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# ISL Programs and Neo-Colonialism: The Response of One Nicaraguan Village

## Programmes ISL et néocolonialisme: la réaction d'un village nicaraguayen

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### Abstract

Over the past five years, through interviews and focus groups, the authors have been exploring the impact of international service learning (ISL) programs on host villages and villagers in the South. While most communities express ongoing interest, this paper focuses on one rural Nicaraguan village that decided to end their long-standing involvement in ISL, citing the North's persistent lack of sensitivity to the interests and needs of their community. Drawing on Basso (1996) and Gruenwald (2003), we explore the concept of place-making—drawing the individual into a collective story and focusing on discovering social meaning in and through the places they inhabit. We argue that the ISL has the potential to challenge and transform both the visitors and the host community members, but for that to happen the host community must exercise agency with respect to defining the behavioural and learning expectations of their visitors

### Résumé

Au cours des cinq dernières années, par le biais d'interviews et de groupes de discussion, les auteurs ont exploré l'impact des programmes du service international d'apprentissage (ISL) sur les villages hôtes et les villageois du Sud. Alors que la plupart des communautés continuent à exprimer leur intérêt, cet article porte sur un village du Nicaragua rural qui a décidé de mettre fin à sa participation de longue date avec ISL, évoquant le manque persistant de sensibilité du Nord vis-à-vis des intérêts et des besoins de sa communauté. À partir de Basso (1996) et de Gruenwald (2003), nous explorons le concept de création d'espace—en attirant la personne dans une histoire collective et en se concentrant sur la découverte du sens social des endroits où ils vivent. Nous faisons valoir que l'ISL a la capacité de remettre en question et de transformer à la fois les visiteurs et les membres de la communauté qui les reçoit. Mais pour que cela se produise, la communauté qui reçoit doit jouer un rôle moteur dans la définition de ses attentes en matière de comportement et d'apprentissage de la part des visiteurs.

Keywords: International service learning, place making; pedagogy of place, social meaning; community agency, neo-colonialism

Mots clés: Service international d'apprentissage, création d'espace; pédagogie du lieu, signification sociale; agence communautaire, néocolonialisme

### Introduction

In 2015 and 2016 we collaborated with colleagues doing similar work in Guatemala, to gather data on the impact of International Service Learning (ISL) visits in four rural, socio-economically marginal Nicaraguan villages.<sup>1</sup> We already had considerable experience as practitioners engaged

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<sup>1</sup> This three-year research project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This recent study continued on from similar SSHRC-funded research which we conducted in Nicaragua in 2013.

with a Canadian NGO that facilitates ISL visits from secondary and postsecondary institutions to such villages, and as researchers investigating the impact of ISL visits both on global northern participants (O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2013; O’Sullivan & Niemczyk, 2015) as well as on host communities (Smaller & O’Sullivan, 2016; Smaller, O’Sullivan, Hernández & Rerrie, 2018). Despite our experience and the host communities’ evident commonalities, we were somewhat surprised during our data analysis by the extent to which these communities differed from one another with respect to (a) governance issues related to decision-making about their respective ISL programs, (b) the range of experiences that the host villages offer (or choose not to offer) their young global northern guests, and (c) the assumptions behind the practice or, indeed, the philosophy that guided their decision-making.

The ISL practices of the four villages that we studied varied widely, ranging from simply acting as a venue for the delivery of a program designed elsewhere—and typically by the leaders of the visiting groups—to being at least somewhat involved in defining expectations linked to the design and delivery of the in-village program (see, for example, Smaller & O’Sullivan, 2016; Smaller et al., 2018; Smaller & O’Sullivan, 2018). From our village interviews and field observations, and our interviews of Nicaraguan- and Canadian-based ISL providers, we came to recognize the diversity and complexity of the host villages’ involvement in and attitude towards these programs. These variations include villages that quite transparently and unapologetically receive ISL visitors essentially as generators of income (Smedley, 2016); in two of the villages, we were informed that some residents wanted to turn their community and/or the surrounding area into eco-tourist destinations. In fact, in spite of these differences, we found that all of the villages (with one exception, San Ignatius<sup>2</sup>) agreed to accommodate group preferences on a whole range of issues—food, accommodation, community project activities, and so on. By doing so, we believe that the authenticity of students ISL experience is seriously undermined. By authentic, we mean sharing as much as possible the social, cultural, and economic conditions prevailing in the village at the time of the visit, not an attempt to find an idealized “traditional” premodern village devoid of 21st century influences. By comparison, our explorations at San Ignatius certainly enlightened us to possibilities for encouraging and supporting students from the North to engage in “transformative,”<sup>3</sup> rather than “reproductive” experiences (Veugelers, 2011). Following a description of this recent research, we will return to a discussion of our findings, and our hopes that ISL programs might be restructured to allow their student participants to, as Vanessa Andreotti (2016) so adroitly states, “imagine the world differently.”

## Literature Review

There is now considerable research literature exploring ISL programs, examining both their impact on participants from the North as well as their impact on host villages and villagers in the South. While some, or much of these findings are laudatory (see, for example, Keilberger & Keilberger, 2009), more critical findings have also been reported—both on the effects on Northern participants (Thomas & Chandrasekera, 2014; Van Deussen, 2014; Epprecht, 2004) and on communities in the South (Jefferess, 2012; Andreotti, 2016; Pashby, 2011). As described in detail below, our methodology sought to explore these reported contradictions, in the hopes of ultimately providing

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<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>3</sup> A complex pedagogical aim, to be sure. As a basic descriptor, we draw on Andreotti’s (2016) suggestion of a shift from students “see[ing] themselves as benevolent global leaders, experts and dispensers of aid, health, rights and education to the rest of the world” to that of being “prepared to face the complexities of simplistic solutions, of uneven power relations and of the historicity and (geo-/bio-) political nature of knowledge production in terms of epistemological hegemony, and of self-implication in structural harms” (p.105, 106).

feedback to ISL program organizers on ways in which their programs could more effectively benefit both visitors and hosts—providing a more “authentic” and informative experience for the former while seeking to explore ways in which relations with Southern hosts could reflect a more equitable exchange of experiences, rather than continuing to perpetuate traditional North-South power relations.

In addition, and especially after conducting research in San Ignatius, we became aware that the concept of *place-making* assisted us in discovering social meaning in and through the communities we explored. Place-making is a practice that draws the individual into a collective story. Drawing on Basso (1996) and others, Gruenwald (2003) argues the importance to place-making of being *inhabitants* of a particular space *rather than simply being residents* (authors’ emphasis). Place-making involves dwelling in a particular space, of being rooted there. In Gruenwald’s analysis, members of host communities are inhabitants, while the young student visitors who typically make up a great majority of ISL groups are very temporary residents. The inhabitants have a long history of place, but it is a history that has been interrupted and reshaped by colonization and social, economic, and political conflict and collaboration (Gruenwald, 2003). We will return to this analysis, and an exploration of a “pedagogy of place” (Haymes, 1995) to investigate their relevance in promoting culturally sensitive and transformative ISL programs.

## **Methodology**

Our research in Nicaragua, following ethical approval from our respective universities, was conducted in two phases. The first phase took place in 2013 when we engaged with five rural villages. The Nicaraguan research assistant with whom we worked during this phase conducted 45 interviews and three focus groups. The second phase occurred in 2015–2016, during which time a second assistant surveyed four villages (one of which was a village we had studied in 2013), conducting 102 interviews. Both segments also involved village observations and field notes.

San Ignatius was the only village surveyed with which we had no prior contact. During the second phase of our research, we heard about its particular ISL history from a facilitator-translator who regularly accompanies ISL groups to a number of villages. While the other seven communities were receiving ISL visits at the time we conducted our research, San Ignatius, which received its first ISL group in 1992, had intentionally stopped doing so in 2010. Its early start with such programming, and the reasons for its decision 18 years later to end the program (described below), led us to consider it as an important reference point for our research, as we sought to analyze the disparate logic of eight very different sets of ISL practice. Members of the host organization—the municipality’s community development association SICDA (a pseudonym)—agreed to a visit by our Nicaraguan research assistant and subsequently a multi-day visit by one of the authors. In addition to the interviews with community residents, much of the background information we have on this village comes from two sources. The first is an MA thesis on competing community development strategies in the village, one spearheaded by SICDA and the other by an ongoing community engagement project by World Vision; the study was conducted by Anne Toomey (2008), who lived and collected data in the community for six months in 2006. The other source is an article by René Mendoza Vidaurre (1990) published in the Nicaraguan journal *Envio*.

In addition to the interviews and field notes from the eight villages, in 2016 the authors and a Canadian research assistant conducted interviews with 12 Managua and three Toronto-based ISL program managers and coordinators, to gain their perspectives both on the intentions and undertakings of these programs, as well as on reasons why host communities may choose to

participate in ISL visits. All village and coordinator interviews were transcribed, and the entire research team engaged in several sessions, using NVivo software to identify relevant themes for analysis. Pseudonyms are employed for all communities and local organizations cited.

### **Host Villages: Active Partners in the ISL Experience or Simply a Locale Where Programs Designed Elsewhere Happen?**

While there were clearly inter-village differences, the ISL programs operating in the seven villages (other than San Ignatius) we studied seemed to have much in common. Typically, the leaders of the visiting groups—most frequently global northern teachers or professors—had developed their own learning expectations with a varying amount of prior input from host villagers. As a result, communities essentially served as the locale in which such expectations were met, through provision of intercultural experiences. One village, for example, at the request of a particular sending organization, organized sessions in which community elders talked about the community's history, culture, and values. Two students stayed with each host family, shared all their meals and household chores, in addition to the project work they are collectively engaged in. By comparison, another U.S.-based agency that sends students to the same village required that their participants stay at a hotel some distance from the community and that they instead conduct day visits to the village. They bring their own food for lunch (the only meal eaten in the village), local women cook it for them, and the visitors eat as a group rather than with community members.

In those situations where the visitors stay with a family a per diem payment is provided as compensation for the extra work (invariably provided by the host mother) and expense of having guests in their home. The per diem allows host families to accommodate the sending organization's frequent request, or requirement, to provide meals more acceptable to their Northern student participants than what normally would be served. Such practices represent a change in the family routine and thus represents a move away from providing as authentic an experience as possible (as described in this paper's introduction)—an experience that would involve ISL students' full immersion in the daily lives and living conditions of their host family. In short, rather than repeatedly eating rice and beans, tortillas, plantain, eggs, and cheese (i.e., the basic diet of a poor, rural Nicaraguan family), this fare would be supplemented by salads, meat on some if not all days of the home stay, and other relatively luxurious offerings, such as fresh fruit that would rarely be found on host families' dining tables. In addition, visitors invariably bring bottled water to avoid drinking the water available in the community.

Many, indeed most host communities, both in our experience and based on our interviews and casual conversations we have had in Nicaragua, accept these often very significant accommodations to meet the requirements of the sending organization. In short, students' experience in the host villages can range from at least somewhat authentic, to situations where minor or even major modifications conspire to make the time in the village little more than a somewhat intense tourist experience.

We now turn to the case of San Ignatius which, we argue, sought to provide the most authentic experience possible to its ISL visitors.

### **San Ignatius: Some Recent History**

Because of the village's continuing socio-economic marginalization, and similar to the other villages that we surveyed, numerous residents have been and continue to be involved in ongoing struggles for social justice both at the community level and nationally. Central to San Ignatius' story is the impact on the community of clergy and lay people from the Society of Jesus (i.e., the

Jesuits) and the Frente Sandinista (officially the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional; henceforth referred to as the FSLN or the Sandinistas). First, the Jesuits.

The local agricultural co-operative bears the name of a Jesuit lay activist, Pikin Guerrero,<sup>4</sup> who came to San Ignatius in the 1970s and who, because of his work with the local peasants, was killed by Somoza's National Guard.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, Jesuit priests established important and long-lasting links with the community. These included Fernando Cardenal, who went on to become the Minister of Education in the FSLN government during the revolutionary period of the 1980s, and Javier Gorostiaga, who subsequently served as the Rector of the Jesuit Universidad Centroamericana (UCA Managua). These two high-profile activists and other Jesuits (both priests and lay Jesuit volunteers) worked closely with the leadership of what would become SICDA (Toomey, 2008). Today, a Jesuit priest who has been living in San Ignatius since 1987 continues to play a key leadership role in SICDA and in the community.

Numerous benefits flowed to the community from their engagement with the Jesuits. By way of example, we learned from Toomey's (2008) study and from our interviews with local residents that:

- A significant number of local young people completed, and continue to complete, secondary education and go to the Jesuit affiliated UCA or other postsecondary institutions. Toomey, writing in 2008, noted that since 2000 “seventy-eight young people have had the opportunity to attend higher education” (p. 188). She goes on to note that “a significant number of the graduates have returned to do uncompensated work in the community in supporting [SICDA's] various activities ” (p. 189).
- In addition to encouraging young people to achieve higher education, Toomey (2008) argues that as a result of SICDA's “strong political beliefs and commitments, much of their impact has been in changing fatalistic attitudes and inspiring the local people to stand up for their rights as citizens and demand a better life for themselves, their families, and their community” (p. 189).
- Networking with U.S.-based Jesuit universities and other international organizations, such as the Oscar Romero solidarity network in Spain, SICDA also connected with urban Nicaraguan youth, particularly from Managua who visit the community. This led to this otherwise isolated community becoming globally connected and undertaking to host numerous individuals and groups, both foreigners and nationals, who have spent time in the community over the years. Community residents also have been invited to travel abroad, in one case to spend several weeks in Brussels to talk to church groups about the community. In addition, members of a youth folklore/dance performance group founded by SICDA have performed in other Central American countries.

There is no doubt that the Jesuit connection played, and continues to play at the time of writing, an important role in the life of the community and particularly in the life of the core group that subsequently established SICDA.

The FSLN also has played a significant role in the life of the community. This role was very positive, indeed inspiring, during the 1970s (the period of the armed struggle against the

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<sup>4</sup> Jesuit lay activists are non-clergy (i.e., not priests or nuns) who relate to the religious and social mission of the Jesuit order. They are lay volunteers (i.e., they don't take vows). They most frequently engage in community projects in conjunction with local community organizations.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasio Somoza, a U.S.-supported dictator, ruled through the power of his National Guard, which brutally fought the Sandinista insurgency and the popular uprising that resulted in the 1979 triumph of the Sandinista revolution. During the subsequent decade, the U.S.-armed “Contras” attempted to defeat the revolution, a conflict which lasted until the Sandinistas' 1990 electoral defeat.

Somoza dictatorship) and during the 1980s (i.e., the period of the Sandinista revolutionary government). We should not find the dual engagement between radical Christianity and the secular Sandinistas during the 1970s and 1980s to be perplexing. The Sandinistas had widespread support among Catholic activists who saw no contradiction between their Christian social justice values and the Sandinista national liberation and socialist program. For example, three notable priests—the Cardenal brothers (Fernando and Ernesto) and Fr. Miguel D’Escoto—were cabinet members of the revolutionary government, and exemplified the leading roles played by exponents of liberation theology, the phenomenon that Rudolf (1988) described as sweeping Latin America starting in the 1960s.

However, following the FSLN electoral defeat in 1990 this positive influence began to dwindle among many long-time party supporters and activists. Among some residents, disillusionment occurred as a result of what they perceived to be the party’s political transformation following its loss of power. According to some sources, this transformation, which was seen as a result of the influence of party leader Daniel Ortega and his inner circle, changed the party from being a grassroots revolutionary force to a neoliberal and authoritarian populist party which prioritized achieving power over social justice.<sup>6</sup> At the same time however, the FSLN was able to maintain the loyalty of many ordinary Nicaraguans because of its revolutionary history and its ability, as an adept opposition party, to enter into deals with successive right-wing governments that benefited both the party and, to some extent, its rank and file supporters.

The FSLN critics in San Ignatius, oriented by their adherence to the theology of liberation and to their more secular revolutionary ideals, organized themselves to maintain and promote these values through community action. In the early days following the defeat of the FSLN, this included forging a broad alliance in the community to organize and defend benefits won during the 1980s. For example, the first post-FSLN government sought to privatize and convert the Pikin Guerrero agricultural co-operative (which was collectively owned) into numerous small, individually owned plots. However, as a result of this community-wide action, unlike the situation in many other communities, the co-op continues to exist as a collective enterprise (Toomey, 2008). Ironically the co-op is now controlled by local pro-FSLN elements in the community who are suspicious of, if not actively hostile to, the activists who led the struggle for its survival (Toomey, 2008).

In addition to the struggle to save the co-op, during the 1990s some 40 to 50 core activists worked on local concerns related to community development and cultural issues (Toomey, 2008). Such efforts included pressuring authorities for the provision of potable water (a service that is not yet available in all areas of the municipality) and establishing the youth folklore/dance group mentioned earlier. This latter initiative is alive and well today and some of the younger SICDA leadership first became involved in the cultural life of the community as musicians and dancers. SICDA members were also key players in the founding of an agricultural women’s co-op. Toomey (2008) notes that “one of the most important areas of work of [SICDA] is in gender” (p. 187); SICDA worked in health care and education but their focus was primarily “on the needs of women in particular” (p. 187).

## **Decision to Host ISL Groups in the Village**

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<sup>6</sup> Examining the details and the controversies of this perceived political shift goes well beyond the issues under discussion in this paper. There is, however, extensive literature documenting that process and its implications, including quickly reaching the point where the party’s principles and practices were no longer aligned with SICDA’s (see, for example, Almeida, 2002, 2015; Almeida & Walker, 2007; Burbach, 2009; Carroll, 2009; Kent Smith, 1997; Lakhani, 2016; Mendoza Vidaurre, 1990; Tinoco, 2005; Walters, 2017).

In 1992, as part of their work in the community, the activists who would later form SICDA hosted the first ISL visit to San Ignatius, a decision described by numerous respondents during our interviews. SICDA's ISL model was unique in that (a) they did not charge their visitors a fee to stay in local homes, (b) they did not allow visitors to donate funds for community development projects, and (c) their program engaged visitors in local community initiatives rather than working on one-off, ISL-planned projects. We do not know of another village that refuses funding either for host families or for community projects.

The explanation for the first of these provisions was the belief that per diem payments to host families would create a dependency among the latter for a regular infusion of such funds. SICDA wanted visitors to be welcome members of a family, not paying guests.<sup>7</sup> In San Ignatius, the SICDA host organization was unwilling to accept this monetization. To reduce the cost to the families who agreed to receive students and to enhance guests' integration into the family, the host organization insisted that only one visitor be placed with each family and that no special treatment would be offered (such as providing food that the family would not ordinarily eat).<sup>8</sup> As for the second provision, SICDA respondents argued that visitor donations to projects would create a dependency on such funding that in the end would lessen the pressure on the community to demand development services from the local authorities.

The third provision—engagement in community initiatives—demonstrated that the community had its own development agenda and that the visitors were welcome to participate alongside community members. One of SICDA's leading members, a teacher with years of engagement with the group, cited the frequently cited statement “give a fish vs. teach them to fish” analogy and said in regard to the question of not accepting project money from visitors that “we are subjects of our own destiny. If you want to involve yourselves in our life, fine, but don't bring a project to save us.”<sup>9</sup> Such policies are in sharp contrast to the seven other villages that we surveyed in the two phases of our study, all of which accept per diem payments from their guests and receive project support as part of the visit.

### **The Visitors**

Beginning in 1992, ISL visitors came from a U.S. Jesuit university. These trips, which occurred over 3 weeks in December, were led by professors who knew San Ignatius well and, according to the SICDA leadership, had an excellent rapport with them and the community at large. The visit was connected to credit-bearing classes at the university. According to several individuals in the village who were aware of these early (and subsequent) visits, the success of the program was based on the detailed preparation that members of the visiting groups had undergone. Each student arrived in San Ignatius with:

- at least some knowledge of Spanish, as they were required to take a Spanish course prior to arrival;

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<sup>7</sup> Some authors (e.g., Smedley, 2016) have no problem with the monetization aspect of visits and indeed embrace it as an infusion of much-needed income for host families, while others (e.g., Zemach-Bersin, 2008) are highly critical of the practice. Zemach-Bersin (2008) comments that on her overseas placement in rural India she felt she had “literally purchased a third-world family for my own self-improvement” (p. 2).

<sup>8</sup> While it seemed to us that the hosting of Northern students in village homes involved heavily gendered labour on the part of hosting mothers, it is interesting that virtually no concerns were raised about this matter by them, in spite of interview prodding, in any of the villages we studied. It certainly remains an issue to explore further.

<sup>9</sup> This reminds us of the oft-quoted statement attributed to Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (“Lilla Watson,” 2017, para. 6).



- an understanding of the history of Nicaragua, including the history of the numerous U.S. interventions in the country since the mid 1800s, the U.S. support for the Somoza family dictatorship, and the Reagan administration's support for the Contras;
- insight into the community (e.g., its history, socio-economic conditions, cultural aspects);
- instructions in advance about how to dress in accordance with the community's cultural norms, understanding that they would be living on their own with a family (not in pairs as is so often the case with such placements), and that they would be eating all their meals with the host family and would be following household routines, including helping with chores at home and working in the fields;
- the expectation that they would participate in communal activities during their stay, ranging from working with the children's folklore group to involving themselves with local initiatives, one example of which was an environmental-protection project.

SICDA's decision in 1992 to initiate regular ISL visits expanded their project of building international solidarity and raising visitors' awareness of the community's lived experience. In this light, SICDA asked their ISL visitors to engage in solidarity work and/or struggles for social justice in their home communities upon their return to the U.S. While it is difficult, based on our interviews, to ascertain if such engagement was indeed undertaken by the returnees, however, given the ongoing and very close relationship with the group leaders from the Jesuit university, SICDA felt confident that this expectation was being met. This confidence in their partner was not the case, as we shall see, with the second ISL organization that began to send groups in 2006.

### **The SICDA ISL Program Runs Into Difficulties**

In 2005 and 2006, three events occurred that impacted the ISL program in San Ignatius. The first, in 2005, was a result of circumstances that led to the suspension of the Jesuit university's trips, including deep financial cuts to the university's budget and the elimination of programs in the faculty in which the three professors worked. The second event was the decision taken by SICDA to allow a U.S. volunteer organization (American Youth Abroad, or AYA, a pseudonym) to send groups to San Ignatius to fill the gap created by the end of the university program. The third event was the electoral victory of the FSLN and the return of Daniel Ortega as president in early 2006.

Based on our findings, there is no question that SICDA soon realized that the AYA ISL program was very different than that of the Jesuit university. During our interviews the SICDA activists reported that the visiting students were not prepared in the way their predecessors had been, and neither the students nor the AYA leaders were willing to meet SICDA's well-defined and long-established expectations. In the words of one villager, "we became concerned with the attitudes of the visitors." High on the list of specific concerns was the sending organization's insistence on matters relating to food and water for the visiting students.

Then they wanted to bring food. No, we said, no food, you will eat what we eat in the village. The other thing was the containers of water. We did not want them to bring containers of water to the community because we have water.

In the words of another resident, ". . . as for the food, some were vegetarians and didn't eat what we eat and others simply didn't like the food. Others wouldn't drink the water. What kind of world is this?"

Delegations also began demanding their own hosting/sleeping arrangements in the village homes. The Steering Committee had insisted that only one visitor stay with each family, arguing that this ensured a closer relationship between the students and their host family members, and minimized the effort and expense of hosting. As one resident expressed it, "For example, they

were afraid to stay alone in a house and they said if the problem was lack of beds, they'd bring a hammock. We said no." Bringing unrequested and undesired gifts also became an unresolved and contentious issue. "We didn't want people giving things to the hosts either upon arrival or departure . . . . The gift giving gave rise to conflict, bad interpretations and the loss of friendship," as well as visitors' demands for changes to traditional visitor accommodation routines.

In short, these routines soon suggested to villagers that little had been done in advance to sensitize visitors to the village's culture and values, and the latter's expressed interests in promoting mutual respect and solidarity. "What we wanted was for the visitors to integrate themselves into the work of the community and relate to the people in their host family and in the community." In the words of another, "The most important thing for us is your presence, the work you are doing and the friendship that we have." As a third resident noted, "If groups wanted to come, they would be welcome, not only to stay with a family but to involve themselves in the work of the community."

In addition to material concerns, another noted, with considerable regret, that they began to experience

. . . a loss of culture in the community because the youth here became accustomed to the life that they brought—they brought other customs and our youth lost their sense of where they came from, their customs, their roots and all that.

Also of concern was the fact that some of the visitors engaged in amorous relations with local young people.

Even more problematic for the Steering Committee were the responses of the sending organization to their expressions of concern, and their attempts to discuss possible changes to the routines.

At first we couldn't say anything but there came a point where we sat down and said that there was something happening that we couldn't ignore and we had to discuss it with the [sending] organization. We said that there were things that we didn't like and if you accept what we want, keep coming, but if not, we cannot continue working in this way. We did this with several delegations but there were no reactions, they just listened to us, which bothered us. For example, the issue of [the visitors] dating [local young people]—they observed that too—they didn't say anything [to their people], they just drew apart from us.

As a result, in 2010 SICDA terminated their participation in this programme. In the eyes of the leadership, as evidenced by our interviews, they are still fully welcome to continue coming, but on the terms that they have established. As one expressed it, "It was the delegations that had to solve the problems. We just received them and share with them but the biggest responsibility comes from them. We came through with what we offered."

The other significant event at the time was the election of the FSLN to office in late 2005. However, in the minds of the SICDA members, this was not the FSLN of former years, but rather one that had developed strong authoritarian tendencies through which it quickly sought to exercise complete control over the popular movement and to repress dissent. The coming to power of the transformed FSLN exacerbated tensions within the community between SICDA members who refused to support the FSLN during the 2005 election campaign, and Sandinista loyalists. In addition, the community also included members of the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI)—the main opposition party—and a growing number of socially conservative evangelical Christians (A. Toomey, personal communication, September 13, 2016). SICDA not only had to deal with these community divisions, but also found themselves at odds with an increasingly powerful FSLN that controlled the mechanisms of government, including the army and the police. Soon, as one of the

SICDA leaders put it, “democratic spaces became smaller and repression was heightened.” Within this context, SICDA continued to seek ways to provide progressive postcolonial leadership consistent with their values under increasingly difficult circumstances. Consequently, SICDA chose not to continue dealing with an ISL organization (AYA) that brought to the community young people who resisted SICDA’s long-established expectations and demonstrated little or no interest in engaging with community initiatives.

To be sure, we recognize limitations in our “findings” to date, and that our assumptions about the “authenticity” of the ICL experience San Ignatius provided has been formed mainly on the basis of our interviews with them.<sup>10</sup> Regardless however, even if based solely on the mutually confirming descriptions provided by a number of residents concerning the ways in which their ISL hosting program was conceived and undertaken, we remain very impressed with the ways in which it seemed to have provided an “authentic” experience, with students very much immersed in the daily, on-going lives of the village, and being required to meet with residents on the latter’s own terms and conditions.

## **Discussion**

What can we learn from San Ignatius? In what ways might their particular values and beliefs, as related to their experiences as ISL program hosts, assist in making our existing ISL programs generally more “transformative” for student participants from the North? How might ISL program coordinators in the North be encouraged to consider, and implement these alternative approaches, in the hopes of producing more culturally sensitive, “transformative” programs?

Indeed, in what ways might the “lessons learned” from San Ignatius assist in allowing residents in other host villages in the South to provide a more “authentic” experience for their visitors, and in doing so perhaps even assist in “decolonizing” the traditional power relations which seem all too often to underpin contemporary ISL program exchanges? Many or most other communities in Nicaragua have not shared the same history of Jesuit engagement, and thus may not have had the advantage of being formally educated in ways which specifically allowed them to explore more systematically the underlying reasons for their lived experience of colonialism. Clearly, it was this background which allowed San Ignatius residents to “take a stand” against what they saw as the undesirable aspects of traditional North-South ISL programs, and to plan their program based on mutual solidarity and internationalism, rather than charity and neo-colonialism. This is certainly a history, and a project, which could be shared with other host villages in the South, for their consideration.<sup>11</sup>

How might ISL programs be reimagined and reconfigured, to meet the ends of providing a transformative experience for their student participants? We would suggest that drawing on a “pedagogy of place” would assist in this regard. While initially employed by Stephen Haymes in the mid-1990s in relation to transforming inner-city schooling practices in the USA, Gruenwald (2003) draws on the concept to explain how it has much wider-ranging possibilities:

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<sup>10</sup> To date, our attempts to identify and interview former participants (professors and students) from the Jesuit university in the North, in order to explore the extent to which they may have been “transformed” by their experiences (the stay at San Ignatius, as well as the pre-and post-trip program at their university), have not been successful. Similarly, the recently-appointed Nicaraguan director of the AYA program claims no knowledge of connections with San Ignatius, and has been reluctant to connect us with previous employees.

<sup>11</sup> To be sure, we are well aware of the highly problematic nature of any suggestion “from the North” about how host villages and villagers should change their ways. Certainly, as compared to St. Ignatius’s refusal to accept material benefits from ISL programs, benefits received by other, economically marginalized host villages, are significant indeed, and clearly influence decisions about accepting ISL programs.

Haymes' pedagogy is grounded in a spatialized critical social theory (e.g., Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989) that recognizes how relationships of power and domination are inscribed in material spaces. That is, places are social constructions filled with ideologies, and the experience of places, such as the Black inner city or the White suburbs, shapes cultural identities. . . . These expressions of critical pedagogy focus on the importance of people telling their own stories (reading the world) in a place where people may be both affirmed and challenged to see how individual stories are connected in communities to larger patterns of domination and resistance in a multicultural, global society (p. 5).

Therefore, for Gruenwald, culturally-responsible and responsive educational programs like ISL must be built on an understanding that the concept "place"

. . . foregrounds a narrative of local and regional politics that is attuned to the particularities of where people actually live, and that is connected to global development trends that impact local places. Articulating a critical pedagogy of place is thus a response against educational reform policies and practices that disregard places and that leave assumptions about the relationship between education and the politics of economic development unexamined (p. 5).

As Zemach-Bersin (2008) notes, based on her own international student experience,

. . . there is a vast discrepancy between the rhetoric of international education and the reality of what many students like myself experience while abroad. Although the world may be increasingly interconnected, global systems of inequality, power, privilege, and difference are always present (p. 34).

At a practical level, pre-trip educational components must include activities designed to open students' eyes to existence of these power differentials, and the need to engage with host villagers in ways which may help to counter them. Certainly, implementing the Jesuit university's pre-trip program described above would go a long way to ensuring that students' interactions with host villagers were based on the social relations of solidarity rather than charity, thus providing the potential for making a difference in their experience.

## Conclusions

We are certainly not suggesting that restructuring ISL programs would be a simple or easy task because they are, for the most part, based on a North-perspective of "helping the poor." These are not easy values or beliefs to counteract—even among those of us who profess to more liberal, or even radical, perspectives. As Andreotti (2016) points out, "Kapoor (2014) reminds us that unconscious desires and (humanitarian) fantasies circumscribe the ways we think and act as modern subjects; we do not necessarily know our vested interests in [ISL], global citizenship or international development (p. 104)."

In addition to challenging these deeply-held values and beliefs held by many of the participants themselves (students, coordinators, supporting organizations), we recognize the difficulties faced in attempting to fund-raise for these projects, on the basis of solidarity and shared-learning prospects rather than offerings of charity for the "other." However, San Ignatius provides an example of this potential, and sharing their story with ISL promoters supporters in the North might help to transform participants' understanding of each other, and thus occasion a small but important shift in the North–South power relationship.

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