

The Benefits of Home Tutoring of English Language Learners: The Tutor's Perspective

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Abstract

This study reports the findings of a content analysis of journal entries of 90 preservice teachers who participated in home-based tutoring of Mexican immigrant children over the course of one semester. The results indicated that a home-based service learning experience was more successful than school-based and community-based service learning projects in bringing about positive attitudes towards working with English Language Learners (ELLs). The preservice teachers who were predominantly white, middle class females reported the loss of negative stereotypes of ELLs and their families, an increased understanding of the privileges and problems of social class, a better understanding of how to individualize instruction for ELLs and a desire to advocate for ELLs and their families in their future careers.

Key words: Service learning, tutoring, ELL, preservice teacher, higher education, community service, home-based service learning

1. The percentage of students who are English Language Learners has mushroomed in the last two decades. The majority of these ELL's are Spanish-speaking (Lapkoff & Li, 2007). In 2020, more than 20% of U.S. children will be of Latino origin (Martinez Aleman, 2006). Most ELLs spend the majority of their days in general education classrooms (Pappamihiel, 2007). Unfortunately, the current teaching force in the United States is not well prepared to help them succeed (Clair, 2000). In the United States, while 40% of teachers had ELLs in their classrooms at the turn of the century, only 12.5% had received 8 or more hours of related training (Gruber, Wiley, Broughman, Strizek, & Burian-Fitzgerald, 2002). Teacher education programs are trying a variety of strategies to prepare pre-service teachers for this population. At a time of backlash against immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants, encouraging students' positive attitudes towards this population is at least as important as providing them with teaching strategies.

2. The question of how to do this effectively is still being debated. Formal learning approaches have only limited success in prejudice reduction unless supplemented by social contact according to Mabbut (1991). Weisman and Garza (2002) concluded that one diversity class can make a difference but only if multicultural education is infused prominently throughout the teacher education program. Haberman (1991) concluded that sensitivity to issues of cultural diversity and multilingualism would require "more individualized and costly direct experiences, and a change in philosophical commitment" (p. 25). Bradfield-Kreider (1999) had some success in opening students' minds to an acceptance of difference through sending them on brief excursions into groups in the U.S. whose values and culture differed from their own. Wiest (1998) reported similar results. More recently, Ference and Bell (2004) used a 2-week immersion experience in a Latino community with the specific outcome of greater sensitivity to Hispanic students.

As the majority of preservice teachers are Caucasian, middle class females they typically have little experience with or understanding of English Language Learners (ELLs)(Wong, 2008). Coursework without a field component is inadequate preparation for future teachers of ELLs because it seldom alters underlying belief systems necessary to support effective teaching of ELLs (Pappamihel, 2007). The negative stereotypes of immigrants and hostility towards non-English-speakers that is current in U.S. society needs to be counteracted by extended and supervised personal contact if future teachers are to embrace their responsibility to reach out to the ELLs that will inevitably be in their future classrooms.

Service learning with diverse populations offers great potential for bringing about greater cultural awareness and sensitivity to ELLs. Pappamihel (2007) had success in bringing preservice teachers to more accepting attitudes towards ELLs after involving them in 10 hours of tutoring in a community-based service-learning assignment. The sites included a local public school, a library, a community college and the university. The majority of the tutees were students at the K-12 level though a few were adults. She saw the preservice teachers progressing from an ethnocentric perspective of viewing intercultural experiences only from their own cultural perspective to an ethnorelative perspective of acceptance of differences and respect for those who tried to maintain their own cultural identity. Hale (2008) placed preservice teachers for 20 hours in schools with large Latino populations. She noted there was a breakdown of stereotypes, increased confidence in teaching ELLs and a developing sense of advocacy for Latino children. Griffith (2005) asked preservice teachers to spend 10 hours as tutors in an after school program for children in a homeless shelter. Among her findings were that the preservice teachers came to understand the impact of the home environment on the children's behavior and learning and that effective teachers needed patience, respect and a willingness to individualize instruction for specific children. In addition, the participants admitted that they had had no previous experience with students outside of their own ethnicity or social class but acknowledged that they had held stereotypes that were challenged by the tutoring experience. They self-reported that they had come to understand that all children had the right to an equitable educational opportunity.

Wong (2008) required preservice teachers to tutor an ELL 2-4 hours per week over the course of a semester in a school setting. After an analysis of their journals she classified 27% as transactional, 58% as transformational and 15% as transcendent. The transactional tutors maintained an impersonal relationship with the children and were preoccupied with what they themselves contributed to the tutoring. The transformational tutors saw the children as unique individuals with whom they had a personal relationship, saw themselves as learning as much or more from the tutoring relationship as the children, were aware of the challenges the ELLs faced and in some cases tried to incorporate the child's first language in the instruction. The transcendent tutors acknowledged significant personal growth in their own beliefs and stereotypes, recognized how institutional structures may have disadvantaged ELLs and saw themselves as advocates for ELLs in their future classrooms

3.1 Current Study

This article reports on a service learning project that has preservice teachers tutor recently immigrated Mexican children in the children's own homes. The tutors are placed in homes at the parents' request through the auspices of a pastoral minister at a local Catholic church. Tutors primarily help the children with their homework but also design mini-lessons to increase the children's literacy skills. Such an experience undermines the negative attitudes many teachers have of the families who appear to not value their children's education because of their reluctance to attend teacher conferences and their failure to help their children with their homework. Students quickly learn that the parents value education very highly but their lack of English makes it impossible for them to assist with homework and makes them reluctant to try to interact with monolingual English-speaking teachers. Working with individual children, the students come to understand the potential of the children and become their advocates as they witness the obstacles schools may unconsciously be setting before the children. The students also learn how to individualize instruction for an ELL. The field experience is embedded in a course that deals directly with issues of prejudice and discrimination. The course also includes background readings on Hispanics and on teaching English as a Second Language.

3.2 Data Sources

Students submit weekly journals (a minimum of 10) over Blackboard and receive a response within the week from the course instructor.

These entries address the following questions: What occurred at the session? Was it a successful session? What did you learn about the life of the child? What have you learned about your ability to work with an ELL? What skills do you need to develop to better meet the child's needs? There is an additional final reflection at the end of the semester which answered the following questions: How did this experience differ from what you had initially expected? How are the lives of these children different from your own childhood? How might these differences influence their success in school? What have you learned about yourself as a teacher from this experience? Name 3 things you have learned about teaching ELL's. The students' final reflections were analyzed for common themes. The content analysis was based on the final reflections of 90 students enrolled in the course over 4 semesters.

3.3 Sample

There were 3 college-aged white males, 1 college-aged black female, 1 college-aged native Albanian, 2 returning adult white females, 1 Asian American college-aged female and 82 college-aged white females. All the students were elementary education majors taking a required upper level course. They were enrolled in the only section that required the service learning project. The section was identified as having a field experience with a Hispanic population in the course catalog. However, some students still expressed great surprise at the requirement when they realized it was not required for any other section. Initially there was some resistance based largely on their concerns about working with ELLs and on going into the homes of the children who lived in poverty. The majority of the students (56%) expressed discomfort initially although none regretted the tutoring by the end of the semester.

3.4 Results

In order to evaluate the potential power of home-based tutoring compared to community placements, the data was analyzed in terms of Wong's (2008) categories of transactional, transformational and transcendent. At least superficially, the results favor the home-based tutoring. Only 3% of the home-based preservice teachers could be considered as transactional compared to 27% of the school-based; 75% of the home-based appeared to be transformational compared to 58% of the school-based and 22% of the home-based actually appeared transcendent compared to 15% of the school-based.

Almost all of the students talked about a personal relationship with their tutees. The three transactional journals where this was a notable omission seldom, if at all, used the name of the child and focused on the tutor's own role. Typical of this very small group was the following:

The tutoring experience wasn't different than what I expected. Going in, I prepared myself for the worst which helped...The biggest thing that I learned was that I need to be patient with students. They are not going to get it on the first try...Also I have learned that I am a good teacher and I feel good when a child feels good. I guess this is when you finally realize that you are meant to be a teacher.(AD, black female, college aged)

The home setting seemed to catapult the majority of the tutors into a personal role with the children and prompted their new understanding of the challenges the children faced as ELLs in the classroom. They also had the opportunity to see how the Mexican culture influenced the families and gained a respect for the children's bilingualism. Typical of this largest group of transformational journals were the following:

I really believe I have learned so much about teaching from this experience. Before this experience I had never tutored an English Language Learner. I don't think I understood the extent of the difficulties these children face. I also learned to see each child as an individual. I learned how important it is to focus on the needs of each child individually and not just assume students are understanding you.(JH, white female, college aged)

I expected this to be a worthwhile experience, but it was more invigorating than I would ever imagine. I learned more about the Mexican culture, teaching Spanish speaking students and myself as teacher, than I would ever have expected. (SS, white female, college aged)

I've learned that as a teacher, you can't judge students based on what you think their home life is like or family is like. You need to really get to know them and their background, culture, and interests. It's essential to form positive relationships with students and their parents to obtain a better understanding of who they are and how you can better meet their needs. *(AG, white female, college aged)*

I learned that Hispanic children are the most respectful and appreciative children that I have ever met. Not only did I have an effect on Yadira, helping her read, write and do mathematics, but Yadira had an effect on me, teaching me her culture (indirectly) and showing me her enthusiasm to learn and speak the English language. *(CP, white female, college aged)*

Throughout the transformational journals was a profound realization that the tutors really had no understanding of ELLs and how to teach them prior to the tutoring experience. There was also newfound respect for the parents and an awareness that the cultural values of the Mexicans were quite different from their own middle class American values. These same insights were throughout the transcendent journals which were distinguished by an acknowledgement of their personal growth in terms of beliefs and biases, an understanding of the inequities the children faced due to their minority status and poverty and a desire to advocate for ELLs in their future careers. The following are typical comments which illustrate this:

I learned that I need to be more open minded when it comes to having minority students in my classroom. I also learned I need to be more compassionate and understanding, because as a teacher you do not know what goes on in these children's homes at night. I also learned that I need to consider that these children might not always have the resources they need to complete assignments, etc. The biggest thing I learned is that it is crucial for a teacher to put aside all stereotypes and negativity that comes along with ELL students, and instead focus on that child and that child only. *(KB, white female, college-aged)*

This experience really opened my eyes to the inequalities that ELL students face. It is not their fault and it is our job to help them. As a teacher I will pay attention to the needs of all my students and really strive to meet their needs head on. It will make my job more challenging, but I would not be doing my job if I was not trying to teach all my students on an equal level. Fair is not always equal and different learners need different supports. I will support all of my students so that they can achieve. *(MM, white female, college-aged)*

One of the most commonly held stereotypes that teachers have regarding ELLs is that the parents do not care about their children's schooling since they do not help with homework or come to parent/teacher conferences or other school-sponsored events. In their final reflections 24% of the preservice teachers specifically mentioned that this was a fallacy. This was apparent in the following passages:

Jamila's parents genuinely care about her education but the language barrier between them and her school makes it difficult for them to support her the way she needs. *(SN, white female, college-aged)*

Asia has parents who aren't as involved [as the tutor's own parents] in her education. I am sure they care very much about her education and value it, but I think they do not get as involved due to the language barrier. They also might have preconceived notions that they aren't as welcomed into the school and classroom as they really are. *(BA, white female, college-aged)*

An additional 20% of the tutors mentioned that serious attempts should be made on the part of schools and teachers to communicate with the Mexican parents. They specifically mention the need for communications to be translated into Spanish. The following student said it eloquently:

Communicating with non-English speaking parents is even more important than communicating with those parents who do speak English. They are usually clueless as to what is going on in school and by having someone explain what they need to do to best help their child is very important. Sending home papers in English that they can't read about something important I feel is unfair and cruel because then their child may miss out on something in school that could have been prevented. These are all things I will remember when I teach and make sure I reach out to help the ELL students. *(AO, white female, college-aged)*

Another stereotype that the preservice teachers (39%) challenged was that ELLs are not very bright as stated in the following:

I think many teachers and people, in general, have this misconception that just because a child speaks a different language or is a minority in school, they are automatically incompetent when it comes to academics. That is a major misconception people need to overcome. *(KB, white female, college-aged)*

One of the most difficult negative stereotypes to break in America surrounds people who live in poverty. It is important to note that 70% of the preservice teachers recognized that they were privileged by their own social class growing up. They acknowledged that as teachers they would have to consider the poverty of the immigrant families when assigning homework and projects. The following quote summarizes this new understanding:

The one, and most important thing, I have learned about myself from this experience is to never take the small things for granted. For example, being able to communicate, always feeling accepted in my community, and the resources I have been provided with all my life. Lizbeth's parents are wonderful people who I can tell work very hard to provide for their family... They work so hard so their family can have a better life and I think that people in their community do not always respect them for that. *(LM, white female, college-aged)*

In the journals the tutors described the stress of having both parents working and the resulting lack of supervision of the children, many of whom assumed child care responsibilities as early as 9 years of age. Another 49% of the tutors remarked on the crowded living conditions with two or more families living in a small apartment and contrasted it with their childhood homes where all the children had separate bedrooms and quiet places to do their homework. This, plus an awareness of different cultural norms among the Mexicans, led the preservice teachers (38%) to claim that it was essential for teachers to know about the home lives and backgrounds of the ELLs. The following is an illustrative excerpt:

Another thing I learned is not to judge students without knowing about their home lives. Obviously it is never a good thing to judge a student without knowing background information about them, but especially in situations such as this one it is vital not to have preconceived notions. Make sure you are educated about your students and do not pass judgment before being properly educated about them. *(AN, white female, college-aged)*

In line with Hale's (2008) findings of increased confidence among her school-based tutors in teaching ELLs, 33% of the tutors in this study made this claim. Less specifically 40% of the tutors advocated individualizing instruction to meet the ELLs needs, 54% suggested ways they would modify instruction for ELLs, 17% declared it was essential to make instruction relevant to the ELLs and another 11% cautioned against assuming that ELLs had the same prior knowledge base as their American peers. The following two quotes back this up:

I have experienced how important it is to ask questions and build on students' background knowledge in order to understand concepts that we take for granted, such as what sledding is, or what it means to build a snowman in winter. *(JC, Asian American female, college-aged)*

By making what you are teaching real to their own lives will help them to understand the material much easier. By having subject matter relevant to something they have experienced can make things simpler for the child and also the teacher. *(KB, white female, college-aged)*

Interestingly enough the one characteristic mentioned most frequently in terms of teaching ELLs was having patience (56%)

It is also important to be patient, especially with children who may be struggling. It took Lizbeth a little more time than the average student to grasp concepts mostly because of the language barrier. It was critical that I, as her tutor, was very patient with her and reviewed the concepts with her as many times as it took for her to understand them. *(LM, white female, college-aged)*

A somewhat unexpected but welcome finding was that 17% of the preservice teachers had a new appreciation for multicultural education. The following quotes reinforce the difficulty of an effective diversity course in the absence of a field experience with a diverse population.

Throughout my four years at W- C- University, professors have drilled into our heads about multicultural lesson plans. I thought that I understood completely what I needed to do to implement different cultures into my everyday lessons, until I met Liliana. She opened my eyes to a whole new idea of multicultural lessons. (AN, white female, college-aged)

I have learned that incorporating multicultural education into the curriculum is essential in order to create lessons to which students of diverse backgrounds can relate. (ES, white female, college-aged)

4. Discussion

With 97% of the sample being white, it makes sense to look at the changes in attitudes through the lens of white identity development. Helms (1993) identifies a 2 phase development process: Phase 1, Abandonment of Racism, and Phase 2, Definition of a Nonracist White Identity. Each phase has three stages. Marshall (2002) has applied this theory specifically to teachers. She sees the first stage of Phase 1 characterized by superficial knowledge of non-white groups and an acceptance of negative stereotypes. There is little interaction with non-whites outside of formal settings such as school and work. In later stages in Phase 1 teachers may acknowledge there are inequities based on race but not actively work to correct them, assuming the white norms established for schools are appropriate, They may also have low expectations of non-white students.

In the first stage of Phase 2, due to additional contacts with racial others, teachers may acknowledge the necessity of culturally relevant pedagogy but still accept school policies and practices that advantage white students. In Stage 5 whites work more actively toward the resolution of inequities but may assume a well-intentioned missionary position of superiority to non-whites. In the final stage white teachers develop genuine appreciation for the uniqueness of other racial groups and join with colleagues to develop anti-racist curricula and school policies.

Characteristic of Helms' Phase 1, the majority of the tutors in this study acknowledged discomfort in working with ELLs at the beginning of the project; however, all but three (authors of the transactional journal entries) expressed a new understanding and appreciation for ELLs and their families by the end of the semester. The stage was set for them to enter Phase 2 of Helms' theory.

Tutors' comments about school practices of sending home inappropriate homework assignments and school notices in English were indications of their criticism of current school practice. They also reported changing their own practices to meet the needs of the students and commented positively on what they perceived to be Mexican values: strong family commitments, respect for adults, hard work and strong religious beliefs. They denounced negative stereotypes of the children and their families. In general the transformational group all would seem to have reached Phase 2. The transcendent group would likely be in stages 5 and 6.

This remarkable gain in cultural sensitivity would support the increased value of a home-based tutoring assignment where interaction includes the family in its natural setting. The percentages reported likely under-represent the actual number of the preservice teachers who had reached similar insights. The percentages are based on a relatively short final reflection. However, the quotes represent a broad spectrum of the project participants and highlight the success of home-based tutoring in preparing preservice teachers to meet the needs of ELLs.

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