they're not much different than us. And they're not aliens.

Students appeared to understand that stereotypes create unnecessary barriers between people and involved generalizations that are typically untrue. The following comment was representative of students' conclusions in this area:

One of the world issues is that we're all suffering the same problem. We stereotype each other in ways that make each other feel awkward about each other. That the Americans think that the Chinese are smart people that are nerds while they think that we are people who wear nice clothes. They think we wear nice clothes.

Other comments suggested that students shared a belief in the importance of avoiding a superior nationalistic attitude. One student expressed her concern in this manner:

I think some benefits is we learned how people are different but we learned how they are the same and it brought us closer to different people so you won't think 'Oh Americans are the best' so we will think everybody is.

World perspective. A recurring theme throughout all focus group interviews was that the students saw themselves as world citizens, with an understanding that their neighborhood, city, and country were just small parts of the world puzzle. As one student observed, "The world's not just Cincinnati, or just Ohio, or just the United States." Nativity students also felt that their experiences with citizens of other countries made the world seem smaller than they had previously thought. One student described the evolution of her thinking, explaining:

I think I definitely have thought about this differently, and I think that I think we are all closer and Europe is just not some faraway place that I don't know anything about [because] now I know more about it..

Students attributed this feeling of a smaller world to their experiences of meeting and spending time with students from other countries. One student proudly concluded, "Since I know . . . everyone—well not everyone, but people from around the world—I feel like the world is smaller and smaller and closer and closer to world peace."

The Nativity school principal viewed the Friendship Journey as a unique experience of growth for each student, noting that the collective experiences of students nurtured a culture of hopefulness for a better world:

Different students will take advantage of the opportunity in different ways, depending on where they are in their own personal journeys. But we provide that opportunity—the setting and the characters, if you will—for interaction. Then, it is up to them to take advantage of that. What the evidence shows us is that a lot of the kids are ready for the experience. Their curiosity is piqued and they begin to explore. They begin to take the chance to go out and to initiate conversation, to begin talking to other students. It all happens at different levels, at different times, and at different rates. But by providing that opportunity for kids, we believe that ultimately the world will be changed, at least our corner of it. (B. Herring, personal communication, September 27, 2010)

Conclusions

Findings from this study revealed that students gained an appreciation for diverse cultures through the social interaction they experienced during the five-day Friendship Journey event. In spite of the Nativity School curriculum focus on global awareness, the pre-event survey responses contained surprising data regarding students' comfort with people of other countries who spoke languages different from their own. Student responses indicated a greater likelihood of avoiding people who were different from themselves and more uneasiness about meeting people who spoke another language prior to the Friendship experience. One interpretation of this data might be that students were academically prepared for the visit but emotionally and socially unprepared, as evidenced by their pre-event doubts and fears. This finding is corroborated by the data collected through semistructured interviews and focus groups. Whereas students commented on superficial differences (i.e., physical appearance and clothing), many expressed their delight at discovering that they had much more in common with the visiting students than they previously thought. Students also noted that their previsit concerns regarding communication were not nearly as problematic as they had anticipated. Many found that simple communication could take place through facial expressions, gestures, and body language. The principal and several teachers also perceived an initial hesitance in the hosting students, which gradually disappeared as students had opportunities to work together on science projects and interact socially during leisure activities, such as recess and lunch.

Although ongoing academic study and book knowledge allowed students to learn about countries and their cultures, this factual knowledge became more meaningful and relevant after the Friendship Journey. Face-to-face interactions with visitors from other countries allowed the young people in this sample to forge personal connections to cultures other than their own. While the pre- and post-test survey data revealed some changes in students' beliefs and attitudes, interviews and observations provided substantial evidence of students' evolving awareness and respect for other cultures. Students in this sample appreciated the opportunity to meet with age-like peers from different cultures. The tangible connections they formed produced young people who have a greater appreciation for our global community.

This study also suggests that the structured approach to the interactions of students provided a forum for students to maintain their individual cultural identity while assimilating the identity of others. While participating in sci-

ence learning, students were motivated to reduce stereotypes and to develop more accurate social perceptions of one another. The “common ground” created by familiar academic content provided students with a comfort zone for engaging in an exploration of their preconceived ideas, enabling them to transcend their initial beliefs and form new perceptions and understanding.

The results of this study cannot be generalized to all elementary and middle-grade settings; however, this investigation suggests that classroom experiences alone may not be enough to reduce stereotypes and barriers to understanding. Further research is warranted to determine whether the positive impact of the Friendship Journey experience had a lasting effect on the students who participated in it and whether it is possible to reap some of the benefits of the face-to-face experience without incurring the expense of international travel. Although this research looks specifically at the impact of face-to-face interactions, future studies might also explore the potential of collaborative learning through technologies such as video conferencing, social media, or shared wiki spaces in a school setting similar to that of Nativity, where global awareness and cultural understanding are high priorities in the social studies curriculum.

The findings of this study may be useful to the Church in its efforts to promote cultural awareness, and specifically to Catholic schools as they endeavor to integrate international awareness, intercultural socialization, and intercultural competency into their social studies curriculum. We share the following lessons learned:

Preparing for International Guests

There were layers of preparation involved in the Friendship Journey. Nativity School worked with the International School-to-School Experience (ISSE) and a highly committed group of parents who served as fundraisers and host families. Schools that are interested in replicating the Friendship Journey should plan on investing a minimum of two years in planning and preparing for an international visit.

Academic Preparation

Nativity School places special emphasis on global education through the study of Spanish and Chinese in grades K–8, school-wide study of nations and cultures, and a capstone project that focuses on intercultural competence.

(The theme of the 2010 Capstone was “460 Weeks to Change the World.”) Nativity teachers weave global themes into cross-disciplinary lessons throughout the school year. In short, students were intellectually primed for the visit with their peers from other countries. This state of readiness undoubtedly contributed to the success of the visit documented in this study.

Social and Emotional Preparation

At the onset of the visit, Nativity students reported that they were both excited and anxious about meeting their visitors from other countries. Although they did not directly admit to feelings of prejudice or stereotyping, some of students’ focus group comments suggested that those feelings may have existed. It is unlikely that any amount of previsit preparation can eradicate the human tendency to fear the unknown. Although schools may focus in the weeks preceding a visit on the importance of creating a welcoming community, it may be equally important to acknowledge children’s anxieties. It is also important to note that the goal of the Friendship Journey is not to eliminate all feelings of otherness and difference but to provide a positive and enduring experience with people of other countries, languages, and cultures that will become permanently interwoven into each child’s worldview.

Real Work; Real Friendship

In 2010, students convened around problems in science. With real work to do and the universal language of science to ground them, students found ways to communicate that transcended ordinary language. The 2013 Friendship Journey was likewise focused around project-based learning. In a team setting, students learned valuable lessons about working collaboratively to solve problems in addition to getting to know one another in an environment that was natural and known to them—*school*. The focus on academics took the pressure off social skills, making friendship a little easier to attain.

Final Thoughts

In a 2012 TEDxCincinnati presentation, Nativity Principal Bob Herring addressed the audience with this question, “Are kids able to change the world?” The answer to this question is not merely rhetorical. In the faith community that surrounds Nativity school, children are changing the world in many ways—by motivating and inspiring the adults who care for them, by strengthening the identity and purpose of their school, and by demonstrating that hope and love—nourished by the Gospel—make humans capable of transcending borders to seek peace in our time.

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