

**THE HIDALGO PROJECT:  
AN EXPERIENTIAL STUDY OF  
SERVICE-LEARNING  
IN MEXICO**

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## **Dedication**

With my love and respect:

To my mother, Joyce Doreen Arthur, for her encouragement, her gentle support, and her stalwart belief in education, life-long learning - and in me.

To my son, Aaron, for his understanding, assistance, patience and support. His quiet wisdom and strength of purpose are a constant inspiration to me.

## **Abstract**

This paper describes and analyzes the experience of a Canadian nurse educator and graduate student who studied and participated in a service-learning project in a rural community outside the village of Orizabita, in the Municipal District of Ixmiquilpan, in Hidalgo, Mexico. A successful service-learning experience occurs when a pre-determined service is provided to an individual or community in need, at the same time providing students with a rich and rewarding learning experience. The methodology used to study and evaluate this experience include ethnographic field notes, interviews, and reflective journaling. The benefits of such an experience include: increased leadership skills, active involvement in community, heightened awareness of cultural sensitivity and competence, life skills, and the establishment of partnerships.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my appreciation to the Olinca school 'family' and to the community residents of Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo, Mx. for allowing me the opportunity to be involved in this worthy humanitarian service-learning experience. Muchas gracias!

I offer my gratitude to the graduate students who made this endeavour possible. Muchas gracias, mi amigos: Alma Torres-Nava, Hector Miranda, Maru Ocampo, Adriana Guerra, Claudia Castellanos Tamez, and Libertad Rodriguez.

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## Introduction

For many years, I have been interested in and supportive of action learning, believing that learners are better able to synthesize their education, skills and new-found knowledge when provided with the opportunity to apply it in a practice setting. The foundation of my undergraduate education as a Registered Nurse focused on the application of theory and research into practice. Formalized education in nursing, social work, education, and other disciplines, provides students with opportunities to explore and learn about existing theories and research in their chosen fields of study. The capstone of the educational process occurs when students are provided with opportunities to implement this new knowledge of theory and research into real life settings.

In July 1998, eight graduate students from the *Universidad Panamericana* in Mexico City came to study at the University of Lethbridge (U of L) as part of a student exchange agreement between the two institutions. I was enrolled in a class to study issues related to pedagogy and global culture with these students and became very interested in Eugenia Cervantes Arias's report of a community service project she had organized for students at *Olinca*, the Mexico City high school where she taught. As transcultural community nursing service-learning experiences are currently part of nursing education at the University of Alberta, the University of Saskatchewan, Trinity Western University, McGill and others, I began to question if a similar experience might be a learning benefit to the nursing students enrolled at the University of Lethbridge. To determine the feasibility of such an experience and to fulfill the one-course credit Culminating Activity in the Master of Education (M. Ed.) program at the U of L, I arranged my service-learning

project: I would travel to Mexico City in February 1999 to study, observe, and participate in the Hidalgo Project, the service-learning project that Eugenia had described in our class.

The methodology used to study and evaluate this experience include ethnographic field notes, interviews, and reflective journaling. The following is an overview of this two week service-learning experience. Excerpts from my journal in the form of reflections on my observations and experiences will appear in italics.

## **Literature Review**

### **History of Service-Learning**

Service-learning occurs when a pre-determined service is provided to an individual or community in need. This service is, optimally, balanced with a rich and rewarding learning experience for students. The theory and practice of service-learning is derived from action learning, where individuals apply textbook knowledge to practice.

John Dewey, American pragmatist and proponent of experimentalism in education, “...believed that philosophy needed to be applied to solving human problems” (Childs, cited in Gutek, 1988, p. 82). When developing his social and educational philosophy, Gutek (1988) states, “... John Dewey’s Pragmatism emphasizes the educational process as a transaction between the person and the environment” (p.9) and embraced both the involvement of the participatory community and the application of the scientific method. As a unified flow of ongoing learning and experience,

[T]hinking and acting were not separable; thinking was incomplete until tested in experience.... In contrast to dualistic conceptions of reality, Dewey emphasized a changing and evolutionary universe

where the human problem was not to transcend experience but rather to use experience to control events that arose from human purposes. Rather than seeking to escape experience, Dewey argued that philosophy should recognize, reconstruct, and use experience to improve the human condition. (Gutek, 1988, pp.91-92)

The application of theory and knowledge to improve community is the central concept of action learning.

Action learning has historically focused on the learning needs of the student/service provider, first, and the needs of the community/service recipient, second.

Action learning has long been a central component in the educational preparation of service providers and

...is based on the premise that the twelve elementary and secondary school years are too long for young people to remain isolated from the responsibilities, issues, and rewards of practical involvement in the world outside the school-house. Action learning seeks to use the learning resources of the real world to give young students opportunities to participate with persons of all ages in performing tasks and making decisions that confront problems of our society. "Book learning" combined with experiences in the real world can inspire individual fulfillment and growth in social consciousness.

(Unruh, cited in Aronstein & Olsen, 1974, p. v)

The educational preparation of teachers, nurses, physicians, social workers, and

other service professionals has included practicum placements, internships, field experiences, and/or community service where students had the opportunity to apply their education and skills in a variety of real life settings. The learning needs of students were considered paramount and little attention was paid to the requirements, needs or benefits to the community/service recipient.

In the mid-1990's, action learning evolved to the more balanced approach of linking service to education. Born out of action learning, Greenberg (1997) describes service-learning as "...separate and distinct from either community service, volunteerism, field work, or internships" (p. 345). Community service and volunteerism primarily focus on the services and benefits to the recipients, and internships and field work primarily focus on the learning opportunities for the student. Service-learning, however, "...has an equally weighted focus between the benefits of the service to the recipient and the benefits of learning for the student" (Greenberg, 1997, p. 345). As Ehrlich (cited in Jacoby & Associates, 1996) defines it,

[S]ervice-learning is the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic theory of service-learning is Dewey's: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning. Students learn best not by reading the Great Books in a closed room but by opening the doors and windows of experience. Learning starts with a problem and continues with the application of increasingly complex ideas and increasingly sophisticated skills to increasingly

complicated problems. (pp. xi-xii)

Students learn to apply theory and research in real life settings. As understanding and knowledge increase, students' abilities to problem solve and apply critical thinking skills improve.

Moffett & Hill (1997) cite studies which suggest that active learning, designed to provide students with opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills, is more effective than passive learning when used to promote and encourage student self-direction, collaboration, and the enhancement of critical thinking skills. One study by Watson, Church, & Darville (cited in Ciaccio & Walker, 1998) claims that

[T]his type of learning has value that has been quantified. With traditional lecture-based methodologies, we retain 10 percent of what we hear, 15 percent of what we see, and 20 percent of what we see and hear. With service learning, retention increases to 60 percent of what we do, 80 percent of what we do with guided reflection, and 90 percent of what we teach or give to others. (pp. 175-176)

Learning retention is enhanced through service-learning experiences when students act, reflect and give to those around them.

A perpetual challenge faced by educators is the need to maintain the balance between service and learning - the intricate balance between the practical training and the academic/theoretical education of students. Beginning service professionals must have the academic preparation of theory and research in order to successfully practice in increasingly complex and challenging settings (learning). Employers and communities

expect students to be technically competent, provide supplemental staff for employers during clinical placements/internships (service) and be fully prepared and integrated into the work setting when they begin their professional careers. Service-learning helps meet the needs of educators and employers as “...service-learning attempts to balance the personal and professional development of students with the service they perform” (Cleary, Kaiser-Drobney, Ubbes, Stuhldreher & Birch, 1998, p. 304).

Philosophically, students learn to apply their skills and knowledge in a workplace setting while, practically, they meet many of the orientation needs of health care employers. When effectively implemented,

...service-learning experiences are reciprocally beneficial for both the community and students. For many community organizations, students augment service delivery, meet crucial human needs, and provide a basis for future citizen support. For students, community service is an opportunity to enrich and apply classroom knowledge; explore careers or majors; develop civic and cultural literacy; improve citizenship, develop occupational skills; enhance personal growth and self-image; establish job links; and foster a concern for social problems, which leads to a sense of social responsibility and commitment to public/human service. (Brevard Community College, 1994, paragraph 3).

New service professionals become better prepared to enter the work force and meet the needs of community members with minimal monetary investment by employers; hence,

service-learning experiences help meet the needs of educators and the community.

Ciaccio & Walker (1998), Rojas (1994), Logsdon & Ford (1998), Hales (1997), La Sala, Hopper, Rissmeyer, & Shipe (1997), and others describe the courses they developed to educate and prepare nursing students to work in rural community health settings in "...response to the call for more rural health service providers and health education with an interdisciplinary focus..." (La Sala et al., 1997, p. 292). Hales (1997) explored the application of three theoretical nursing frameworks to a national community service-learning experience: a) The Holistic Model recognizes, "... the client/patient as a complex, dynamic and unique product of his/her genetic endowment, culture, environment and life experiences" (p.16), b) Human Needs Theory, based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (p.16) and, c) General Systems Theory which "... recognizes the impact that the environment has on a person's health" ( p.16). When applied in service-learning projects, all reported positive learning experiences for both students and community residents as classroom theory was applied in real life settings and health education/service was delivered to individuals in need.

Ailinger & Carty (1996) and O'Toole, O'Shea Melli, Moore & Derstine (1996) arranged international service-learning experiences for nursing students so that they could apply existing research and theory to care for residents of communities in international settings. One nursing student, cited in Ailinger & Carty (1996), comments on the knowledge and benefits gained from applying the nursing process in one Nicaraguan community, stating: "I learned more about the nursing process than in any other clinical experience" (p. 236). This provides supportive evidence that service-learning enhances the

real life application of academic theory.

Chanecka (1998) and Conrad (1997) describe their cultural immersion service-learning experiences from student and faculty positions, respectively citing positive learning experiences both academically and personally. All reported on the positive and lasting effects their learning experiences will have in future situations, for students and educators, as cultural awareness was heightened and strengthened.

Ailinger & Carty (1996), Balcazar, Valdez, Tofoya-Barraza & Guevara (1998), Bond & Jones (1994), Conrad (1997) and others write about the depth of personal, professional and academic growth resulting from national and international experiences in service-learning. Whether these experiences occur in national or international settings, service-learning is a valuable

... method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully-organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education, and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience. (American Association for Higher Education, no date, paragraph 2)

### **Components of Service-Learning**

To enhance the personal and professional development of students, educators must clearly define and outline realistic goals and objectives of service-learning to both students

and the community as well. In addition, appropriate evaluation methods must be selected and utilized to ensure that experiences are relevant and valuable for all involved.

The Corporation on National and Community Service (no date) cite three components that are intrinsic to efficient, effective, and timely service-learning projects. The first is that students have “...sufficient preparation, which includes setting objectives for skills to be learned or issues to consider, and includes planning projects so they contribute to learning at the same time work gets done” (paragraph 5). Students must be adequately prepared academically and emotionally prior to any service-learning experience. Thoughtfully organized service-learning experiences necessitate participants’ active involvement with community to complete an assessment of the service needs, as perceived by community members in consultation with the service provider(s). This fits well with Dewey’s transactional interchange between the service provider and the community (Gutek, 1998, p. 9).

The second component is the actual service being performed. The service must be a good ‘fit’, ensuring it is valuable, relevant and timely for students’ growth and level of academic preparation. Of equal importance is that the community must perceive the service to be relevant and valuable in order to maximize their involvement and commitment.

The third criteria is met when “...the participant attempts to analyze the experience and draw lessons, through such means as discussion with others and reflection on the work....the analysis and thought allow the participants to identify and absorb what they have learned” (The Corporation on National and Community Service, no date,

paragraph 5). Reflection and evaluation, by student, faculty and peer, of student involvement is a critical part of any service-learning experience.

Reflection and journal writing, as described by Ciaccio & Walker (1998), Baker (1996), Logsdon & Ford (1998), Hales (1997), Ailinger & Carty (1996), and others, is a critical evaluative component in the learning process as it allows students to integrate experiences with prior learning. Logsdon & Ford (1998) describe one service-learning experience identifying the extensive "... reflection process and written synthesis with caring theory and the University" (p.34). Leninger (cited in Logsdon & Ford, 1998) defines caring as "...those human acts and processes which provide assistance to another individual or group based on an interest in or concern for that human being(s) or to meet an expressed, obvious or anticipated need" (p.34). The use of

[R]eflective practice is an increasingly valuable tool in ... education where independent practice places a growing emphasis on the affective and cognitive domains of learning. Although individual students vary in the extent to which they naturally reflect upon life experiences, all students benefit from strategies which develop the skill of reflection. Increased involvement of the affective domain is highly desirable in a humanistic profession.... Reflective journaling using various media is one strategy that students and ... educators alike find stimulating and rewarding. A key element to the success of this strategy lies in the fact that it allows students to relate to aspects of their experience which most profoundly speak to them at

the moment. (Baker, 1996, p. 22)

Reflective journaling offers the writer an opportunity to revisit and relive poignant and meaningful experiences at a later date, with the option to examine, evaluate, and learn from them. As if peeling away the layers of an onion, each opportunity to revisit these meaningful experiences allows the writer to gain insight at a new and deeper level.

As Gutek (1988) wrote, “Dewey emphasized the cooperative nature of shared human experience. The more sharing that occurs among individuals the greater are the possibilities for human interaction and growth” (p. 101). This interaction and growth, he believes, is dependent on the following elements:

The *common*, representing shared objects, instruments, values and ideas, arises in the context of group experience. *Communication* occurs when people frame and express their shared experiences in symbolic patterns, in a common language. *Community* was the human association that results as individuals come together to discuss their common experience and problems through means of shared communication. (Gutek, 1988, p. 101)

As students become immersed in service-learning experiences, they come to know and understand the environment in which they are involved. With that understanding, it would be expected that they become familiar with the community, the residents of the community and, jointly, determine strategies to assist in helping meet the needs of the community.

### **Benefits of Service Learning**

As we move into the new millennium, the need to develop educational programs

that provide students with advanced knowledge and skills is apparent. Technological, societal and political pressures on post-secondary education have increased, and the new graduates of post-secondary education are expected to possess a value system that emphasizes active participation in their communities, nationally and internationally, in addition to successful academic and advanced skill preparation.

Service-learning is one method by which academic subjects, skills, citizenship and an understanding of others, nationally and internationally, can be taught. “In an era when outcomes are valued in both business and education, and successful graduates need to demonstrate real world skills, marriages of both education and the community, and doing and reflecting are very appealing” (Logsdon & Ford, 1998, p. 37). Service-learning,

[I]ncreases retention; provides quality education; increases the relevancy of education to students 'living in a real world'; enhances personalized education for students; teaches positive values, leadership, citizenship and personal responsibility; empowers students as learners, teachers, achievers and leaders; invites students to become [active] members of their own community [and/or the world]; teaches job skills and prepares students for careers after college; encourages faculty to be innovative and creative in their teaching; contributes to a university's outreach efforts to the local community, ... and beyond; increases campus-community collaboration and partnerships; helps with community education; and contributes thousands of hours of

service to people in need, non-profit agencies, private sector companies, and non-governmental agencies. (Crews, no date, paragraph 1)

Service-learning is a valid method which creates partnerships, promotes trust and serves the needs of students and communities.

In addition to the benefits for students and the community, Ciaccio & Walker (1998) identify the positive service-learning components for faculty. “The faculty benefits because service learning enriches and enlivens teaching. In addition, as faculty connect the community with the curriculum, there is a greater awareness of the relationship between current societal issues and academic areas of interest” (p. 177). The positive self worth and intrinsic rewards experienced by all involved indicate that service-learning is a valuable educational tool.

The benefits of service-learning are many and have a profound and lasting influence on all participants. Service-learning is a valuable method that can be used to help prepare students for their professional futures. In addition, it enhances the teaching of academic subjects and skills and promotes active citizenship and an understanding of others.

### **The Hidalgo Project**

Incorporated into the curriculum of all high school and post-secondary students in Mexico is a mandatory requirement for community service. Every student must complete a specific number of hours in community service (75 hours in high school and 480 hours in university) in a pre-determined location before they can successfully earn a diploma or

degree. Depending on the project selected, the program in which the student is enrolled, and the level of student education, students may be accompanied by an instructor as a member of a group or they may work in more independent roles to fulfill this service-learning requirement.

The Hidalgo project was, at one time, part of a longitudinal study involving the distribution of nutritional ingredients (corn flour, oil, sugar and milk powder) to supplement the diet of malnourished infants and children in the marginalized communities of Mexico. The selection of these particular ingredients and the proportions used in preparing the *papilla* (milky pudding) to be fed to the children is based on results obtained from a study conducted by Gomez (Date unknown) at the Children's Hospital of Mexico. As a result of the positive findings and outcomes of this study, the project was adopted and sustained by a former resident of the community, Ing. Xochitl Galvez Ruiz, now a successful engineer in Mexico City and founder of the *Fundacion Porvenir*.

This project serves the people who live in the rural communities of Hidalgo, a state north of Mexico City, with nutritional ingredients and the knowledge to supplement their childrens' diets in order to optimize their mental and physical growth and development.

The learners are students, their parents, and the teachers in all levels of study (*Preescolar, Primaria, Secundaria and Preparatoria*) at Olinca school in Mexico City as all are involved in different parts of the project. Typically, Eugenia Cervantes Arias, as project leader, notifies the teachers of *Preescolar* and *Primaria* of the impending community visit and the date of travel; the teachers then request that specific nutritional ingredients be donated by the students and their parents; then the ingredients are collected

and stored in a common area. The students from *Secundaria* and *Preparatoria* involved in the project place the ingredients in sacks, transport and distribute them every 8 to 9 weeks to the parents of children living in the seven rural communities of Ixmiquilpan. Each sack contains 6 kg. corn flour, 2 kg. sugar and 1 liter of oil. In Ixmiquilpan, 2 kg. of milk powder is provided by the community social service and added to the sacks.

This particular project included thirty-eight students from two different grades, two teachers, and me. Five of the thirty-eight students had previous experience with the project and they assumed leadership roles, assisting and guiding the students who had no prior experience in the project. The teachers and more experienced students worked with the novice students in advance, instructing them on how to prepare the sacks of nutritional ingredients, how to weigh and measure the children and how to instruct the parents to prepare the *papilla*.



The experienced students and teachers helped to prepare the novice students for the living conditions they could expect to witness and encouraged them to play with and befriend the local children.

*A great deal of planning, organization and time was required to successfully complete this project. Eugenia, as project coordinator, asked her fellow teachers at*

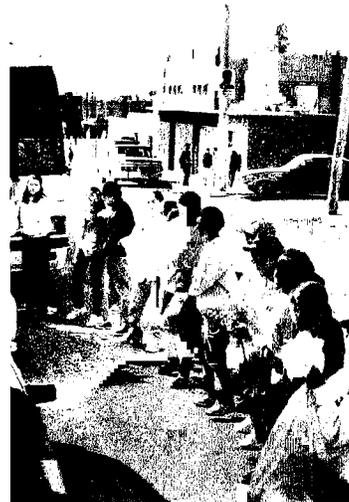
*Olinca to request their students (and the students' parents) to supply the nutritional ingredients. She contacted the Municipality of Ixmiquilpan to establish the time and date of the next visit. The bus was booked, reminders were sent to teachers, students were selected and prepared for the experience, the nutritional ingredients were collected, the sacks were packed, and summary instructions given.*

*The students, their parents, the teachers as well as the administration at Olinca school are involved at various stages throughout the Hidalgo project. Their continued commitment and dedication to this project is affirmation of how important they believe this experience to be for the students. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

On February 10, 1999, we arrived at Olinca school just before 0430h. The students began to arrive and, in assembly line fashion, transported the pre-prepared sacks of food into the storage compartment of the bus. We boarded the bus at 0500h and, after roll call was taken, left Olinca school at 0515h. Three hours later, we arrived in Ixmiquilpan where we were warmly greeted by Lety and Rufi, who assisted us in translating the native language, Otomi, into Spanish. We were offered the traditional breakfast of *tamales* and *atole* in the town centre and, after eating, reboarded the bus and were driven to the smaller village of Orizabita.



We were met in Orizabita by the local doctor who provided us with hanging scales and the plastic expandable boards used to weigh and measure the infants, as well as growth and development charts listing the average height and weight of children according to their age. Also joining the group were eight students and two teachers from Escuela Bancaria, one of the public schools in Mexico City. Geraldo, the teacher responsible for the community service projects at his school, had previously arranged to join the project so they could learn how, in the future, to develop a similar experience for their students. The students and teachers from Olinca and Escuela Bancaria separated into two groups, blue and red, unloaded the sacks from the bus, and added the milk powder.



*The positive regard and reputation of Olinca's successful involvement in this project was apparent by the voluntary involvement of the students and their teachers from Escuela Bancaria....*

*To my great surprise and pleasure, I noted the milk powder included in the sacks of ingredients had been provided by Dairyland Foods, Vancouver, Canada. I felt very*

*proud to be a Canadian when I saw that company logo and address on the bags of powdered milk. I vowed, upon my return to Canada, to write a personal letter of thanks to the President of Dairyland Foods requesting the continuation and, if possible, expansion of their support of this project. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

The students packed the sacks, now complete with all required nutritional ingredients, into two smaller vehicles that were provided to take us to our respective destinations. The students and teachers in the red group traveled to their final destination by truck and we, in the blue group, traveled by bus along a single lane, gravel-and-rock winding road, to a remote mountainous region north of Orizabita. As we traveled to our final destination, the bus stopped three times to pick up small groups of mothers and children who were walking to meet us. I learned that some of the women and children had walked for as long as three hours, taking time from their daily work routines to participate in this project.

*This, I believe was evidence of the value and support this project had to the people living in the communities it serves. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

We reached our final destination at approximately 1030h. Rufi arranged for us to use one of the school rooms as a work station. The student leaders began to organize the less experienced students from both schools into groups of three or four students. Each group prepared for the specific task to which they have been assigned. One of the student leaders asked a male student to climb a tree and tie a rope around its branch. This rope was used to attach the hanging scale that measured the weight of the infants. Another group of students selected the flat surface of a desk to set up the device that would

measure the length of the infants. One student placed the bathroom scales on a level surface on the floor, and another secured the tape measure to the wall of the classroom with masking tape - these would be used to weigh and measure the older children. The students assigned to demonstrate the measuring and preparation of the food set up their work area, and the last group of students guided the mothers and children through the appropriate work stations, offering the children suckers and candy as enticements.



As the children and mothers moved through the line, students documented the height and weight of each child on a card that was given to the mothers and plotted the measurements on the growth and development charts, comparing their findings with the measurements on the sheets. Mothers were congratulated on the growth and health of their children and encouraged to continue supplementing the children's diet with the *papilla*. Each was given a sack of the nutritional ingredients. After the work was

completed, students played with the children and provided them with the remainder of the suckers and candy. When the mothers and children prepared to go home, the students wished the families farewell, packed their equipment and reboarded the bus for the journey back to Orizabita.



Eugenia had made previous arrangements for Rodrigo, a 15 year old Olinca student and the son of a prominent politician in Mexico City, to tour some of the homes of the residents in this community, at his request. Rodrigo would like to learn from the residents of this community what they believed their greatest needs were. After gathering this information he planned to write an essay and provide this information to a friend of his family who was running for election in Hidalgo. Eugenia had arranged for me to accompany Rodrigo and Rufi, the interpreter who translated Otomi to Spanish, as they spoke with the residents and toured their homes.

*Perhaps the information these people provided me with could be used to benefit them in future. If Dairyland Foods deemed this project worthy of their support, perhaps other companies might be persuaded to make contributions, as well. (Journal entry,*

*February 10, 1999)*

With my video camera in hand, I joined my fellow student and our interpreter for a tour of the village and some of the homes where these residents live. Rufi and Rodrigo translated Otomi to Spanish to English and back again as I captured, on video tape, the living conditions of these people.

These people live in sod or mud shacks with dirt floors. Each family appears to have two separate huts, one for preparing and cooking their food and the other for living and sleeping in. The roofs were made from thatched cactus leaves, and the cooking area was made of stones that had been cemented together to contain the fire in its core and a grill at the top.



Domestic animals wandered freely among the buildings and children watched us shyly. The woman who lived in the first home we visited greeted us warmly as she spoke through Rufi. She showed us how she, and other community members, make the fibre used to thatch the rugs and mats this area is known to produce. Wielding a large wooden bat, she pulverized a cactus leaf against a rock. Using a large machete, she scraped the pulp away from the longitudinal fibers that run through the cactus leaves. Expertly winding the coarse fibers at the end into a loose knot, she turned the leaf over to pound and scrape the pulp away from the other end of the leaf. Each leaf was manually pulverized, leaving a heap of pulp on the ground and a length of fibre which, once dried, would be woven into mats, belts, rugs, or shawls (*rebozos*).

The woman accompanied us to another home where we watched a man repeating the procedure of separating cactus leaf pulp from fibre. Rufi explained that the people use the pulp as soap, to wash their hair and bodies or to clean their dishes.



Rufi toured us through the family garden, showing us tomatoes and squash plants. There was a make-shift thatched roof covering the tomato plants from the harshest rays of the sun. There were other plants growing, encased in chicken wire to protect them from

the roaming animals.

The native woman from the first home conversed with the resident female, and our hostess offered each of us a soft drink. As Rufi, Rodrigo and I sat sipping our soft drinks, Rufi explained to Rodrigo and he translated for me, that families residing in this area earn the equivalent of, approximately, 6 dollars per week if they are fortunate to find work in the area. This constitutes their income to feed, house and clothe their families. After consuming our refreshment and thanking our hostess, we left the bottles for the family to recycle for the few pesos they would generate toward the purchase of other soft drinks.

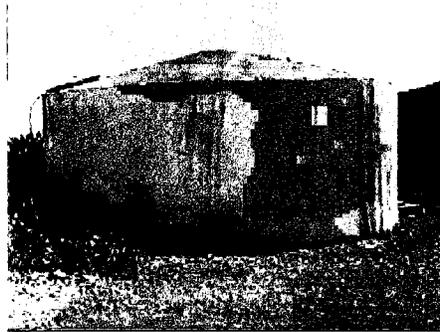
*The generosity of the people involved in this project was apparent as I thought of the time and effort it took for Rufi and Rodrigo to translate Otomi to Spanish to English for my benefit. I thought of the soft drink I enjoyed and how it probably cost the family a considerable amount of their weekly allowance and was humbled by their generosity and kindness. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999).*

Rufi toured us down the dirt lane between homes, explaining that the different types of cacti in the region are used for different purposes. The fermented juice of one species of cactus, the *maguey*, is used to make an alcoholic beverage called *pulque*, for which this region is renowned. Another cactus had large red berries that the native residents eat as fruit. A different species bears smaller yellow berries that are used to make a sweet candy-like dish, Rufi explained. The flowers of the one cactus are cooked and used to flavour food. Rufi picks a flower from a *Manzanilla* plant explaining that, when boiled in water, it is used to make a tonic for upset stomach and other illnesses.



I asked if there was immunization for the children and if there is maternity care for the women during their pregnancies. Rufi explained that the nurses came, once, to immunize the children, but never returned. She could not tell me why. Infants are born with the assistance of family or friends, if possible. If assistance is unavailable, the women deliver their children themselves and hope for the best possible outcome. There are no hospitals, doctors or nurses in the remote areas to provide health or medical care. The local doctor in Orizabita will come to help those in times of need, if summoned in time and not needed elsewhere.

There is no electricity in these homes. Water is hauled from another location, by truck, and stored in a large concrete container that appeared to be approximately 8 or 10 meters in diameter. The residents take the water from this storage container by bucket, for their needs, and carry it back to their homes.



*I wondered about the cleanliness of the water and realized it may be one reason for the large consumption of soft drinks I have witnessed here. The health needs were obvious to me, a Canadian visitor - nutrition, hygienic living conditions, clean water, immunization, womens' health issues, ... there were so many. At the same time, I question my observation and motives. Who am I to assess these peoples' need? I am an visitor here, bringing with me the values, beliefs and education of an outsider. Certainly, if the health needs were met, they would be healthier and would have better lives. Or would they? These people have survived for centuries. Certainly the fittest have. I can only imagine how strong the immune systems of those survivors are to fight off the illness and disease they must regularly encounter.*

*I marveled at the strength and stamina of these people and think of how spoiled we are when I compare our culture and lifestyle to that of the people in these communities. These generous, extremely humble people were simply trying to survive in the only way they know how. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

Rodrigo was able to speak Spanish to the woman we met in the next home we visited. This woman was born and raised in Puebla, a state east of Mexico City. When she was married she moved, with her husband, to this community. She appeared very happy as

she smiled and conversed with Rufi and Rodrigo. We were again offered a soft drink. As Rodrigo explained, it was the only thing this woman had to offer us as guests in her home. At the risk of offending her, Rodrigo thanked her but declined the offer, explaining we had just had a refreshment.

*Rodrigo is an amazing young man! His mature quiet demeanor and his thoughtful insights make him a real delight to spend time with. His rapport with Rufi and the community residents is respectful and kind, as he takes notes and asks questions. He patiently translates my English questions into Spanish for me and answers my questions, in detail, after carefully listening to Rufi's answers. It would be no surprise for me to see him develop into a very prominent Mexican figure. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

As we left this home, after thanking our hostess for her hospitality, we saw the bus lumbering down the road toward us. The resident children had been weighed and measured and the sacks of food distributed to the parents. We hurried to the road and, as we climbed aboard, waved goodbye to the women and children who had provided us with our tour and offered us their generous hospitality.

The red and blue groups reunited at approximately 1430h in Orizabita. A record of each child's height and weight was kept by Eugenia, the project coordinator. A copy was provided to the local health authorities in Ixmiquilpan, for their records, and the devices used to measure and weigh the children were returned so they could be used on the next visit. Students and teachers mixed and mingled, regrouping inside the cement gazebo in the village centre to escape the intensity of the afternoon sun.

The students from Olinca and Escuela Bancaria chatted amicably, exchanging and

comparing their experiences of the day as they ate the lunches they had brought from home. They worked well together as one harmonious team. After lunch, the teachers asked the students to complete a verbal and written evaluation, reflecting on their experiences in the community. After approximately 30 minutes, evaluations had been completed and students and teachers from Olinca and Escuela Bancaria wished each other farewell before reboarding their respective buses for the journey back to Mexico City.

*As I observed the students from Olinca and Escuela Bancaria exchange and compare their experience of the day it is obvious that they have worked well, as one harmonious team. Throughout the journey, they laughed and exchanged the friendly banter of caring individuals who know they have provided a valuable service to other human beings. Although my Spanish skills are limited, I can tell by the smiles, gestures, the occasional words I understand, and the collegiality of the group that this was a satisfying and enriching experience for all involved. (Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

As we traveled back to Mexico City, Eugenia told me she has arranged an interview with Ing. Xochitl Galvex Ruiz, the founder of the Hidalgo project. Geraldo, Eugenia, Sandra (one of Olinca's senior students involved in the Hidalgo project), and I have an appointment for the following week. Eugenia tells me some of Xochitl's background and describes her importance to the Mexican people, as an established, respected, educated businesswoman and as the founder of the *Fundacion Porvenir* (the Future Foundation) and community service projects.

*The admiration and respect in Genia's voice are evident as she describes this woman's personal history and life story. I feel ambivalent - part of me is thrilled to have*

*the opportunity to speak with this woman yet I am anxious at the prospect of being in the company of a person who is so respected, almost revered by those who know her.*

*(Journal entry, February 10, 1999)*

### **Ing. Xochitl Galvez Ruiz**

Ing. Xochitl Galvez Ruiz, one of the foremost business leaders in Latin America, (Smith & Malkin, 1998, p.63) is an engineering consultant who, as *Directora General*, started her own business, *High Tech Services*. As her company rapidly grew, Ing. Galvez's personal knowledge of poverty and oppression spurred her to create another company, the *Fundacion Porvenir*, which distributes nutritional ingredients to supplement the diet of infants and children in marginalized communities of Mexico. "Her philosophy: that Latin America's private sector must help bridge the enormous gap between rich and poor." (Smith & Malkin, 1998, p.63).

*When we enter the ultramodern building, before taking the elevator to Ing. Galvez's office, we stop off in the washroom. I am surprised to see the high technology of a sensor activated soap dispenser and water faucet. This is, Genia explained, a building designed and equipped by "High Tech Services", the business founded and run by Ing. Galvez. I now have a better understanding of what "High Tech Services" is and does.*

*(Journal entry, February 16, 1999)*

Outside Ing. Galvez's business office there are two doors side by side. On one door the placard reads "High Tech Services", and on the other the placard reads "Fundacion Porvenir". Both doors enter into the same foyer.

*The symbolism was obvious to me - both services hold equal importance to Ing.*

*Galvez. Eugenia explained that, to Ing. Galvez, they are synonymous ventures - they feed and nurture each other. (Journal entry, February 16, 1999)*

Xochitl, now 36 years of age, was one of seven children raised in a family of Otomi Indians in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico. At the age of 7 years, Xochitl had a weekend job selling ant eggs (a delicacy in Mexico), cacti, and cactus worms as produce at the local market to help generate income for her family. This intelligent little girl won a scholarship to attend high school. The scholarship was only sufficient, however, to pay for the bus fare from her village to the neighbouring village where the high school was located. Every morning she would walk 7 kilometers to catch the bus, ride it to school, study her lessons, ride the bus back, then walk the 7 kilometers back to her home. By the age of 15, Xochitl was the most educated member of her small community and was appointed to the position of Judge in her small remote community.

Although her home had no running water or electricity, Xochitl decided, after reading a brochure advertising the career, to pursue an education and study computer science. She traveled to Mexico City and learned to speak Spanish, as her first language is Otomi. Studying at the National University, she earned an undergraduate degree in Computer Science. Supporting herself by working as a telephone operator, she earned a master's degree in telecommunications. In 1992, she invested \$3,000 of her personal savings and developed her own company, High Tech Services, which designs communication and energy networks for office buildings.

...The first year, her firm billed about \$200,000. She was battered by the 1994 peso devaluation but quickly recovered. High Tech last

year rang up sales of \$900,000 to clients such as 3M Co. and Mexican banks.

But her chief concern is the future Foundation. Galvez says that last year she channeled all of High Tech's \$150,000 in net income into the foundation. (Smith & Malkin, 1998, p.63)

*Eugenia and Ing. Galvez exchanged warm greetings and called each other by their first names, a sign that they have a close working relationship. Ing. Galvez greeted me with much less enthusiasm and I expected no more than the politely cautious handshake I received. I realized I am a foreigner from a country that is thought to be culturally synonymous with the people, perceived as affluent, dominating and arrogant, from the U.S.A. I have yet to prove my sincere and honest interest in the altruistic nature of the project and the people here. (Journal entry, February 16, 1999)*

Ing. Galvez is a small statured woman in her mid-thirties. She presents herself as a dynamic, confident, soft spoken yet firm woman with definite goals and the determination and ability to achieve them. Explaining a little of her background, she recounted one of the first experiences she had upon reaching Mexico City. While riding the subway to school one morning, she was jostled about by the male passengers on the subway. In fear and horror, she later approached a friend to disclose the frightening news that she was pregnant. Her friend asked her about the circumstances surrounding the event and discovered that, when growing up, Xochitl and her siblings were told that if a woman had physical contact with a man, she would get pregnant. She smiles as she tells us how her friend laughed at her naivety and explained physiology and conception to her.

*My education and experience as a nurse educator identified the need for health education. It would be a great benefit and comfort for people to learn about their bodies and how they function without having to experience this kind of fear and anxiety:*

*Wouldn't it? (Journal entry, February 16, 1999)*

Ing. Galvez explained how important the project is to her because of her native roots in the small, poor community in Hidalgo where she grew up. She shared, for our benefit, the story of her history and the struggles she experienced to access an education and improve her life. Having experienced poverty and hardship, she has made a commitment to work toward improving the living conditions of her people; hence, she developed the Foundation. One of her primary goals is to encourage other Mexican corporations to help reverse the poverty and malnutrition experienced by many of the marginalized Mexican people.

Ing. Galvez explained that, for the past 2 years, she has traveled throughout the country, giving lectures to promote the work of the Foundation. She is very pleased that the project has been embraced and supported by so many. Sharing with us her vision for the future, Ing. Galvez explained that, as a result of the students and teachers who work to deliver the sacks of nutritional ingredients to families in her state, a bond has been established with individuals from outside the area. In the near future, Ing. Galvez would like to expand the project to improve the nutritional state of all family members by offering them other nutritional supplements, like soya, that are easily acquired.

Ing. Galvez shared another of her goals with us: to establish mechanisms where the residents of marginalized communities are assisted to develop marketable products that

will, with minimal support and marketing, be sold in a national or international market. She explained that once the community residents excel at the production of this product, the people can then learn to market their own goods, improve their lifestyles, thereby increasing their self-worth, self-sufficiency and pride in their accomplishments. “It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as Subjects of the transformation” (Freire, 1970, p.121).

I looked at her and said, “Feed a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime” and she simply smiled at me. As Freire (1970) wrote,

[T]rue generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands - whether of individuals or entire peoples - need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become hands which work and, working, transform the world. (p.29)

The wisdom and hope I saw in her eyes was almost religious.

Ing. Xochitl Galvez Ruiz is one of Mexico’s most powerful and motivational success stories. Meeting her was truly one of the greatest highlights of my experience in Mexico. I shall never forget her gentle, dedicated inspiration.

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent

on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. (Freire, 1970, p.56)

Ing. Xochitl Galvez Ruiz is an amazing woman whose quiet humility was apparent as she discussed incidents from her past, and whose strong and focused commitment was obvious when she shared with us her hopes and dreams of how the *Fundacion Porvenir* might help to improve the lives of her people and promote the future of her country. Her history, upbringing and culture continue to play a very important role in her life and have been instrumental in creating the woman she is today. Her hopes, insights and aspirations for a better way of life for her people are based on personal experiences, cultural and historical awareness.

### **Observations and Reflections on Mexican Life and Culture**

Mexico was discovered, explored, conquered, and pillaged by the Spanish, the French, and the Italians; therefore there are many famous and historic sites to visit and explore. Mexicans take great pride in their history and their homeland. Patriotism is strong, and the people are extremely proud of their history, culture and endurance. Classified by other nations as a developing, third world nation, most Mexican people are,

from my observations and conversations with Mexican people, justifiably sensitive to any suggestion that they are in any way inferior to other peoples, cultures, or countries of the world.

The class structure, which is based on economic wealth and/or education, is very strong in Mexico. The disparity in wealth separates the relatively small numbers of upper class from a small middle class and a very large population of lower class, impoverished people. The majority of those considered to be in the upper and middle classes live in Mexico's cities, and the most marginalized, impoverished people tend to live in more remote rural areas, on the city streets, or in the slums of large cities. "People get ahead in Mexico through their connections with a local boss or a powerful national politician..." (Bell, Wilcock, Muller, Zendell, 1998, p. 91).

*On the airplane from LA to Mexico City there was a group of young teenage school children from Mexico City, accompanied by 2 teachers, returning after a week of skiing in Colorado. I assumed the teachers were not Mexican as one had an Australian accent and the other spoke English without any trace of an accent. I tried to converse with some of the young people, but they were busy socializing with their friends and playing with portable electronic game machines or listening to CD players. The boy beside me fell asleep. These children were, obviously, from affluent families who could afford to send them on trips outside the country and provide them with the latest technology for their amusement.*

*I was reminded of the difference in customs and felt like the foreigner I am because I do not speak Spanish well. I remembered feeling this way on other trips to*

*Mexico. As I recalled, the Mexican people were always polite, but cautiously reserved. Their eyes tell you that they tolerate the foreigners' presence, but they are guarded about offering anything more personal. Overt friendship and relaxed demeanor are reserved for those who are of their nationality or who have proven themselves to be trustworthy.*

*The children I met on the flight had learned this outlook well. They smiled and politely answered my questions, but did not offer the spontaneous conversation or banter they displayed when interacting with their peers. As an observer, I have always found this fascinating and know they do not see a distinct cultural difference between Canadians and Americans. To them we are the same - we dress the same, speak the same language, eat the same kinds of food, and display similar body language. Only when they extend themselves or spend longer periods of time with citizens from each country can they tell any differences. This I know from questioning my Mexican friends and the bi-annual vacations I used to take to Mexico. (Journal entry, February 6, 1999)*

There are approximately 50 recognized languages native to the country of Mexico, and many rural community members speak their native language, which is not Spanish. The use of body and sign language are primary methods of communication for all who are involved in the Hidalgo project. Because I do not speak Spanish well, I was linguistically challenged in Mexico City. Most residents of the large cities speak Spanish and fortunately for me, all members of my host family spoke fluent English. Most of the students, staff and faculty at Olinca School and the Universidad Panamericana had some command of the English language, as do most of the people who reside in Mexico City. To be polite and show respect, however, it is advisable when visiting Mexico to have a rudimentary

command of the Spanish language and to try to speak the language; even if it is only a few words. Too often, foreigners travel to this country and expect the natives of Mexico to speak English because it is the most commonly spoken language in the world. This is frequently seen and interpreted to be rude and arrogant.

*In the courtyard, at the entrance of the church, there was a large gazebo where a crowd had gathered to watch a comedic mime entertain. As I watched the mime mimic a woman as she crossed the zocalo (main square), I realized there is much about the Mexican culture I do not understand. In addition to the difference in language, there is a hidden culture. Although no words were exchanged between the woman and the mime, there were gestures and whistles made, it seemed to me, representing depreciative meaning. As the woman made an obscene gesture to the mime, he whistled at her and the crowd laughed. Eugenia, after seeing my confusion, explains, "That whistle is the worst whistle in Mexico." She explained that people communicate with whistles much like we communicate with our hands (for example extending our middle finger to a driver who has cut us off on the freeway). Mexicans "play with words", too. An individual may make a simple statement, but there is frequently a hidden meaning in the way the words are phrased or used within the sentence. Unless familiar with the culture, one would not know if there was some underlying meaning behind the words. It made me think of how difficult it is to learn another language and I felt empathy and compassion for those who come to Canada to learn and study, for I realize we often use subtle innuendo to create meaning different than what the simple words imply. (Journal entry, February 6, 1999)*

Mexico City, with a population that is equal or greater than all of Canada, has

grown exponentially over the past three decades. As is common throughout the world when rural economies fail to support their residents, many young and able-bodied individuals, sometimes entire tribes of Native Mexicans, moved to Mexico City in search of work and with the hope that they might be better able to financially provide for their families. As a result of Mexico's economic instability and the two major economic recessions over the past three decades, consistent employment was not easy to find. Most of the relocated masses were unable to realize their dreams of success and financial wealth. (Personal communications with Mexican people, February 1999)

*One of the teachers at school was telling us about being highjacked and robbed yesterday.... I remember class discussions with my fellow students from Mexico last summer, when we discussed the fact that most Mexican families have at least one television in their homes. The programs broadcast on television and the advertisements in magazines depict the values and lifestyles of the affluent North American. Monetary wealth is idealized here, just as it is everywhere else in North America. The expensive homes, clothes and vehicles seen on television are portrayed as attainable and the 'norm' in North American society. Almost everyone seen on the screen is beautiful, happy, wealthy and successful. Seldom do we see a television program that shows us the homeless, the hungry, or the poor that reside with our country. The television and magazine images leaves those in disadvantaged situations to believe that they are not as fortunate or as rich. These peoples' lives are sharply contrasted to the rich and famous characters they consistently see on their television screens. Is it any wonder that some strike out or perform an illegal act, thinking to improve their lifestyle? (Journal entry,*

February 17, 1999)

The disparity of economic wealth, in addition to the history of conquest and pillage, has created an atmosphere where tensions often run high, and safety can be an issue of concern for residents and visitors alike. Great care must be taken when visiting this beautiful city, to ensure personal safety. "... the Mexican perceives that there are only two attitudes to take when dealing with others. Take advantage of them, or have them take advantage of you" (Bell et al., 1998, p. 91). Canadian visitors must, at all times, remember that they are not in the comparatively safe, secure world of Canada, but have traveled to a country where decades of oppression and economic hardship have created, for many, an anger and bitterness which sometimes erupts in violence and corruption.

*This evening Pancho Jr. took me to the National Museum of Anthropology where I could have spent many days exploring and learning about the vast history of Mexico. A few hours of discovery could do justice to this tremendous collection of history. I would have to spend days or weeks studying and reading to truly be able to appreciate the legacy left by these people. The rich Mexican history is awesome to me, coming from such a young country as Canada.*

*There were numerous exhibits dedicated to the history of the many tribal cultures of the Native Mexican Indian: Mayan, Aztec, Olmec, Toltec, Mixtec, Zapotec to name a few. The collections of artifacts stored was astounding. I marvel at the detailed works and the artifacts and sculptures that are housed here and was saddened when I read that many of the artifacts were copies. When I asked Pancho where the originals were kept, he told me that many are in Italy, France or Spain depending on who the invaders were at*

*the time of the discovery. There was an angry undertone in his voice and, not for the first time, I experienced the sad, uneasy feeling that the numerous invasions and repeated oppression of the Mexican people has left deep roots of bitterness and anger - especially in the young people. As Freire (1970) said, "Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being [considered] less human leads the opposition to struggle against those who made them so" (p .28). (Journal entry, February 11, 1999)*

Visitors to Mexico run an increased risk of becoming ill from parasitic and/or bacterial infections which result from the ingestion of high levels of infected food and water. People living in Mexico have matured and developed heightened immune systems which allows them to live in harmony with their microscopic comrades. Until the parasite's host becomes used to these increased levels of contamination, children and visitors remain targets of illness, sometimes critically. The leading cause of infant morbidity and mortality in Mexico is diarrhea and dehydration - a direct result of immature immune systems becoming targeted by invading bacteria and parasites.

Cleanliness is related to culture, I discovered, as are other domestic patterns and habits. I found that I reflected and learned as much about my own culture as I learned about the Mexican culture during my service-learning experience. "The process of striving for cultural competency is an *ongoing journey*, beginning with understanding one's own culture and how it has formed one's perception of self, of others and of what is good or bad" (Evans, cited in Denboba, Bragdon, Epstein, Garthright & McCann Goldman, 1998, p. S-50). We, in Canada, are perceived to be very rule oriented, very tidy and very clean (Personal communication with Mexican people, February 1999). In Mexico, generally, the

eggs are not refrigerated, windows do not have screens, vacuuming is not done on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, activities of daily living such as washing clothes or buying groceries are much more time consuming and difficult than in Canada. I had become comfortable with and, at times, unaware of my Canadian customs, never evaluating them until I traveled to Mexico.

Our lifestyles and customs are very much a part of who we are, therefore we often expect other cultures to have the same standard of living. We expect the food and water we ingest to be of the highest standard - clean and safe to consume, we expect to find washing machines, refrigerators, dishwashers, microwaves and computers in all homes. We expect, perhaps without even thinking about it, that wherever we go we will find what we are culturally used to at home. We must be ever cognizant of and remember that we are the visitors and things may be very different from what we are used to and comfortable with. Our ways are not the only ways, and we should not expect others to accommodate us or adhere to our way of being. Cultural differences shouldn't be seen as good or bad; they are just different. Are our ways superior or just more familiar?

### **The Family**

The home I lived in for the duration of my study visit was, by Canadian standards, a middle class condominium. The three bedroom, split level home was made of cement. Most Mexican buildings are constructed of cement as lumber is very expensive and difficult to acquire. The main entrance leads into the foyer with stairs leading up to the bedrooms and down to the living area, kitchen, bathroom and laundry area. The family home is one of a complex of houses located in the southern part of Mexico City. The

complex is surrounded by a fence, and guards are employed to secure the property and provide entrance to all who enter. I was very surprised, given the crime rate, that the home is seldom locked as the area is considered to be safely protected.

Carpets run throughout the house, except for the kitchen, laundry area and foyer. The house was well kept, by Mexican standards, thanks to the employ of a Native Mexican Indian maid, Nachita, whose job is to clean, shop and cook, do laundry and provide service to the family. Nachita is very shy and quiet, speaks only when necessary and only in Spanish, although her first language is Otomi.

It is customary for middle and upper class Mexican families to employ servants. Most upper class homes have a number of servants in their employ - nannies to help raise the children, gardeners, and chauffeurs. Although many middle class families once employed other servants, the economic recession in 1994-1995 left many people unemployed, and many of the servants positions were terminated. Nachita is the only full time servant employed by this family. A married woman with five children, Nachita lives with her family in a home close by. She has been the family maid since the children were infants and knows this family and their needs well.

Eugenia has instructed Nachita to boil all drinking water and use less spice in the food she prepares for all foreign guests. Although I explained to Eugenia that I enjoy spicy food and requested that no special precautions be taken for my benefit, Eugenia is reluctant to meet my request, expressing her concerns that I might become ill. She explains that my immune system might not be accustomed to the different foods and organisms that she and her family ingest daily.

Eugenia is one of the most sincere, kind and warm people I have ever been fortunate to meet. She regularly opens her home to people from many nationalities, as she is responsible for the exchange programs at the private school where she works. Her belief in peoples' inner goodness and value are strengths that come from her own goodness and value. She has traveled extensively, often on exchanges with students from her school, and her experiences have provided her with the knowledge that there are good people throughout the world, just as there are those who will take advantage of others if given the opportunity.

In Mexico, most people are warm and friendly, once their trust has been earned, holding deeply rooted values, customs and beliefs. The people residing in the more populated areas may appear to be more cynical as they are surrounded by the corruption of politicians, cab drivers and police. As recipients of the overbearing and arrogant ways in which I have seen foreigners treat the Mexican people, added to their history of invasion and economic disparity, it is not surprising to witness some cynicism and mistrust.

Trust and friendship must be earned, and the only way they can be earned is to show respect for the customs and traditions of these humble, yet proud, people. Although trust may be difficult to earn and each person must prove themselves worthy of it, once it is secured, the acceptance, hospitality and friendships are unparalleled!

*My host family are kind, patient and caring people proud of their heritage and homeland. They explained their history to me and answered all my questions with patient consideration. They seemed to want me to develop an understanding of their culture and lifestyle. Eugenia expressed concern that I might not enjoy my stay with them. I was*

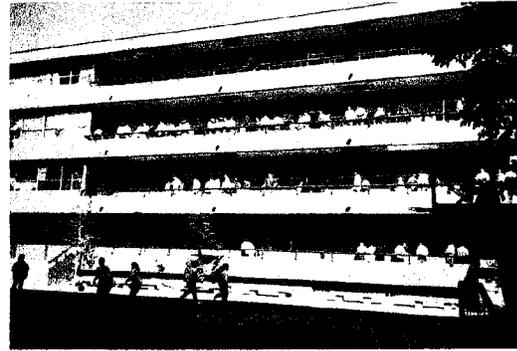
*humbled by their hospitality and willingness to include me in their lives as I tried to reassure her that I was having a wonderful learning experience. If anything, I assured her, I felt lacking in my education and responsibility as a visitor because I did not speak their beautiful language. (Journal entry, February 7, 1999)*

### **Olinca School**

Olinca school is a private school, with approximately 1,500 enrolled students, located on two different sites in the southern part of Mexico City. One site is where the Preschool children, who range in age from 18 months to 6 years of age, study. The school at the other location accommodates students who study in *Primaria* (grades 1-6), *Secundaria* (grades 7-9), and *Preparatoria* (grades 10-12). Each division has a Director with duties similar to those of an assistant principal in Canada.

The classrooms at the high school site are located in 2 three storey buildings and one single storey building. A separate building contains the offices of senior administration. Open concrete play areas are nestled between the buildings, and in the play areas there are basketball hoops and soccer nets, some picnic tables at one end of the playgrounds, and small canteens at the other where students can purchase tacos or sandwiches, soft drinks or juice during their breaks between classes.





Involved in exchange programs with 20 other schools internationally, Olinca offers its students a wide range of educational and exchange opportunities. In addition to access to a variety of international exchanges, high school students at Olinca are fortunate to have a number of service-learning experiences to choose from when completing the mandatory community service component incorporated in their studies. Some of the varied service-learning projects include: teaching English to students at a neighbouring public school; providing leadership as guides for exchange students who visit the school; providing help and assistance to the elderly and infirmed at institutional care centres; participation in ecological preservation projects; and participation in the Hidalgo project.

*...Today, one of the students brought pictures to show me another of the community projects she had been involved in: freeing young giant turtles, now an endangered species, back to the sea. Accompanied by the biology teacher, Christina, a group of students had traveled to a sanctuary outside Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco where giant turtles come routinely to lay their eggs in the sand. The students and workers at the sanctuary, collected the eggs and placed them in a protected area to incubate and hatch. This natural process takes approximately 45 days, in total. Once the hatching is complete*

*the baby turtles are collected in large plastic tubs and transported back to the ocean where they are released into the sea. This student had been able, with her peers, to touch the mother turtle and watch as she laid her eggs. She then collected and transported them to the incubators and observed a previously collected batch of eggs as they hatched. They were then able to participate in the release of these small creatures into the sea. Without human intervention, she explained, it is estimated that only 2 or 3 of the hundreds of hatchlings would survive to make the short journey from the sand into the sea. Natural predators such as birds, coyotes and humans prey on the eggs and young hatchlings.*

*The young lady who shared her experience with me spoke with animation and enthusiasm, convinced that her role in this project had made a contribution to nature and to her environment. Her eyes shone as she describes the experience! There was no doubt in my mind that this was a valuable learning experience for her. This young adult had touched another living thing and contributed to its survival. Her reward was knowing that the actions she and her peers took would make a difference to the survival of a species of animal that, left to nature, might become extinct. What a wonderful experience it must have been! (Journal entry, February 9, 1999)*

Every morning there is a long line of vehicles down the block as parents/ guardians or chauffeurs drop their charges off for the school day. Announcements are broadcast throughout the day and, at the end of each school day, students' name are announced over the loudspeaker as their rides come to take them home again. This school was a noisy hive of activity at all times during the school day.

Each Monday there is a "Welcome" ceremony where students line up in the central

playground of the school to welcome exchange students, have announcements and celebrate the accomplishments of the Olinca students. One of the Directors is Master of Ceremonies, welcoming guests and wishing them a pleasant stay. The student council presents a small token of welcome to each visitor.

*I watched the morning ceremony with great interest. The students were attentive and well mannered as the flags were marched in accompanied by drummers. I watched the way the students presented themselves as their National anthem was played. Their pride was apparent as they loudly sang the anthem, standing at sharp attention with their right arms at a 90 degree angle to their bodies, shoulder height with hand, palm down, resting at their right breast. (Journal entry, February 8, 1999)*

Throughout my two week stay, I observed the students and teachers in their daily activities. I noted the differences in classroom discipline from what I know of our high schools. The students spoke freely and frequently throughout their classes. They mixed and mingled as they asked questions, discussed and debated points of instruction.

*...I observed one class as the teacher and students took microscopes to the picnic tables in the outdoor courtyard between the buildings to study the lesson(s) of the day as they enjoyed the open atmosphere. As they chattered and studied, other students played soccer on the playground. Occasionally a ball flew through the air and bounced off one of the picnic tables/desks. Nonchalantly, one of the students would throw it back onto the playground and resumed their studies as the soccer players continue with their game. There appears to be a much more relaxed atmosphere surrounding education here - or perhaps just a different teaching style. Teaching seemed to be directed to the active,*

*animated, enthusiastic, enquiring student.*

*Eugenia's position includes teaching the Social Studies curriculum and arranging all international exchanges with their 20 partners. She is, as well, the liaison between student council and administration...When we arrived this morning, the students greeted her enthusiastically by name. They love to play tricks on her. Before this morning's classes began, someone, as a joke, had locked the door to her office and taped it shut - a message for her to cancel their classes for the day. When we entered her office one of the students had left a written message, in chalk, on her desk. Students streamed through her office on a continual basis throughout the day asking for advice and guidance. The students, obviously, love her! (Journal entry, February 8, 1999)*



Students in the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) Program must prepare an audio tape for individual oral examination of their English language skills. Eugenia asked me if I would assist her by listening and providing feedback to her students' presentations. The examination tape consisted of a two part interview, approximately ten minutes in length. The first part of the examination was an oral presentation by the student on a topic of his/her choice. The second part was a general discussion between the teacher and student,

where an assessment was made of the student's conversational language skills and comprehension.

*...Eugenia had prepared the students by telling them that I, as the resident English language expert, would evaluate them. I laughed when she told me that she wanted the students to feel intimidated, as they would put more effort into their presentations. (Perhaps there aren't as many differences in education as I think). The first few students were terrified but once they realized I was there to offer constructive suggestions to help them, they became more relaxed. I was able to listen to 19 of the 21 student presentations and was, with the exception of one or two students who struggled with pronunciation and grammar, amazed at their command of the English language. Three of the students expressed disappointment with their presentation, citing a lack of preparation on their part, and all three asked if they could return to present to me a second time. I found myself wondering if most Canadian students would be as interested in repeating the experience?*

*The time I spent with these students was wonderfully rewarding as I learned a little bit about each of them and their interests, and what they believed the future holds for them. These were bright and enthusiastic young people, all planning to continue with a post-secondary education, some in Mexico and some in the United States. I was disappointed to not hear Canada mentioned as a site for future study although one young man did plan to travel to Central Canada for a few months before beginning his University education. I noted that every one of these young people placed great value on their education and they saw it as an investment in their future. These students are*

*Mexico's future and, based on what I have seen at Olinca, the future of Mexico is in good hands! (Journal entry, February 17, 1999)*

### **Benefits of the Service-Learning Experience In Mexico**

#### **Benefits to the Students**

The students who study at Olinca school are from privileged upper class Mexican families. Many have not been exposed to the abject poverty and hardship that is a part of the everyday existence of the people living in the marginalized communities. Through their participation in the Hidalgo project, these students witness the poverty and malnutrition of their fellow citizens and how difficult their daily activities for living are. They develop first hand knowledge of the differences in the language, culture and thinking patterns of people living within their own country. Attached are essays (Appendices A and B) written by three students following their participation in the Hidalgo project. Both provide valid feedback as evaluation of the positive experience from the students' perspectives, citing the value of the face-to-face interaction with the people residing in the community, the differences in their cultures, socioeconomic status, and education.

The students involved in the Hidalgo project eagerly contribute their time and effort to its success. They expressed, in their evaluations and in personal communication, an awareness of the positive role this project plays in their education and in teaching citizenship skills. Students develop increased leadership skills and take on personal responsibility for their involvement in this project. This experience empowers them to become teachers and achievers, and invites them to become active members in their community. Their cultural sensitivity, awareness and competence is enhanced and nurtured

through their contact with those living in the rural areas of Hidalgo.

Denboba, et al. (1998) offer a definition of cultural competence as "...a individual and program's ability to honor and respect those beliefs, interpersonal styles, attitudes, and behaviours both of families who are clients and the multicultural staff providing services..." (p. S-47). Cultural competence is cited as an integral component of a successful service-learning experience as, "[I]t takes us from a level beyond cultural sensitivity to a level where the sensitivity is integrated into planning, implementation, and evaluation of service systems and encompasses cultural diversity" (Evans, cited in Denboba, et al., 1998, p. S-47). Both student evaluations (see Appendices A & B) mentioned the level of disparity between their lives and those of the people in Hidalgo; they expressed recognition of their privileged status when comparing it to the people who live in the communities of Hidalgo, the importance this project has for the growth and development of the children in Hidalgo, and the relevance it has for them as young members of their society.

Successful partnerships are formed between the school and those directly involved in it. Parents partner with the school as they contribute the nutritional ingredients prior to each Hidalgo visit, every 8 - 9 weeks. The partnership between students and their parents increases as these young adults relate the learning experience they have had to their family members upon their return from the community, and this enhances the parental commitment to the project.

Students are proud of their school and the contribution it makes to community service (Appendix C). Their pride in the importance of their work was enhanced when

they were joined by a visitor from another country and by students from another school. The students acted as role models for others to emulate. Olinca high school is able to offer a wide range of projects that are valuable to the community and the environment.

“Developing a network of parents, advocates, and community leaders, including those representing culturally diverse populations, is essential to having relevant input on advisory committees, quality evaluation and improvement activities, document reviews, and partners in training” (Denboba, et al., 1998, p. S-52). The pride, personal value and, ultimately, the success of this service-learning experience hinges on these partnerships.

The students and their teachers develop partnerships with the community by providing this service as they prepare, travel and work side by side during the length of the project. “Establishing and renewing personal relationships with individuals of different cultures inside and outside the work environment helps to broaden perspectives” (Denboba, et al., 1998, pp. S-51-52). Students gain self-esteem and develop a sense of pride from knowing they have contributed in an active and meaningful way to make a difference in the lives of the community residents. Students learn citizenship, life skills, cultural awareness and cultural competence. They learn how to relate to individuals who do not speak their language, do not share their economic or social status, or many of their customs or beliefs. Perhaps Ailinger & Carty (1996) express it best:

In a broader sense, there were “moral” awareness outcomes that arose from the third world experience. For example, the students... had a new appreciation for how people lived in the third world, and would “never complain again” about what they did not have. Perhaps

these “moral” outcomes, though not measurable, were the most important ones that were gained from the experience.” (p. 241)

Experiences such as this enrich the lives of those involved and provide future generations with opportunities to become caring, responsible citizens.

### **Benefits to the Community**

The community benefits by receiving the nutritional ingredients and gaining the knowledge that, by correctly mixing the ingredients and supplementing their children’s diet, they can help their children to grow and develop to their fullest physical and intellectual potential. In addition, community residents develop the knowledge that they are not alone as they form a bond of trust with the students and teachers who travel to provide a service they need.

Many of the individuals who are actively involved with the implementation and success of this project develop a heightened sense of community action and responsibility. In order to “[B]reak down communication barriers, including language barriers... [I]nterpreters and translators must be culturally appropriate and sufficiently trained...” (Denboba, et al., 1998, p. S-52). People such as Rufi and Lety, the local doctor, the bus driver and others become actively involved and share a common goal to help to improve the living conditions of their neighbours and, ultimately, their community.

The potential for growth and development of the community was best outlined by Ing. Xochitl Galvez Ruiz when she spoke of the bond of trust that, if encouraged and mentored, can only continue to develop. There is no doubt in my mind that, with the help of these committed and dedicated individuals, life will improve for the indigenous people

of Hidalgo. The greatest benefit to this community is the gift of hope; hope for healthier lives and a better future for their children and for their community.

### **Personal and Pedagogical Benefits**

Our own experiences represent a familiar and functional source of knowledge. The ability to generalize, to recognize regularities, and to make predictions based on observations is an important characteristic of the human mind....Naturalistic researchers tend to emphasize the dynamic, holistic, and individual aspects of the human experience and attempt to capture those aspects in their entirety, within the context of those who are experiencing them.

(Polit & Hungler, 1999, pp. 9-14)

Service-learning, such as my involvement in the Hidalgo project, is meant to be lived educational experiences. While recognizing the generalizations made in this body of work, this naturalistic study has resulted in a rich and rewarding service-learning experience and fueled my desire to return to Mexico to assist in the next phase of the Hidalgo project development.

Two very positive personal benefits resulted within days of my return to Canada. First, I wrote the President of *Dairyland Foods* in Vancouver, BC., as I promised, forwarding copies of some of the photographs I had taken while involved in the project. Although I did not receive a response from my letter, I was pleased that I had taken the opportunity to share with him the results of his company's involvement in the project and encouraged *Dairyland* to maintain, if not expand, its involvement in projects such as

Hidalgo. The second immediate personal benefit was the publication of a short summary article in *Communique*, the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), the national newsletter for Student Services professionals in Canada (Roth, 1999, pp. 12-13). The personal satisfaction of sharing a brief summary of my experiences with others was very rewarding.

Over time and through reflection, as I transcribed my written work, I began to relive in my mind the memories of this wonderful experience.

Reflective learning has been described as a process whereby an individual responds to a lived experience and cognitively reviews and explores the experience in such a way as to create and clarify meaning in terms of self ... [The] working definition of reflection ... suggests that it is a process of thinking about and exploring an issue of concern, which is triggered by an experience. The aim of one's deliberations is to make sense or meaning out of the experience and to incorporate this experience into one's view of the self and the world.... (Boyd & Fales, as cited in Baker, 1996, p. 19)

The Hidalgo project was an opportunity for me to become the student in a service-learning experience and I experienced many of the positive benefits of the students, as described above. In addition, I was able to renew and establish personal relationships with my friends and fellow students in Mexico, and I was fortunate to meet new people of a different culture and share their home for the time I was in their country.

Reviewing the goals and objectives of service-learning, I believe this experience

satisfied all of them, as defined by Crews (no date). It increased my personal awareness and education, supported positive values and leadership skills, and enhanced my personal responsibility and desire to become an increasingly active citizen. As this experience is one I will never forget, it met the goal of increased retention.

### Summary

This service-learning experience has confirmed and deepened my belief that projects such as this are becoming more timely and relevant to the education of students. As we help to prepare them to meet the future of increased technology, skill development, heightened demands for societal change, and active membership in their communities,

[Y]oung white people who have been raised to feel entitled to leadership by accident of birth need to be reminded that the world they face is already two-thirds nonwhite and poor and that our nation is every day becoming a mosaic of greater diversity. Of the total growth in the American labor force between 1988 and 2000, only one in eight of these new additions will be white non-Latino males. As our fate becomes more and more intertwined with that of non-English-speaking people of color - in California, Texas, New York, Iraq, Iran, South Africa, and Japan - personal, economic, and world survival will depend on awareness of and respect for other races and cultures. (Edelman, 1993, p. 37)

The world is, metaphorically speaking, becoming a smaller place. We live in communities that include individuals from numerous cultural, religious and ethnic origins. The more

opportunities we provide for students to interact with others who have ways of living that are different from their own, nationally and internationally, the better we will prepare students for their personal and professional futures. As Edelman (1993) wrote, "...education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it." (p. 9-10)

I cautiously believe there are opportunities for increased collaboration and partnership with Olinca High School, and possibly the Universidad Panamericana. Great attention must be paid, however, to the differences in the philosophical and theoretical beliefs in education and, perhaps more importantly, in culture. The sensitivity of many individuals in Mexico, a result of turbulent history and culture variances, must be explored, assessed and accepted. The differences in language and the hidden meaning of words can easily create misunderstandings. As with the Hidalgo project, inroads must be made with caution and over time. Trust and acceptance must be earned before any successful collaboration or partnership will be achieved.

The assistance and co-operation I received from everyone involved in my service-learning experience (at Olinca school, at the Universidad Panamericana, and from the members in my host family) were generously given and gratefully received. After sharing some of my experiences with a faculty member after my return to Canada, I was asked why I thought my experience had been so special and such a positive experience. I responded that it was, in large part, due to my previous contacts with the students I had studied with in the summer of 1998. After further reflection, I would add that I was not there to judge or demand, and I did not expect the overwhelming display of generosity or

warmth I was offered. As Freire (1970) wrote, “In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from “another world” to the world of the people do so not as invaders. They do not come to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people’s world” (p. 181). I went to Mexico to study, to learn and to actively participate in, what I believe to be, a valuable humanitarian project. I did not arrive with any hidden agenda or preconceived expectations, and because I was treated so exceptionally well and with so much respect, the gratitude I expressed was genuine and offered with honesty and humility. As Denboba et al., (1998) support, “Gaining knowledge of other cultures with a goal of understanding, rather than judging, them and resisting stereotyping others is a key element in expanding our worldview and appreciating the...[people we meet and]... serve.” ( p. S-52).

My service-learning adventure in Mexico was truly one of the most wonderful experiences of my life, and I hope to return again in the summer of 2000. Perhaps by then I will be able to secure commitments from others to contribute their time, resources, or expertise in providing service in free clinics or will be able to take a group of students to participate in a service-learning project. As Edelman (1993) wrote,

We are taught that the world had a lot of problems; ...that we were able and obligated to struggle and change them; ...that extra intellectual and material gifts brought with them the privilege of sharing with others less fortunate and that service is the rent each of us pays for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. (p. 177)

The service-learning experience I had in Mexico spurred me to believe in myself as a person who may be able to make a difference, in whatever small way, to the lives and living conditions of others from a different background and culture.

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## Appendix A

"Hidalgo" by Mariel \*\*\*\*

About two years ago Olinca decided to include Hidalgo as a part of its CAS program. Since then, every two months, we bring the ingredients for a nutritional complex for kids under five years to help them to avoid malnutrition. This mixture has cornmeal, vegetal oil, dried milk, sugar and water, it isn't a substitute of a hole meal, it helps to complete kids' nutrition and make sure they are getting everything they need to grow healthy and fully develop their brain cells.

We help children from different communities in the district of Ixmiquilpan in the state of Hidalgo. We also teach their mothers how to prepare this complex, and we measure and weigh their children and make a record of their improvement. We have helped many kids but we have to fight a lot. Sometimes their mothers don't bring them, and the next time they didn't gave their kids the mixture because it is easy to incorporate the mixture's ingredients into the hole family diet.

This year was the first time I went to Hidalgo and participated in the program. It was a shocking experience for me, I learned so many things. First I've ever woke up at 4:00 am to help anybody, and carry the bags into the bus, and travel five hours to Ixmiquilpan and then take another bus to the communities, change the bags from the bus, unload the bus, organize everything, who is going to weigh, who is going to measure, who is going to keep the record, who is going to teach the mothers how to do the mixture and who is going to give out the ingredients. But it isn't just going there and do the list of things I've mentioned. If we did that it wouldn't be a CAS activity, if all of them could

read, it would be the same to sent them a package with the instructions enclosed. But what is really important about the Hidalgo program is to spent some time with these people and learn from them.

They are very thankful and educated, they shake hands with you, and to show their appreciation at the end they give you something to eat. I mean, they are very poor, but they are still able to share a little bit with you. Sometimes I can't share my things with my sisters and these people don't mind sharing with somebody that don't even is their relative and maybe won't see again. Another thing I learned was knowing that other part of Mexico, the part that 50,000,000 mexicans live every day, walking 10 miles to go to school, wake up with the sunrise and go to bed at sundown , because there is no electricity, and forget about bathrooms and your daily shower with hot water, also you won't be able to talk hours with your friends on the phone while you are watching t.v.. For most of us these are things we can't spare, but these people manage to get along every day and their major preoccupation is to find out what are they are going to eat today, meanwhile we are so worried about our weight and if we are getting a few kilos. And they are not super humans made for living in these conditions, although we have different ways, they are just like us, and they have the right to accesses all the things we are enjoying, services , oportunities for jobs and most important of all, a good education.

We can't stand still and I believe that the Hidalgo program is a good start but it just can't stop there, we have to change things for the kids we are helping today so they have a chance for a better life in the future. we are knowing a different reality, a different way of living and we need to do something eles

## Appendix B

“Social Service in Hidalgo” by Lidia \*\*\*\*

At Olinca, we enjoy helping others, and we do not expect to receive anything for doing it, that is why, we are members of a social service program.

In our school we do a lot of things for CAS, like teaching English to a primary school, or spending time with elders, but the activity that I enjoy the most, is going to Hidalgo.

Nandho and Taxto are two communities at Hidalgo which are very poor. They don't have as many things as we have, and they are suffering of malnutrition. Their kids are not growing as good as other children are, because of the lack of food.

Every two months, we go to Hidalgo to try to solve this problem. We give them a specific nutritional mixture for babies and for children up to five years old.

Last year I went to Nandho where I had a really nice experience by sharing time and things I don't usually appreciate.

There are a lot of poor communities in Mexico, and of course we are not able to help them all, so we decided to concentrate in this two towns, because we can see more easily the way the mixture is having results. We can see that, by measuring and weighting the kids.

Nevertheless, we have to teach their mothers to cook the mixture, and our main job is to give them the ingredients.

Eventhough we are doing a big effort, it is very difficult for us to understand that

there can be such different cultures and ways of thinking in the same country.

But what we really need to learn by this experience, is that we are all Mexicans with the same rights and privileges and friends of justice.

I decided to participate in this program, because I think that the best satisfaction for a human being, is not to give food, or money, but to give and receive love and care from people as important as you are.

## Appendix C

### “Creativity Action Service” by Carlos \*\*\*\*

The world is round; a coin is round. In a world in which material objects are above human conscience, a program like CAS does not let us forget our true nature: Humankind.

When we turn around, the only things that we can notice are the material necessities, values and objects that rule our lives; and it is way too difficult to avoid being absorbed by them.

With Creativity, Action and Service (CAS), each one is important. Within a world where others tell us what to do, CAS makes us create. We are able to carry out what we create and imagine; that's action. However action and creativity alone do not develop our human side, that is why the alternative to help those who need it.

An option which you choose or bunk; not an obligation to help others, because it is compulsory to do so. We must be engaged with the idea to help with a little of ourselves.

In Mexico, our school has taught us that those who are not ready to serve, are not ready to live. So, with these watchwords, Olinca adds to a program where we deliver the ingredients for a nutritional “baby mush” to the Otomies who live in Hidalgo, Mexico.

Commitment means not only to be there when you are told; it means to be there whenever you are required. Life is service, and service makes us human.

Whenever a natural catastrophe occurs - not only in our country-like hurricane Paulina in Mexico, but also hurricane Mitch in Central America, we volunteer to send supplies collected from every student and teacher who are part of our institution; not exclusively from these who are part of the International Baccalaureate or the Middle Years Programs.

Human nature is founded on community service. When we talk to Mankind, we do not reckon borders, religion, sex, race, or anything dividing us. We only know “One home: the Earth, and One family: Mankind.”

If we are able to understand these concepts, and accept Service as a personal commitment, we will be able to find and know that our capacities are not dictated by economy or globalization. Instead, our goals are guided by ideals, tolerance and understanding. Therefore CAS will not become an academic achievement, but a triumph of Human Kind.