

## Is Service-Learning the Answer? Preparing Teacher Candidates to Work with ELLs Through Service-Learning Experiences

Sandra Rodríguez-Arroyo  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Ashley Brailsford Vaughns  
*College of Charleston*

### Abstract

In an effort to address the gaps in preparing teacher candidates (TCs) to work with English Language Learners (ELLs), service-learning experiences (SLE) were integrated into two courses within a teacher education program. This exploratory case study sought to explore the outcomes of teacher candidates (TCs) engaged in SLE with diverse students and families, particularly ELLs. Content analysis of students' reflections provided insights of the impact of the SLE. Findings indicate that participating in service-learning with ELLs provides opportunities for TCs to engage in positive interactions that help to address misconceptions about students, families, and communities. TCs also began to confront their fears of working with ELLs and develop relationship-building skills and initial strategies for teaching ELLs.

### Overview

Across the United States there is a general concern that TCs are not prepared to teach English language learners (ELLs) (Bunten, 2010; Lucas, Villegas & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; O'Neal, Ringler, & Rodriguez, 2008; Samson & Collings, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). According to the *National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition* (NCELA), some states require all teacher candidates to have specific

coursework for teaching ELLs, several make a general reference to the needs of ELLs in their state standards, and others have no requirements at all and disregard the dramatic increases in the number of ELLs throughout the nation (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008, p. 4). For the purpose of this study, the state of Nebraska will be used as an example of a U.S. context that needs to provide more ELL training for its teacher candidates. As evidenced by *Education Week's* special issue entitled *How English Language Learners are Putting Schools to the Test*, Nebraska is one of 13 states where the enrollment of ELLs grew over 200% from 1995 to 2005 (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009, p. 2). The U.S. Department of Education's *Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students* (OELA) data concurs with this trend. The data shows that in the 1997–1998 school year, Nebraska's ELL enrollment was 7,396. By 2012–2013, Nebraska enrolled 20,304 ELLs with its largest group being kindergarten students with 3,417.<sup>1</sup> Even though the majority of ELLs attend urban areas schools, many small and rural communities are also “experiencing an influx of language-minority students” (Abourezk, 2009). Despite this dramatic increase in the past decades, the state still does not require

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.education.ne.gov/natlorigin/PDF/Maps/20132014map.pdf>

teacher education programs to have specific coursework on ELLs.

As the number of ELLs keep increasing in Nebraska and other states that “had little recent experience with new immigrants and their social and educational needs” (Editorial Projects in Education, p. 1), there is a call for “properly trained teachers” (Reutter, 2009). The state of Nebraska attempts to address the need for properly trained teachers through a set of documents with guidelines (Ex. Rule 15, Rule 24, Nebraska ELL Program Guide)<sup>2</sup> for universities and school districts to offer an English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement and/or professional training for teacher candidates (TCs) and in-service teachers. However, ESL endorsement courses are still optional and many teacher candidates and in-service teachers do not receive any preparation to teach ELLs. Lucas and Villegas (2013) argue that teacher educators must be strategic in how to prepare TCs to teach ELLs when there are no required courses in a program. One strategy to prepare teachers to teach ELLs is through the use of Service-Learning Experiences (SLE).

SLE in teacher education can support TCs in many ways (Swick, 1999). According to Swick, service learning can 1) provide TCs with the opportunity to learn how to plan, implement, and problem solve—skills necessary for effective teachers; 2) provide TCs with opportunities to practice and refine instructional strategies in various contexts; 3) help TCs better understand development by working closely with children and families; and 4) deepen their knowledge and understanding of the community and its role in the lives of children and families.

The incorporation of SLE in teacher education programs can also facilitate cultural competence (Domangue & Carson, 2008). As a result, several studies on SLE in teacher education focus on the positive

outcomes these teacher candidates experience when working with culturally diverse children and families (Able, Ghulamani, Mallous, & Glazier, 2014; Bollin, 2007; Dunn-Kenney, 2010; Wade, Boyle-Baise, & Grady, 2001). For example, Meaner, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, and Scott (2008) examined the outcomes of preservice teachers in a physical education course that required students to teach physical education to African-American and Hispanic children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. After reviewing their reflections and focus group interview data, the researchers suggest that service-learning indeed enhances cultural competence in TCs.

Tinkler and Tinkler (2013) argue that SLE provide the “possibility to target experiences with particular populations of students, specifically English language learners” (p. 108). However, only a few other researchers have studied SLE with ELLs (Bollin, 2007; Szente, 2008; Able, Ghulamani, Mallous, & Glazier, 2014). As a result, there is still a need for research articles that explore the outcomes of TCs engaged in SLE with ELLs.

In an effort to address the gaps in preparing TCs to work with ELLs, the authors integrated SLE into their courses and required TCs to engage with ELLs. These SLE exposed TCs to the unique linguistic/cultural assets and challenges of ELLs. The research presented in this paper echoes the words of Lucas and Villegas (2013) when they state that even though culture plays an important role in the teaching and learning process, it cannot be separated from language, therefore “our goal is to spotlight the language-related issues that are too often lost in the larger conversation about culturally responsive teacher preparation” (p. 100).

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<sup>2</sup> Documents available at <http://www.education.ne.gov/natlorigin/LimitedEnglish.html>

### Context of Service-Learning Projects

This study examines two SLE that required teacher candidates to be engaged with ELLs. Thus, this study explores the impact of these experiences on preparing TCs to work with ELLs in a teacher education program. The majority of TCs in the teacher education program reflect the national trend; White, female, middle class, and English speakers (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). All together, the participants in this study included 31 TCs that fit the description mentioned above, as well as a female student who was Pakistani and another African-American female. Only three students were White males. The researchers are Latino (Prairie Project) and African-American (All that Jazz) women in their 30s.

At the University of Nebraska at Omaha<sup>3</sup> TCs may be exposed to various SLE before admittance into the teacher education program, as well as within their teacher education program; faculty throughout the university are strongly encouraged, but not required, to integrate service-learning, where appropriate. In an effort to support faculty using service-learning pedagogy, the university has a unique entity called the *Service Learning Academy*.<sup>4</sup> The experienced staff in the Service Learning Academy provide three critical elements to support service-learning projects: 1) in-depth professional development workshops about service-learning pedagogy; 2) funding to design, implement, and maintain service-learning projects and; 3) research support to collect, analyze, and present data at conferences and for publication.

The Service Learning Academy (2015) defines service-learning as: "...an experiential, collaborative, method of teaching using projects that promote academic learning and are tightly linked to

course content while meeting the needs of the community." Additionally, the projects' goals are to emphasize the six stages of service-learning: innovation and investigation, preparation and planning, action, reflection, demonstration and celebration, and evaluation. Furthermore, the goal is to also facilitate benefits for students such as enhanced student achievement (Furco, 2007), connecting individuals to the community and an increase in self-efficacy (Billig, 2010).

### Prairie Project

TCs in Nebraska are required to enroll in *Literacy and Learning*, an education course on incorporating literacy strategies (oral, listening, reading, written, and digital) into content areas such as social studies, science, math, physical education, art, and music. During the first weeks of the semester, TCs usually meet as a class to study literacy strategies such as graphic organizers, vocabulary cards, RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic), read alouds, and more (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Each TC is also required to select a literacy strategy to teach a mini-lesson for his/her classmates. In recent years, a field experience component was added to *Literacy and Learning*. Most sections of this course meet on campus for the first weeks to study the content area literacy strategies, then attend a school placement for about four weeks as part of their intermediate field experience to implement lessons in their content areas, and end with TCs coming back to class on campus to reflect on their experiences. In the spring of 2013, the teacher educator/researcher was assigned to teach a special section of *Literacy and Learning* for ESL, Art Education, Physical Education, and Music Education TCs. Due to the amount of school-based field experiences

<sup>3</sup>Pseudonyms used for community organizations and personal names. Institution's real name used as there is approval to share it.

<sup>4</sup> Information available at: <http://www.unomaha.edu/service-learning-academy/>

that this particular group of TCs were already required as part of their teacher education programs, this special section did not require a field experience component. However, the teacher educator/researcher took this opportunity to develop a SLE to have the TCs practice the literacy strategies with diverse learners (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). From there, a partnership with a local middle school, ESL teacher and her ELLs began.

The SLE meetings took place at the middle school, the university campus, and at the community partner's site (Allwine Prairie Preserve) located northwest of Omaha. For the first two semesters of the SLE (Spring 2013 and Fall 2013), each TC was paired with one or two ELLs to help them write and present their research on Nebraska prairies. The SLE required each TC to work with one or two middle school ELLs on a research project on *Tall Grasses and Wildflowers of Nebraska Prairies* during class time (one hour and fifteen minutes) during eight class meetings throughout the semester. The middle school ESL teacher selected this topic, as her ELLs were curious about Lewis and Clark, and their journey through Nebraska and its prairie land. Each ELL researched topics related to the prairie (ex. prairie burning, animals, medicinal plants). TCs guided the ELLs to write a 5-paragraph research paper and develop a poster to present their work at a presentation at their school. The poster presentation followed a format similar to a Science Fair. The TCs were required to look for reliable research resources, use literacy strategies for all phases of the SLE, and support the ELLs as they presented their posters to the guests at their school. In addition, after each meeting with their students, TCs reflected on their experiences through *What, So What, Now*

*What* reflections incorporating assigned readings on service-learning for diverse learners.<sup>5</sup> These past semesters (Spring 2014 and Fall 2014), the prairie research project focused on developing consciousness about prairie conservation through pictures and incorporating high-level academic vocabulary with words that described the prairie. Additionally, before beginning the SLE and per their request, the TCs received more specific instruction on teaching ELLs. Three class sessions focused on the diversity of ELLs, the SIOP Model,<sup>6</sup> and a guest speaker that talked to the TCs about Service-Learning for Cultural Engagement. During the semester, each ELL took pictures at the prairie, selected his/her favorite picture, developed a Tagxedo (online word cloud) with at least 25 words that had similar definitions to describe the prairie, wrote captions of his/her pictures, and presented his/her pictures at a gallery walk at his/her school. TCs guided and supported the ELLs throughout the process and used as many literacy strategies as possible in their interactions with the ELLs.

### **All that Jazz**

The All that Jazz SLE was embedded in a course called Family-Centered Partnerships, which was taken by students seeking their early childhood endorsement. The All that Jazz project sought to expose TCs and young children and their families to jazz through literacy and arts-based activities with a community partner, *Jazz Center*. The *Jazz Center* is a cultural center that aims to highlight African-American art and jazz. Another community partner for this project was *South Omaha's Family Literacy Center*, which aims to provide a comprehensive family literacy program that includes parent workshops, English courses, and computer

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on *What, So What, Now What* reflections please visit: <http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu/info/reflection.html>

<sup>6</sup> Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol or SIOP was developed by Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (<http://siop.pearson.com/about-siop/index.html>)

training for mostly new immigrant Latino families. South Omaha's Family Literacy Center viewed the project as an opportunity for families to practice their English with native speakers (the TCs) and to engage the families in rich literacy activities with their young children.

For two nights, the 24 TCs were responsible for serving dinner to approximately 15–20 families, engage them in conversation during dinner and the activities, and develop and lead literacy and arts-based activities such as story creation and book making. The TCs' experience continued in the form of indirect service after the family nights. Working in pairs, the TCs developed activities for family literacy bags. The purpose of the literacy bags was to extend the families learning and engagement with jazz and art, while requiring TCs to develop activities that were culturally relevant. These were donated to the Family Literacy Center to add to their growing library for checkout.

### Methods

To explore the outcomes of the TCs engaged in service-learning with ELLs, the two projects described above were examined as an exploratory case study (Yin, 2009). The purpose of this exploratory case study is to explore what can be learned from these SLE that could support the implementation of service-learning pedagogy in teacher education, specifically designed to prepare TCs to work with ELLs. Data was collected during the spring semester of 2014 from a total of 35 students across both projects. The data sources were weekly and final student reflections. Reflections required students to describe what happened, examine the difference made, discuss thoughts and feelings, and place experiences in the larger context of teaching (Kaye, 2010). Moreover, to ensure that TCs connected their experiences with course content, they were

required to read articles on service-learning and name the teaching strategies used during their sessions with the ELLs and the families. For most of the TCs these SLE were their first experience working with ELLs. The authors of this study were the instructors for the courses and they developed the projects working together with the school and community partners previously mentioned.

For this exploratory case study, Harwood, Fliss, and Gualding's (2006) findings provided a model for conceptualizing the outcomes of TCs engaged in service-learning with ELLs. This model evaluates outcomes of TCs' service-learning experience in the following categories:

1. Understanding of students
2. Understanding of service-learning pedagogy
3. General pedagogical understanding
4. Understanding the community
5. Knowledge about self
6. General commentary on the impact of the practicum experience

The authors reviewed and evaluated each students' reflections based on these six categories (Hardwood, Fliss, and Gualding, 2006). Content analysis of the student reflections uncovered themes that were not revealed by Hardwood, Fliss, and Gualding (2006). Afterwards, the researchers search the data for themes and patterns following Creswell's spiral data analysis process (2007, p. 150). Creswell (2007) visualizes the data analysis process as a spiral figure. He explains that the researcher goes through the data process "moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 150). The researcher has the data with him as he/she enters the spiral and once inside goes through four loops inside of it. These loops are: 1) data management; 2) reading through the data and memoing; 3) describing, classifying, and interpreting; and 4) presenting the data through text, tabular, or figure form (pp. 150–154). After the

researcher goes through all “the facets of analysis and circles around and around” he/she exits the spiral “with an account narrative” of the research study (p. 150). The data from the written reflections was reduced based on patterns in the descriptions and language used by the TCs, then the researchers selected quotes that supported the themes in the six categories, and classified and analyzed the TCs experiences based on it. Below are the findings under each one of these categories identified by Hardwood, Fliss, and Gualding (2006).

### Findings and Discussion

#### Understanding of Students and (Families)

The SLE provided TCs with opportunities to interact with students who are learning English and gain an understanding of them. This understanding includes “recognizing their abilities, social or emotional characteristics, and physical attributes.... gaining knowledge of students’ interests and establishing bonds (Hardwood, Fliss, Gualding, 2006, p. 144). The following insights demonstrate that they gained an understanding of their personalities as well as their abilities, which helped facilitate positive interactions.

S2: My students are Aung and Aye, who each have their own specific personalities that I love. Aung is very quiet and shy, but once he starts to open up, he is very spunky and funny! Aye is outgoing and extremely smart. She is very determined and passionate about chasing her college dreams! I really enjoy each and every time we get to work with our ESL student’s and get to know their lives outside of this service-learning project. Aung is playing soccer for the school, and Aye and her friends like to go and watch his games. (Prairie Project)

S15: One of the things I learned

was to just give children the time to think of things on their own instead of trying to “baby” them too much. I struggle with this a lot with younger children because I tend to try to do everything for them instead of letting them show me what they can do. Having Justin take charge of his own story really surprised me. Before the event I was afraid the children wouldn’t really want to write stories about jazz, and instead would end up just coloring pictures. This made me realize that I need to sometimes just sit back and let children show me what they can do, instead of assuming things. (All that Jazz)

The above quotes from the students’ reflections show how the TCs were listening to the ELLs and seeing them as children who had the skills to complete the task at hand and with wonderful personalities. TCs expressed the hard time they had to “sit back” and let the children take charge, however it was through having the ability to relax and listen that they started to see the ELLs’ personalities come out and they shared their talents.

Although Hardwood, Fliss, and Gualding’s (2006) findings did not include families, due to the nature of the *All that Jazz* project, the authors decided to add understanding of diverse families under this theme. TCs in the *All that Jazz* project gained an understanding of families as a whole, as well as family structures and family dynamics. The project also provided clarity regarding misconceptions about whether families, particularly of ELLs, wanted to be engaged in their children’s learning.

S23: From this experience I noticed that these families are very interested in their children’s education. Some people say that families in South Omaha, or even low SE families aren’t interested in their

children's school or education and don't get involved. Going to this event really proved that wrong. The amount of families that came and were actively engaged made me see how wrong that assumption is. (All that Jazz)

S20: I was expecting the families to be a little more hesitant to engage in the activities than they were. This was significant because I learned that no matter what neighborhoods you are in, the families that live there want the best for their children and want their children to have many educational and new experiences. Even the families that spoke little English were able to thank us by just having a smile on their face and shaking our hands. (All that Jazz)

S23: This [making a book] was an interesting experience because the mother knew some English and was learning more, but her daughter did not speak any English at all. The mother had to translate for me to help us communicate better. This was a surprise to me because I usually find that the children are the ones who are translating for the parents, not vice versa. (All that Jazz)

S4: I learned that family is very important to the families that we dealt with at this event. I was amazed to see that families came with their grandparents and cousins because I never did stuff like that with what I consider to be my extended family as a child. There was one grandmother I interacted with and she says she tries to do something with her grandchildren once a week. My grandparents never did anything like that with me when I was younger. (All that Jazz)

The surprise expressed in these TCs understanding of the Latino extended family as active participants in each other's lives and activities that promote their education, shows how ingrained mis-conceptions of families of ELLs could become (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Nonetheless, these TCs reflections provide some hope that at least for them, these myths will not continue perpetuating.

### **Understanding of Service-Learning Pedagogy**

This theme includes "recognizing the impact of service-learning on students, working with community partners, reflection, structuring service-learning and statements expressing personal value for service-learning" (Harwood, Fliss, & Gualding, p. 146). In order to get an understanding of service-learning pedagogy, TCs need to recognize the purpose of SLE. Teacher educators need to purposely include as part of their service-learning classes, readings that "give preservice teachers an opportunity to compare and contrast what they read about service-learning with actual practice" (Harwood, Fliss, & Gualding, 2006, p. 153). Therefore, each reflection for the Prairie Project requires TCs to connect their experiences with service-learning readings.

S1: While reading the article "*Service Learning Promotes Positive Youth Development in High School*," I came across a very powerful statement: "nurturing young people's civic actions, motivations, and skills can have lasting benefits for both youth and society." Although I feel that this is talking to the students taking place in the service-learning project, an impact can also be made on the students the project is working with. For example, I loved the experience of working with my two ESL students. I have learned so much,

because I have never had the opportunity to work with students trying to learn English. It has greatly opened my eyes to the ESL community. (Prairie Project)

S3: For the next class I plan on interacting more with my student. Since the purpose of this according to Kieslmeier is, “Service-learning creates a bridge of interaction and shared purpose that improves student learning and creates better schools and stronger communities.” I need to interact with my student more and get her more involved with the project. (Prairie Project)

S9: The definition of service-learning has changed for me as I am reading the articles related to this project and doing my reflection. I am slowly figuring out that service-learning means to both serve by providing your knowledge and to also learn by gaining knowledge from the people you work with for an important and yet reasonable cause. (Prairie Project)

It was not rare to find in the TCs’ reflections immediate reactions to the statements presented in the service-learning articles. These reactions were noticeable as time passed and they understood why this SLE was incorporated into the Literacy and Learning course. Moreover, TCs understood that learning was reciprocal and that both their ELLs and they were learning from each other through interaction.

### **General Pedagogical Understandings**

Harwood, Fliss, and Gualding’s (2006) fourth category includes general pedagogical understandings from teaching. This could include behavior, discipline, or motivation; structuring instruction; capturing teachable moments; and commentary on the role of

teachers and their impact (p. 146). While engaged in SLE, TCs utilized various pedagogical skills such as story dictation and questioning that they will be able to use in their future teaching experiences, not just with ELLs, but also with all of their students. They learned some of these skills in a previous course, but were finally able to practice it during the SLE.

S1: One thing that surprised me was the process of dictating a child’s story. I have learned about this process in previous classes but had not been able to participate in this process until the project. I was a little apprehensive about this process because I was unsure on how the student would pick up on the process and if they would enjoy dictating the story before they began. However, the girl I did story dictation with was seven years old and she was very excited about writing her own story. When we began she choose the style of book and immediately began to dictate her story. This was significant for myself because it showed the positive interaction that can come from story dictation. (All that Jazz)

S3: A skill that I was able to practice and gain experience with was story dictation for the first time. This went very well and I learned how to prompt the child I was working with to get more information, after this her story just bloomed. (All that Jazz)

S7: Before diving into the organizers I used the literacy strategy of questioning to help them with their photographs. Once they picked their picture they had to explain to me why they picked it. It is one thing to say that you picked a picture because you liked it but it is another thing to go into detail about the exact reasons.



This not only helped with their descriptions of the photos but it also helped to brainstorm ideas for possible words. In our book it states, “Classrooms should include ample experiences in responding to questions that require students to analyze information, identify problems, develop original solutions, and formulate opinions” (Fisher & Grey, p. 84). When they explain why they chose their photos they are analyzing the photo next to other options, identifying positives and negatives, and formulating higher-level opinions of not only what is good and bad but what is better and best. (Prairie Project)

These and other reflections provide evidence that TCs were not only naming the teaching strategies that they were learning, but they were implementing them with the ELLs participating in the SLE.

### **Understanding of Community**

The category of better understanding of their surrounding community includes “understanding the needs of community partners and recognizing how service-learning can fill those needs, learning about community issues, and learning how community agencies operate (Harwood, Fliss, & Gualding, p.150). The data from the *All that Jazz* project sought to provide an understanding of the community as it was located at a community organization and the families who attended were recruited through a community organization. It is important to note that before the project actually began with the families, TCs were required to attend a class session at the community organization to provide them an understanding of the community and surroundings where the SLE would take place. As a result of this introduction to the community, TCs gained an understanding of the various assets of the

community as well as the needs in the community. Moreover, TCs were able to acknowledge preconceived notions about the community.

*S18:* I learned that this area of the city has a lot of culture and heritage, and there are many within the community that are very welcoming to outsiders. This area of the community has some very pressing needs. The area is dominated by poverty. You can tell that the city neglects this part of its community...the area can be aided by bringing more positive attention, to what is going right in the area, instead of constantly focusing on what is going wrong. (All that Jazz)

*S22:* The experience taught me that just because I did not grow up with them, or that I do not frequent that place, or that I don’t know anyone from that community doesn’t mean I have any right to judge, or be judged for that matter. I remember walking into the center a little weary of my surroundings. However, as if to prove me wrong, a man getting into his car waited to tell me that the street is busy and to be careful when I crossed, he waited outside his car until I crossed and proceeded to tell me to have a great night.

I remember thinking at that moment how I doubted if anyone would have done that for me in the community where I grew up, the community where I feel most comfortable. (All that Jazz)

*S12:* Some of the needs from the community are that it has a bad rep for being the “bad part” of Omaha. There is a high gang violence and poverty rate. The service-learning experience focused on the positive situations that

are happening in this community. The community has a wide range of historical background and information that many people tend to forget about. This experience opened up our eyes to the historical content that Omaha does have. (All that Jazz)

Immersion in a community setting also provided TCs with an ecological perspective of the child and their families that they may not have gained within the boundaries of a classroom (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, a student stated, “It was nice to work with the families and be able to see how they interact with their children because that is something you don’t see when teaching in a classroom” (All that Jazz). These TCs were very conscious of how important it was to acquire knowledge about family interactions. They were also aware that this was an aspect of teaching that was not directly connected with knowing teaching strategies, but that could strongly influence their future careers.

### **Knowledge About Self**

In addition to gaining an understanding of the students, families, and the community, TCs also gained a better understanding of themselves. As in Harwood, Fliss, and Gualding’s (2006) research, TCs participating in these two SLE learned more about *who they are as teachers*, their *personal attitudes or emotional responses*, and how they *assess their skills* (p. 151). Several students reflected on their anxiety about working with ELLs and families. Yet, they were amazed at their ability to find strategies to overcome their fear. Other students who were not nervous about working with ELLs realized there were other factors that made them uncomfortable such as the student’s age and personalities.

S8: Going into this experience I was extremely nervous. I have not had any experience with families from a teaching standpoint, so this

was something completely new to me. Not only was being with the families nerve-racking but I also have not had much opportunity to be around English Language Learners before. Even though I can typically talk to people easily, I was worried that conversation would not flow easily.... One thing that I was surprised by was how easy it actually was to communicate with English Language Learners using non-verbals while working on the art project. (All that Jazz)

S3: This was one of the most uncomfortable experiences I have had working with Spanish speaking individuals...but by utilizing modeling and communicating with either the English speaking child or adult it became easy to communicate. (All that Jazz)

S7: Some people might be concerned about the language barrier, but I am comfortable with people whose first language isn’t English because it is something I am around constantly. If I had to pick something I am slightly more hesitant about it is that they are older than the students I am around most frequently. Being elementary education, I am typically around the younger kids more, but I don’t think it will be a problem. (Prairie Project)

However, this last TC was not expecting that one of her students refused to talk to her or to anyone for that matter.

S7: I was slightly overwhelmed during the hour because one of my students had major technical issues with her computer and the other was not responding to anything I suggested. I am starting to get concerned about how I am going to

help him finish his project because he has refused to talk to myself, other teachers, and other students. I have tried several different tactics to get him to speak and he refuses to. Even by asking him yes or no questions he will not give me an answer. Luckily, he got done what needed to be done for the first class period but I am more concerned about the next class. The next session will require a lot of work and communicating between us both. (Prairie Project)

This TC acknowledged the fact that the communication barrier was not necessarily the English language proficiency of the student, and that “both” of them had to work on their communication skills. These TCs’ experiences show how even though they were confident on their skills, there were certain situations during the SLE that made them uncomfortable and needing to reassess their skills.

### **General Commentary on the Impact of the Practicum Experience**

There were several other significant comments made by TCs that emphasized the “particular elements of this practicum or seminar experience”....and that “identified that this particular experience was different from others they had in the program” (Harwood, Fliss, & Gualding, 2006, p. 152). The experiences of the TCs involved in the Prairie Project reflect how the topic of developing consciousness about Nebraska prairies through pictures did not convince the TCs until the end of the SLE.

*S10:* I have to be honest about the entire Service Learning project, I thought it would be a fluke! I am so glad to have partaken in this experience because my student increased her vocabulary in a couple of weeks, was able to create a Tagxedo, and orally presented her

chosen picture and adjectives to her peers. It was a proud moment for both of us. Overall, I have learned that any outdoor experience can be brought to life and become a “teachable moment” if the teacher can capitalize on what can be learned, expressed, and shared. (Prairie Project)

*S5:* Ultimately, I think this service learning has been a wonderful experience, which provided me with opportunities to work with ELL students, apply literacy strategies, and learn about the Nebraska prairie. Daw was an amazing student, and I hope he learned as much as I did from this experience. There were challenges along the way, but in the end, it all worked out. The students had fun and expanded their vocabulary. I am so glad that they had a chance to present their hard work, as all those students truly deserve recognition for their accomplishments this semester. (Prairie Project)

Some TCs recognized the fact that the uniqueness of this experience was the importance of working with ELLs. One TC went as far as saying: “I learned more in this service-learning project about working with ELL students, than I have in my undergraduate career at UNO” (*S2- Prairie Project*). This statement confirmed the value of SLE and its impact on TCs.

The TCs written reflections strongly highlight the acknowledgement of working with ELLs, particularly their perceptions of a “language barrier.” For example, some students discussed their frustrations working with ELLs.

*S22:* I worked with the oldest girl and her grandma and had an issue communicating because the grandma was an English Language Learner and the granddaughter had to translate

everything I was saying for the grandmother. I felt at a loss of what to do because the little girl was very shy and would barley open up to me, and I couldn't communicate with the grandmother. (All that Jazz)

S23: I tried using some basic Spanish words or sentences that I could think of from my four years of high school Spanish. Even though I have had a lot of Spanish classes I still had a lot of trouble communicating with the little girl. I found this to be very tough and I could tell that this four-year-old girl was getting very frustrated as well. I felt bad that I couldn't communicate with her as well as I wanted to. I tried to do a lot of pictures, pointing, and using some basic Spanish words such as color, hair, puppy, etc. but it wasn't enough. (All that Jazz)

In addition to feeling frustrated, several students discussed being initially nervous working with ELLs. For some TCs, being able to have initial experience interacting with ELLs was the first step in overcoming their nervousness and using the experience to benefit their future teaching. An initial concern expressed by a TC participating in the Prairie Project, "...is that I will be able to communicate with them, and help them understand the material/lessons" (S1). After just one meeting this same TC stated: "He understood my questions and reacted to them better than I had expected. I am curious to see how I can incorporate my content area, art, and his interests/strengths. I think this will be a great learning experience for both of us!" (S1). Students participating in the All that Jazz project expressed:

S6: Before attending these events I was extremely nervous about communicating with the families. I had no idea what to talk about and I

was also concerned about the language barrier...I realized that as long as you make an effort to get to know the families and show that you care about what they have to say then they will open up to you. (All that Jazz)

S22: The most significant learning experience that I took from this learning experience is how to interact with families and get them involved in an art project or book making. I can apply this to my own teaching because I will have to work and interact with parents in my classroom, so I can take the tips and conversation starters I learned from this experience to get to know the parents from my classroom. (All that Jazz)

Although some TCs expressed frustration, several figured out ways to communicate with students and families since verbal communication was not always successful.

S17: ...I was afraid of the possible language barrier but I found if you are able to use motions and pictures that almost everyone could communicate in some way. I believe that is significant because we should not be afraid of a language barrier. We can figure out other modes of communication that work just fine. (All that Jazz)

S20: Even though some of the families were not proficient in speaking and understanding English, they tried their best to communicate with us, whether that is verbally or nonverbally.... It made me realize that even if we cannot communicate verbally, there are other ways to communicate. (All that Jazz)

Despite their ability to figure out ways to communicate with the students and families, TCs also acknowledged the need for more skills with teaching ELLs and that it is likely they will have ELLs in their classrooms.

*S4:* I was not expecting the language barrier to be so difficult to deal with. This was significant because it caught me off guard and I was not prepared. I had to make a lot of changes to what I wanted to do and how I wanted to approach it. This was good practice because these sorts of things will happen on a daily basis in the classroom. (All that Jazz)

*S17:* I would like to learn more about how to properly communicate with families that have a language barrier. I feel it may be hard to communicate with families that do not have a common language so it would be beneficial for me to learn about different resources that would be able to assist me. (All that Jazz)

*S5:* I had not previously worked with any ELLs in the community or in schools, so this was a great introduction to what I may see in the classroom. (All that Jazz)

In addition to needing more explicit instruction in educating ELLs, some students also acknowledged their need to interact first with students and families who are ELLs and that the SLE provided this initial first step.

*S6:* Before attending these events I was extremely nervous about communicating with the families. I had no idea what to talk about and I was also concerned about the language barrier. . . . I realized that as long as you make an effort to get to know the families and show that you care about what they have to say then they will open up to you. (All that Jazz)

*S22:* The most significant learning experience that I took from this learning experience is how to interact with families and get them involved in an art project or book making. I can apply this to my own teaching because I will have to work and interact with parents in my classroom, so I can take the tips and conversation starters I learned from this experience to get to know the parents from my classroom. (All that Jazz)

Finally, it is important to note that the impact of the SLE was not always what the instructors hoped. Some students still believe in the notion that they had the ability to “help” the ELLs. This view reinforces the “missionary” approach of working with culturally diverse learners that Hess, Lanig, and Vaughan (2007) express concern about when implementing SLE. There was one student in particular, who repeated the word *help* more than once throughout his reflections. For example:

*S6:* I was very happy with what was accomplished and with my ability to *help*. I am comfortable working with Naw and I believe she is comfortable working with me. She shows an eagerness to learn, which makes *my job of helping* her that much easier. (Prairie Project, emphasis added)

After reading this reflection, the researcher decided to read aloud to all the TCs Rachel Naomi Remen’s “*In the Service of Life*” (1996). Many TCs commented on the fact that they had not realized there was a difference between helping and serving others.

By summary, the data from the SLE reveals that TCs recognize the need to interact and learn from ELLs and their families. Moreover, due to the structure of

both of the SLE the TCs were able to apply teaching strategies as they worked with their students. Nonetheless, many of them quickly realized that there was a “language barrier” that they had to overcome. As one of the TCs quoted above learned, it is many times through making an effort and showing that they cared for them that they were able to accomplish the instructional goals.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This exploratory case study sought to explore the outcomes of TCs engaged in SLE with ELLs. The findings suggest SLE with ELLs provides an opportunity for TCs to confront their fears about working with ELLs and facilitate positive interactions with students and families. For most of the TCs, the SLE was the first experience working with ELLs. Through these positive interactions, TCs gained relationship-building skills that allowed them to begin to understand the abilities and personalities of the ELLs and the families. As a result of this understanding, TCs started to acknowledge misconceptions they harbored about the students and families through direct experiences with ELLs and families. The SLE gave TCs the opportunity to figure out how to overcome the language barrier, practice instructional strategies with diverse learners, recognize the assets of ELLs/families, and acknowledge that caring for ELLs and their families goes a long way.

In addition to addressing misconceptions about students and families, TCs gained an understanding of the assets and needs of the community by being immersed in the community. Immersion in a community organization setting versus a school setting allowed students to gain a broader understanding of the students and families. We believe this may be because TCs have begun to view families and students holistically from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, the

TCs started to see the students and the families as members of the community with outside obligations and responsibilities, rather than just as individuals who attend a school. This new outlook required TCs to confront their fears about the community through learning its rich story as well as the history and purpose of the selected community organization. Lastly, the community setting encouraged TCs to experience diverse family structures, which may be harder to see in the confines of the school environment. Thus, gaining a better understanding of the students, families, and communities can serve as a foundation for effectively teaching students, particularly ELLs.

Furthermore, TCs gained relationship-building skills through the interactions with students, families, and communities. In addition, as they worked with students and families, the TCs practiced using various teaching skills such as story dictation and questioning. One of the goals of this SLE was to practice specific teaching strategies discussed in the courses. The SLE gave TCs an opportunity to practice pedagogical skills through meaningful literacy and art projects and activities. Beyond cultural competency, the SLE made TCs aware of their need to learn more effective strategies for working with ELLs, which would be the ideal next step in a teacher education program.

The important findings from this study, particularly regarding relationship-building skills and addressing misconceptions, leads to the following recommendations for creating future SLE for TCs with ELLs:

- 1) Choose a community setting and partner with a community organization.
- 2) Develop partnerships with ESL teachers and other experts in the field.
- 3) Plan an initial visit to the community and/or school for the TCs before the start of the project to get them acclimated to the setting and to address initial fears and

misconceptions.

- 4) Provide TCs with basic strategies for working with ELLs before the SLE begins.
- 5) Reiterate the purpose of service-learning, the strengths of ELLs, and that TCs are there to serve rather than “help” so as to combat deficit thinking (Remen, 1996).

Hess, Lanig, and Vaughan (2007) state that “pedagogical efforts to help students

grow toward cultural effectiveness need to happen in a variety of higher education courses and not be limited to those specifically identified as multicultural education classes” (p. 33). The authors will continue to engage in service-learning pedagogical practices and research that engage TCs with ELLs and families to help them overcome perceived barriers and deficit notions.

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