

## **“Where’s Belize, Anyway?” Exploring Multiculturalism in the Primary Classroom**

When I first decided that I wanted to use my own experience with Belize as a foundation for my inquiry project, it wasn’t just the simple fact that Belize seemed like an interesting place for my students to experience that influenced my decision. As I planned my second spring break trip to a country with which I had already fallen in love, memories of the smells, tastes, feelings, and emotions that were so profound in bonding me to the country gave me reasons to wish to expose my students to the culture of Belize.

### **Background Information**

I can still taste the sweet smell of juicy, fresh pineapple and hear the sound of the crisp waves hitting against the wall of the bay outside my hotel. The warm, humid air is stifling at times, licking my face and arms—the humidity a drink for my parched Pennsylvania skin. I remember driving along dusty limestone roads in a fifteen-passenger van, sometimes on the left side of the road in a country where everyone drives on the right, to avoid the jarring grooves scarring the crude white pavement. The flat countryside leads to flatter, endless countryside as we take a right at the Pepsi billboard bus stop and the roads become more dangerous—this time with children parading, oblivious to the speeding cars and humongous sugarcane trucks, along its shoulders and scrawny dogs sleeping directly in the line of traffic. We are entering the parts of the country where many visitors will never go—often because time in Belize is spent taking advantage of the luxurious tropical islands right off the coast. The usual pastimes of snorkeling and scuba diving to see astonishingly beautiful ocean creatures captivate foreigners’ unintentionally exploiting eyes.

We take another right into a small village called Cristo Rey where dozens of pairs of swiftly darting eyes belonging to the brown-skinned inhabitants quickly turn to rest upon our group—sallow, pallid strangers—in an otherwise uninterrupted community. The skinny dogs we passed earlier only multiply as we enter the village. We literally have to honk, stop the van, and practically bump into the dogs to get them to move. A small group of children run alongside the van, waiting excitedly as we lurch to a halt in our huge, dust-covered vehicle.

A short walk around the streets of Cristo Rey reveals some of the most amazing creations I have ever seen. Beautiful pink and red flowers the size of large fruits are tucked into the corners of each yard. Brightly hued crocheted hammocks find their homes in delightful little outdoor pavilions called palapas, built from thin, tropical wood and covered in thatched-leaf roofs. A small child trots over to me, her huge brown sparkling eyes questioning my very presence. My overwhelming American style of greeting children bombards the quiet little girl—“HOLA! Como estas?” I exclaim. She whispers a hushed, gentle, “Hola.” in return, her small frame almost wafting in the gentle tropical breeze. With a warm smile, I invite her to take me to her home, where I meet one of the many gracious families who will prepare our meals and open their homes to us in the evenings.

I have returned to Belize for my weeklong spring break to teach sixth and seventh grade in the Presbyterian Day School in Cristo Rey for a week. I will teach most of the same students whom I taught last year. The rest of our team is involved in a few other projects as well—some are teachers like me, others are working on the construction crew, and a few are setting up a computer lab at the brand-new high school. I am eager to see my students and friends from last year. Katie, one of the little girls I befriended last March, leads me to her small home at the end

of the dusty road through the middle of Cristo Rey. I never visited their house the last time I was here, so I am excited to see where they live.

The Nah's—Hilario, Natalie, and Danae, Katie's sister—open their door, excited to have a group of Americans there to visit. They show us their pink painted walls adorned with lacy doilies and large photos of their ornate wedding. The long kitchen table is covered with a bright assortment of foods—their smells permeating our noses. Crisp, golden-brown fried tortillas called fried-jacks are heaped onto a platter; a clear glass bowl is full of bright yellow pineapple and another piled high with the dark red-orange flesh of papaya; as well as a dish full of the soft purple-brown color of colado, or refried beans.

The smells, the tastes, the sounds, the sights, and the feelings found when visiting a place like Cristo Rey are, at the least, overpowering, and in some ways, so dilapidated, outdated, impoverished, and shattered that one may wonder about the attraction of it all. But the richness of this place—in its sweet fruits of pineapple, papaya, mango, coconut, and plantains; in its people who continuously give without expecting anything in return; in its laughing, smiling children, quiet at first, but quickly shifting to loving friends; in its thick rainforests, abundant with the bright reds, greens, blues, and yellows of macaws and parrots and the shrieking sounds of the howler monkeys, their spidery arms and legs swaying between branches and vines. Cristo Rey was immediately a place with which I fell in love as well as a place I developed a passion to learn about.

It is essential for one to understand my deep appreciation for the little country of Belize, found northeast of Guatemala and south of Mexico on the Yucatan Peninsula. With this story, I wanted to paint a picture that reveals the connection I had and still have for this place. Herein lies my motivation to explore the possibility of teaching my first and second graders in State

College about Belize. As an intern in the Penn State University Professional Development School at Park Forest Elementary, I have been teaching in a first and second-grade split classroom. The yearlong internship provides me with the opportunity to have many classroom experiences—including the Belize inquiry research I explored through this project.

As I left Belize for the first time, I was filled with the emotion of separating from a group of people with whom I had developed strong connections and from a place where the temperature, the food, the smells, and the natural environment were all just right for me. I learned so much about their culture—about money, food, sports, activities, lifestyle, clothing, economics, occupations, the system of education, plants, and animals—and all of it was so fascinating that I wanted to be able to share this place with my students here in State College. I think about the fact that my students here might never get the chance to leave the country, and I want them to be able to experience or taste Belize in some way. As I prepared for my second trip to Belize, I began to form wonderings about the possibility of bringing the culture of Belize to my students. As I explored this possibility, the purpose for my inquiry research began to take root. I wanted to connect my experiences in Belize with my first and second grade students within the classroom.

Children's knowledge and understanding of places outside their homes is limited to the information they receive within books, internet, and paper resources unless they have experienced traveling to another place. Usually those resources are not primary resources—or resources collected directly from the place. By using myself as a primary resource to link my students to a place they cannot presently visit, I wanted to use what I know and learn in Belize to make connections for my students about the culture of the country.

Primary children are also limited by their perspective of the world, usually an egocentric one. Most children can only visualize as far as the boundaries in which they have traveled. A map of a country can only give a child a limited amount of information about where the place actually is—it usually means nothing more than a pretty picture of shapes and colors. Unless they have traveled to a place outside of their own country, it is difficult to bring understanding to the idea of other cultures outside their own. By going to Belize and bringing back primary resources for my students to use to discover the culture of Belize, I hope to bring a better understanding of Belizean culture to them.

With a foundational purpose to fuel my inquiry research, I developed a wondering that I hoped to answer through my research:

*How can I teach my first and second grade students about the culture of Belize in a developmentally appropriate way?*

In addition, a subset of more specific questions pinpointing the specific methods I would use to teach my students about the culture of Belize:

- *Can primary students even understand another culture?*
- *What methods could I use to make the culture real to them?*
- *Can I help my students “see” Belize without actually going there?*
- *Will photo artifacts that I collect in Belize allow my students to discover and understand different aspects of Belizean culture?*
- *How can I connect my students to the people of Belize in a personal away?*
- *Can I use Belizean food to help my students experience and understand more about Belize? How can I show the difference between the foods of the US and Belize and the*

*difference between running to the grocery store and surviving on things that grow outside?*

- *Can I use Latin American music to reveal one aspect of the culture to my students?*
- *Can I help my students “create” Belize in our classroom and have it be a learning experience?*

### **Inquiry Plan**

After developing my wonderings, I developed a system of collecting data for my research. My research involved many hands-on activities and lessons that brought different aspects of Belizean culture to my students. I tried to find resources about teaching a culture to primary students; however, I had little luck in doing so. I decided to take as much as I knew about Belize along with some internet and paper resources about the country itself, to create a type of mini-unit about the country. Based on my prior experience in the country, I knew I could bring back artifacts, photos, and memories about the country that would be valuable to my students’ understanding of the country when I went for the second time.

Initially, I began talking about Belize with my students to give them an idea of where it is, some of its characteristics, and what I would be doing there. Since most people, not just first and second-graders, have not heard of Belize and do not know where it is, I thought I should give them a small background of the country. When we first talked about my trip, I told my students that I wanted them to learn about Belize from things I could bring back—artifacts. Nelson (1998) describes artifacts as, “materials...that define the culture, such as automobiles, chairs, tools, weapons, and clothing” (p. 54). I taught a short lesson about artifacts to make sure they knew what an artifact is. Together we made a list of all of the different artifacts that would tell us more

about Belize. They were very excited about the possibility of seeing new things from Belize and then together we came up with the idea of collecting things that I could take with me to show my students in Belize so that I could teach them about our American culture.

At first, I wanted the experience to be an exchange between two cultures. I wanted to be able to teach my students in Belize about America and teach my students in State College about Belize. My students in Belize—a group of fifth and sixth-graders last year—had looped to the sixth and seventh grades and were still in the same classroom with their teacher, Mr. Medina. I knew in advance that I would work with the same children, so I had an idea of some of the things they did. As the trip grew closer, I realized that I wanted to focus my artifact collection and research on teaching my American students. With only one week to spend in Belize, if I worried too much about teaching my students there, I would lose critical time and energy that could be spent on the focus of my inquiry—teaching my first and second-graders about Belize.

When I met with my State College students for the first time to discuss things to take with me, they were thrilled that they would be able to share some of Park Forest with the kids in Belize. First, we brainstormed a list of photographs that I needed to take of things in our school so that the Belizean kids would know what it looked like. They came up with all sorts of ideas—our principal, Ms. Stoicovy with our school dog, Sade; the music room, art room, library, and gym; the cafeteria and their lunches; the bathrooms; the Nittany Lion Shrine; our class pets, other teachers, and the custodian; and a picture of the class. Together, we also decided on some items for me to take to Belize. My students asked many questions about things that Belizeans already had so that the things I took with me were native to the States. It was comical to hear the questions they had, mostly stemming from their ignorance of Belize. Some questions were perplexing and others were windows into my students' cultural thinking perspective:

- *Do they have jewelry?*
- *Do they have socks?*
- *What color is their skin?*
- *What color is their hair?*
- *Do they have a whiteboard?*
- *Do they have chalk?*
- *Do they have lapboards?*
- *Where do they eat lunch? Do they have a cafeteria?*
- *Do they have busses?*
- *What do they eat for dinner?*

After the period of questioning where I answered some of their questions, we came up with a list of things for me to take to Belize. They included a camouflage hat, gum, peanut butter, a hockey puck, tens & ones blocks, chocolate chip cookies, and American money. Most of these items were my students' ideas. They knew that Belize was a warm place, so the camouflage hat represented our cold, snowy winter. They asked if Belizeans had gum or peanut butter and I told them they were not things they had very often. Then we decided that I should take that too. Then one of my students asked about math manipulatives—a word I hadn't heard until I came to State College. I knew that the Belizean schools probably did not place a high priority on reformed mathematics, so my students' comfort with using manipulatives was something that showed their math experience. As I thought about how my students wanted to show the Belizean kids their tens and ones blocks, I realized how important my students' experiences were for determining the things they wanted me to take. We were currently studying place value and working on tens and ones at the time that we had this discussion, therefore it was something important for my

students to show the Belizean kids. One of my student's mothers offered to bake chocolate chip cookies—an American kids' food staple. The hockey puck was my mentor's idea. She offered that to the discussion, and then asked why Belizeans probably would not have hockey pucks. I already saw great inquiry happening when one student responded by saying that it's too hot in Belize for ice hockey.

After deciding on these items, I allowed my students to ask some more questions—things I wanted to try to answer through my artifact collection:

- *What kinds of toys do they have?*
- *What do they use to eat? Do they use chopsticks?*
- *What language do they speak? Chinese? French?*
- *Do they have cable or satellite dishes?*
- *Do they have plumbing?*
- *Do they have electricity?*

Next, I developed a pre-assessment (Appendix A.1) of my students' knowledge about Belize. Although I had given them some information about the country already, I wanted to find out about their preconceptions of the country. I developed the pre-assessment based on some of the questions they asked during our discussion. See Appendix A. I asked them to identify what part of the continent Belize is in and where it is on a map and asked some questions derived from the wonderings my students had about the country.

Almost all of my students satisfactorily completed the pre-assessment. As soon as I began to read the results, I was shocked at what they already knew what they thought they knew. Four of my students could identify the country on a map of North and Central America. Ten students

circled places on the map that were close to Belize. Five students either did not circle anything or circled places far away from Belize on the map.

The first response question, *What do you think the people in Belize look like?* generated some very interesting responses. One student wrote, “I think the people look like chinese,” while others used words like, pretty, rugged, and African American. Another student wrote this on her paper, “I think they look all different. With brown skin and black hair. Some with yellow skin and brown hair.” Another question, *What clothes do they wear in Belize?* also generated some interesting responses. “Tuxedos and dresses” was one child’s response. “Rugged clothes” and “hot clothes” were two other responses. The question, *What food do they eat in Belize?* was typically answered based on their own experience. Foods like corn on the cob, chicken nuggets, waffles, pork chops, hot dogs, and pizza were typical foods that my students would eat. However, another group of students related what they knew about Belize—that it is near the water and that it is warm there—to respond to the food questions with answers such as: shrimp, seafood, clams, tropical fruit, and fish.

After reading the pre-assessments, I had to wonder what influenced my students’ responses to the questions. Some of their answers seemed as if they were randomly pulled out of the sky—“I think the people look like chinese” or “tuxedos and dresses”—but must have been influenced by something they had seen or heard. The responses to the food question were easy to analyze. Some children chose foods that they always eat and assumed that Belizeans must eat them too. Other children knew that Belize is a warm place near the water and chose foods that reflected the climate and location of the country.

After the pre-assessment, I used pen-pal letters to connect my students to the people of Belize in a personal way. I knew it would be easy to bring tangible things back from Belize, but

other than photographs and video clips, there was not a good way to capture the thoughts and ideas of a Belizean child. I wanted my State College students to form personal connections with my Belizean students. I had my students write letters to the kids in Belize, asking questions about their country, their customs, and their school. Together we brainstormed ideas for the letters. My students had great ideas. They came up with questions such as, *What do you do for fun? Do you have recess? What projects do you make?* as well as topics to ask about like toys, clothes, sports, animals, food, hobbies, class pets, drinks, clothing, money, cars, books, insects, and the ocean. (Appendix A.2)

Once again, their letters were written about their own experiences. Rather than thinking of new things that Belizeans might have or do, most of my students asked questions about things they already experienced. “Do you have any class pets?” and “What greetings do you do in morning meeting?” were questions that my students assumed could be answered. Had they thought that the Belizean kids might not have class pets or do morning meeting? A few of my students asked questions that reflected their prior knowledge about Belize. “Where do you go fishing?” and “Do you go swimming in the ocean?” were two examples of questions that showed that these students were thinking about where Belize is when they wrote their letters.

After writing letters, the next step in my inquiry plan was to actually go to Belize. I took the letters with me to Belize and handed them out to my Belizean students. My Belizean students then had a chance to read and respond to their letters. While I was there, I collected artifacts with a digital camera in order to capture as many sights and moments as I could. I took small video clips of several of the sights and sounds that I thought would be helpful for my students to see. I also collected a few items to bring back—including seashells and pen-pal letter responses.

When I returned from Belize, I had plenty of information collected from the country that I wanted my students to discover. I started by sharing the letters that my Belizean students wrote to my State College students. (Appendix A.3) They, in turn, wrote their second letters to the Belizean kids. (Appendix A.4)

Next, we looked at photographs and videos that I recorded while I was in Belize. I used PowerPoint presentations and an interactive SmartBoard to show the photos and videos. For the photographic PowerPoint, I placed a photo with a multiple-choice question on each slide. Then, as a class, my students went through the photo artifacts and used information that they already knew to discover more about Belizean culture. Through the video PowerPoint presentation, I gave my students a list of questions to think about for each video. There were five videos, each taking place in a different setting. I showed a video of a girl's pet parrot and asked, "What color is her parrot? What is her parrot's name? When does her parrot talk?" For the video of children playing a game, I asked, "What do you have to do in this game? Have you ever seen a game like this? Do they look like they're having fun?" I asked, "Does this look like our cafeteria? Who do you think the lady in the beginning is? Compare her to someone in our cafeteria" for the lunchroom video. For the recess video I asked, "What are the boys playing?" For the classroom video, I asked, "What do you notice about their classroom? What do you notice about the kids? Did they have any school supplies like we do?" Then, after I showed them each video, we talked about what the people were doing in the videos and answered the questions. To assess my students' learning about the differences and similarities between the Belizean and American cultures, I had them draw and write about what they learned. (Appendix A.5)

The next step in my inquiry plan was to use a video documentary about Latin American music called *Roots of Rhythm* to introduce the difference between Latin American and American

music. I showed different clips from the video that highlighted some of the instruments, singing, dancing, food, and clothing that are part of Latin music. As a class, we discussed some similarities and differences of Latin American and American music and then I had my students draw and write about something they learned from the video—an instrument, clothing, food, or how it made them feel. (Appendix A.6)

My students' responses to the music video were varied. Some students simply noticed that the people wore different clothes or played different instruments. "They usealy [usually] ware [wear] red and other brite coloers like yellow. My favorite micicel [musical] instermint was the thumb guitar but my favarite when the peple were singing about there gods," wrote one student, who was one student who picked up facts, not interpretations from the information. Others wrote comments like, "The musik sond [sounded] werd [weird]," or "The singers in the video sang diffly [differently] then amarcin [American] singers." One student drew a very colorful picture with "The musik sounds like Indein musik," written across the top. Another student wrote, "The music makes me feel exsided!!" on her paper. These students were able to compare the music or describe its influence on their own feelings.

After looking at the music of Belize, I taught my students about some of the foods in Belize. On Belizean Food Day, I prepared pineapple, papaya, mango, coconut, fried plantains (Appendix A.7), coconut rice (Appendix A.7), and black beans for my students to try. I showed them pictures (Appendix A.8) of some of the different fruit trees using websites and an LCD projector. Then we split and cut the fruits and my students tasted them. They filled out a worksheet (Appendix A.9) about the fruits and answered the question, "What is different about where we get our fruits and where Belizeans get theirs? Why do you think so?" One of the main ideas I wanted my students to understand was that the climate of Belize is warm, thus allowing

fruits to grow year-round that can be picked right from the trees. However, I wanted them to figure that out on their own.

After discussing the types of trees the fruits came from and then looking and tasting them, most of my students were able to answer the question. One student wrote, “They get theirs from trees and we buy ours. Because there is fruit trees near their house.” Another student wrote, “People ship far away fruits to state college and belizeans just pick their fruit from a tree.” A third student thoughtfully responded: “We get awereas [ours] at the store and they get theirs of [off] a tree. The reisin [reason] way [why] we get awereas [ours] at the store because we have a lot of cold weather. The Belizens people have warmer weather.” (Appendix A.8) Many of my students were able to figure out that the warm weather in Belize allows tropical fruits to grow on trees that can be picked year-round and that we usually have to buy fruits at the grocery store because it is not warm enough for them to grow here year-round.

One of the next activities I had my students complete was to draw and write something they learned about Belize. I gave them blank white construction paper during the morning work time. I wanted to find out what they were learning and what was the most profound information for them. Almost every student chose to write about some aspect of the nature of Belize, probably because we had recently talked about some of the fruits, trees, and animals. Some responses were, “Belizeans get their fruit from their trees. They don’t have electricity. They live near water. They have lots of fruit,” “It is hot out. Fruit grows anywhere. They can pick fruit from anywhere. It is near the ocean. They wear uniforms at school,” and “I know that there are beautiful flowers in Belize and their flowers are colorful.” The retention of different pieces of information I had taught them so far was amazing. Some students remembered that Belizean kids wear uniforms to school while others thought that the coconuts or flowers were more important.

One of the culminating steps of my inquiry plan was to create our own rainforest in the classroom. I taught a lesson on rainforests using the *Passport to Knowledge* website (Haines-Stiles). The next day, we had Belize Creation Stations, where each student was part of one of four teams—Flowers and Fruit, Monkeys and Butterflies, Leaves and Vines, or Birds—and worked with their team to create their aspect of the rainforest. Then, each student was required to write about why their object was important to Belize on an index card and fill out a worksheet about their creation. (Appendix A.12) Each student was required to draw and write about what they made and answer the questions: *Why is it special to Belize?*, *How is it used?*, *What does it tell you about Belize?*, and *Would this think survive in Pennsylvania?*

My students' work showed inquiry thinking. Not only were they making things like coconuts, scarlet macaws, leaves with drip tips, and flowers, but also they were also able to explain *why* these things lived in Belize. One student wrote, "Macaws are in Belize not here because it is hot there, but it is not hot here as much. Belizeans have a rainforest. It is hotter there." In a video clip of the creation stations, I interviewed one of my students about the leaf she was creating. I asked, "Why does the leaf have a drip tip?" She responded, "It has a drip tip because the rain falls off and if it stayed on, the leaf would get soggy and die."

After creating their own things to put in the rainforest, I set up the vines and trees, hung birds and flowers, and even used donated plants and flowers from local florists to make the rainforest look real. I played rainforest sounds in our rainforest, and the next day—Belize Day—my students were able to see the finished product. Their reactions were wonderful. I could quickly see that the rainforest looked and felt realistic to my students as they looked up at the canopy, pointed at birds and monkeys, responded to the noises they heard, and discovered different parts of the rainforest.

I had my students dress in blue bottoms and white tops to represent Belizean school uniforms. One student walked in and showed me his outfit, to which I exclaimed, “You look like a Belizean!” Later that day, when his mother picked him up, he immediately told her, “Mom, Miss Vozel said I look like a Belizean!”

During morning meeting, we collected stuffed animals and decided which ones could live in the rainforest and which ones could not. Then students took turns placing them in the rainforest. Then, the morning was spent working on writing about the rainforest my students created. I had a simple checklist of topics they had to include in their writing—the layers of the rainforest, fruits, leaves, mammals, birds, reptiles, flowers—as well as a reminder that they had to do their best work. The results were amazing. (Appendix A.13) Most of my students were able to recall almost all of the information they needed for their writing. A few asked questions about the big words, but I quickly saw that they had learned what I taught them about Belize. They explained many of the important things about the climate and differences between Belize and State College. One student, who refuses to draw detailed, colorful pictures, drew one of his best for the whole year. Another student who often rushes on his work and only cares about getting finished, wrote so much that he had to staple an extra page to his writing.

Belize Day led my students to experience a small part of a rainforest. We did not have rain and the temperature in the classroom was still a chilled 68 degrees compared to that of a rainforest, but what I saw taking place on the faces and heard in the words of my students was that they felt like they were really there. This experience led them to understand one important aspect of Belize.

My final data collection was to give my students a survey about the Belize unit. After working more than two months to help my students experience Belize, I knew there were many things they had learned and enjoyed. I wanted to capture those experiences through the surveys.

### **Claims and Evidence**

Through the heaps of data that I collected, the notes and video that I recorded, and the student work that I gathered, I was able to develop several clear claims about teaching primary students about culture. I looked back at my initial wondering: *How can I teach my first and second grade students about the culture of Belize in a developmentally appropriate way?* and derived my claims from the work I had done and the products I obtained from my students.

### **Culture**

***Teaching primary students about culture is not developmentally appropriate. Teaching about environments and experiences is.***

In *The Concept of Culture* by Dr. Nelson, he describes culture as “learned.” He says, “When you were born, you were born into a culture...When we learn a culture we learn many things. We learn a language, manners, style of dress, and many ways of doing things” (p.8). Thus, culture is an all-encompassing lifestyle. For me to bring that idea to first and second-graders, I quickly realized that it would be impossible. Rather than try to teach about the culture, I decided to teach about the environment and experiences of Belize. I saw that this was more appropriate through student surveys that asked, “Write at least one sentence about why you did or did not like learning about Belize.” One student explained, “I liked studying about Belize

because I have never studied about Belize before and I like the rainforest.” She was an example of a student who *experienced* the rainforest and was able to see a small aspect of Belize.

## **Experiences**

***The experiences of a primary student strongly influence the way they perceive another culture.***

Across all of the data I collected, I saw a major theme about my students’ responses and ideas about another culture. Their own experiences were critical in their perceptions of Belize. This could be seen in many ways as I looked at the data.

The artifacts my students chose for me to take to Belize were chosen based on their experiences. The camouflage hat reflected the cold winter we just had. The tens and ones blocks reflected the place value we were doing in math at the time. The peanut butter and gum were examples of things my students were used to eating.

The pre-assessment yielded more evidence to prove my idea about experiences. Many students responded to the question, *What food do they eat in Belize?* with foods they usually ate. Pizzas, chicken nuggets, corn on the cob, pasta, and pork chops were some of these common responses.

My students’ letters to their pen pals also were evidence toward my claim about experiences. Many children asked questions in their letters about things such as morning meeting and class pets, assuming that the Belizeans would have the same things they did.

***Children must have experiences to understand and retain information about another place.***

Before I decided to incorporate food day, Belize Creation Stations, and Belize Day into my project, I was having a hard time deciding how to reveal Belize to my students. We had

worked through writing and responding to pen-pal letters, looking at photographic artifacts as well as video clips from Belize and comparing their ways of doing things to American ways of doing things, and watching a Latin American music documentary to write and draw how the music was different from American music. However, the different ways I was teaching my students about Belize just were not getting the reaction I had planned. My students were not that excited about the country and they did not talk about the things we were doing. I was baffled.

I sat down with another elementary teacher to discuss what I was doing and she helped me realize that the students were not experiencing anything. They just listened, watched, wrote, and drew. They had not been a part of any experiences to make Belize profound to them. I decided to implement a food-tasting day as well as the Belize Creation Stations to bring Belize to my students. My plan worked.

I quickly saw how much the foods and the creating of a rainforest influenced my students and got them excited about Belize. They asked questions about the fruits as we cut them open and cracked them on the pavement. They drew pictures and answered questions (Appendix A.9) about the foods they tasted and then kept talking about them the next day.

While creating the rainforest, I taped my students at their stations. The conversation was evidence that they were *experiencing* Belize. One student said, “Look at my leaf. It has a drip tip so the water will fall off and then the leaf won’t die.” Another student held up her monkey and explained that it would hang from a vine in the rainforest. A small little girl proudly displayed her scarlet macaw and said, “It’s an endangered species. We shouldn’t take these from the rainforest.”

My students’ survey responses (Appendix A.14) also proved that the experience of creating a rainforest helped them to understand more of Belize. Many students wrote that their

favorite part of learning about Belize was creating the rainforest. No one wrote that the pen-pal letters really excited him or her. None of my students said that the music video was fun. They all wrote that either tasting the fruits and foods of Belize or making and learning about the rainforest was their favorite part.

Not only were these two areas their favorite parts, but they were also the things they learned the most about. Their Belize Day writing (Appendix A.13) showed that they remembered many things about the fruits, animals, plants, rainforest, and flowers. I did not have to help them as they wrote. They had retained the information from those experiences.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Inquiry research is one of the most difficult, time-consuming, and challenging things I have ever done. Whether I was making sure I highlighted all of the important aspects of teaching my students about Belize or deciding how to look at the data I collected from my students, I was never exactly sure of the next step to take. Sometimes my data showed me things I never expected. Other times, I was frustrated with the monotony of the data, with not being able to make any new conclusions about my students' thinking.

However, although every aspect of my research was challenging, many aspects of it were satisfying and enjoyable to watch. When I saw my students' faces light up when they saw the completed rainforest, when I read their final writing about Belize, and when I went back and watched the video clips during the Belize Creation Stations, I was reminded that my students learned so much about Belize as a country.

I may not have achieved my primary goal of bringing the culture of Belize to my first and second-graders, but I did learn that it is not developmentally appropriate to teach primary

students about culture in the way that I first planned. My unattainable goals were not attainable because I did not do something right, but rather because my preliminary ideas for the inquiry project were not appropriate to teach to my students. Thus, the metamorphosis of my project from the beginning to the end was one of great proportions. Rather than teach my students about the people of Belize and have them understand cultural differences about the country, I was able to bring Belize to them through things like the food day and the Belize Creation Stations. Those experiences, which led up to the final Belize Day when my students were able to go in the rainforest and wear uniforms to school, were what made the experience authentic. Belize came to my students through tasting fruits that they normally would not, creating animals and flowers that they cannot see in State College, and listening to music that is not typically on the radio or television here. Their words confirm my hopes for this inquiry project when I asked, “Why would you want to visit Belize?” on the survey. One student said this, “Because I would like to see whats there in Belize and try a lot of food that we didn’t learn about,” and another summed it up with these words, “Because it has a lot of cool stuff.”

Inquiry is a process. It involves change, development, experience, and collaboration. I believe it is a process I will use constantly as an educator. No matter what I teach, it will be important to utilize inquiry, either formally or informally, to always improve and renew my teaching strategies and abilities.

Through all of this, I have developed some new wonderings that I would like to answer about primary students. I want to know why some students had preconceptions about Belize. *Why did they think the people there were Chinese? How did they know Belizeans were dark-skinned? Where did they find these ideas? What influences one student to be aware of skin color and another student not aware?*