Physical Therapy Student Perceptions of a Global Health Service Learning Experience: A Qualitative Synthesis

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Physical Therapy Student Perceptions of a Global Health Service Learning Experience: A Qualitative Synthesis
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**Purpose**
To explore the impact of student experiences by identifying recurring themes in journal entries following a 5 day physical therapy service learning experience (SLE) in Zacapa, Guatemala in March 2019.

**Methods**
Eight students provided written consent for analysis of personal journal entries. Three student reviewers completed a qualitative evaluation using a constant comparative method. Reviewers used open coding to determine initial categories and axial coding to cross-link sub-textual themes.

**Results**
The following themes emerged from the analysis:

1. **COMMUNICATION** — Learning to communicate and build patient relationships while negotiating language and culture barriers, recognizing and addressing miscommunication, and collaborating inter-professionally to provide meaningful care.

2. **CLINICAL DEVELOPMENT** — Improving confidence with clinical skills and critical thinking, discovering resourcefulness, and applying and integrating prior coursework.

3. **HEALTHCARE DISPARITIES** — Recognizing disparities in access to quality care and resources, promoting patient education in the absence of care continuity, responding to severe presentations.

4. **COMPASSIONATE EMPATHY** — Juggling reactive emotions with professionalism in response to trauma, overcoming feelings of hopelessness, desiring to make a positive impact, and building human connection.

**Discussion**
- SLE allowed students to recognize healthcare disparities, build clinical and communication skills in an intercultural context, and show compassion in the face of trauma and hardship.
- These competencies are crucial to the professional development of novice practitioners and reflective of APTA core values.2,3
- SLE fosters improvements in cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication skills, clinical reasoning, confidence, and the ability to advocate for patients.4,5,6,7,8

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**Figure 1**
A word cloud generated to demonstrate the shape of the country of Guatemala. Each sub-textual theme is represented proportionately to its frequency and presentation within the journals. These themes were then compiled to cross-link into the four major categories.