

¹When Nobody Seems to Care: Preparing Preservice Teachers for ELLs in Texas Classrooms

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On June 10, 2014, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) filed suit on behalf of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) against the State of Texas (*LULAC v. State of Texas*, 2014). According to the suit, the state was not doing enough to meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) in Texas public schools and was in violation of the U.S. Federal Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974. Data for lawsuit was taken from the State's own accountability system. There is a 40-year history of civil rights lawsuits dealing with the education of ELLs in Texas. This latest lawsuit alleges that the state fails to provide adequate support and supervision of ESL programs, particularly at the secondary level. Weak monitoring of ELLs' educational progress in the Texas fails to hold districts accountable. Furthermore, the ESL teacher certification process is woefully inadequate in the state, with teachers requiring little training or education. Although only two school districts in San Antonio are named in the case, it is acknowledged that many Texas school districts have similar problems.

Texas is a minority majority state; only 44% of the population is non-Latino White according to 2013 population estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Latinos represent the largest ethnic group in the state, comprising about 38% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Approximately 51% of the K-12 public school population is Latino (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Texas does have a more diverse teaching workforce in public schools than the U.S. as whole. While 84% of teachers in the U.S. are non-Latino White (Feistritz, 2011, p. 11), approximately two thirds of the teachers are White in Texas (Ramsay, 2013). These percentages are similar to the students we encounter in our education preparation program where 69% of preservice teachers are White (Enterprise Services, 2013).

In Texas, one out of every six public school children is an ELL (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Ninety-two percent of ELLs are Spanish speakers and 89% are economically disadvantaged (Morgan & Vaughn, 2011, p. 5). The majority of ELLs are increasingly concentrated in high poverty and high minority schools, facing the triple isolation of language, economics, and race/ethnicity (Heilig & Holme, 2013, p. 1). At the 6-12 grade levels, 70% of the ELLs are considered long term ELLs who have been in ESL programs for over five years (*LULAC v. State of Texas*, p. 11). According to the preliminary analysis of the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) data from the 2013-2014 school year, more than one out of every two ELL students (56%) in grades 3-12 failed to advance at least one proficiency level (*LULAC v. State of Texas*, p. 16).

The failure of Texas schools to address the academic progress of ELLs is as lacking as their attempts to address their English language development. Recent accountability statistics

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from state exams are alarming. For example, at the 6th grade level in the 2012-2013 school year, the percentage of all students who met the state standard in reading was 72%, while only 37% of ELLs as a subgroup did (*LULAC v. State of Texas*, p. 17). State exams at other grade levels in other subjects, such as math, science, and social studies, also show negative results. Significant differences exist between the total number of students who met the standards and the total of number ELLs who did (p. 17). Furthermore, the four-year graduation rate of ELLs in Texas is 58% as opposed to 86% for all students in the state (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014, p.8). Like many districts in the state, the public school district near our university has failed to make adequately yearly progress for ELLs.

ESL Teacher Certification in Texas

Despite this disturbing picture, ESL teacher certification requirements for general in-service classroom teachers continue to be lax in Texas; neither course requirements nor in-service hours are required. Teachers must simply pass the ESL certification exam. Many districts have implemented cram sessions for the exam. Few colleges of education in Texas require specific coursework for preservice teachers in the area of ESL. The college of education where we work requires all elementary and middle school teacher candidates to seek ESL certification and take three courses in working with culturally and linguistically diverse children: multicultural education, second language acquisition, and ESL methods. Yet this commitment to ELLs appears to be superficial at best even at our institution, which is recognized in the region for the quality of teacher preparation it provides. High school preservice teachers only take the course in multicultural education. Furthermore even in the elementary/middle school teacher preparation program, no field experience dedicated to working with ELLs is required. Field experience refers to an institutionalized component of a course which involves working directly with children in the public schools. This field experience does not exist for ESL courses because the assumption is that preservice teachers will have the opportunity to work with ELLs during other field experiences in literacy block, content methods, and student teaching. Unfortunately, there is no actual mechanism for ensuring that ESL-specific experiences take place; nor is there any guarantee that the mentor teachers in whose classrooms preservice teachers are placed have significant training in working with ELLs. As stated previously, a Texas teacher may be certified by simply passing an exam.

Our own college of education data indicate that teacher candidates fail to adequately address the needs of ELLs and that they recognize their limited preparation in the area of ESL. Furthermore, many of our colleagues in the college of education readily admit their own professional knowledge base in ESL is lacking. A recent comment from one professor is typical of their comments and queries, “I don’t really know much about working with LEP² students. What can you tell me about the ELPS³?” In other words, the content presented in the ESL courses is not necessarily being reinforced in general teacher preparation courses. It is rather like many education textbooks where ELLs are relegated to a chapter rather than integrated throughout.

Service Learning for Equity in Education

It is in this environment that we work as professors of ESL education. Our commitment to social justice for ELLs is based in our own life experiences. Mary Petrón began her teaching career as a high school Spanish teacher. She first became involved with ESL because the ESL teacher on the campus was also the football coach. His teaching consisted of having students

² LEP stands for Limited English Proficiency and is used by the Texas Education Agency to refer to ELLs.

³ ELPS are the English Language Proficiency Standards adopted by the State of Texas in 2007.

watch ESPN day in and day out. She listened to ELL students growing frustration and began teaching them survival English. She soon realized the lack of commitment to ELLs that existed in many public school settings. This understanding of ELLs plight deepened when she adopted two older children from El Salvador who also received ESL services. She has dedicated her personal and professional life to improve ESL programs through teacher education and civic engagement projects. Baburhan Uzum was raised in a rural city in Turkey and spent many of his weekends and all of his summers doing farmwork in his nearby village. He was first exposed to English in middle school, as a foreign language class, and was fascinated by the sound of an unfamiliar language and the fact that it would allow him to interact with new people. Almost immediately, he realized that English would provide access to further education and the opportunity to experience the world outside of Turkey. Grateful for these opportunities that would have otherwise been unavailable to him, Baburhan pursued a career in teaching English as a way to offer the same chances to other less privileged populations in Turkey and in the U.S.

In effort to improve the educational experience of ELLs, we advocate strongly at the administrative level for increased integration of ESL content at all levels of teacher education coursework and dedicated ESL field experiences for preservice teachers. Field experiences help preservice teachers make connections between the teacher education course content and the realities of classrooms. These practical linkages make education theories more accessible, understandable, and useful to preservice teachers. According to situated learning theory, through learning by doing, “the individual learner is not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge which (s)he will then transport and reapply in later contexts. Instead, (s)he acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process”(Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 14). It not only includes a comprehensive understanding of content (e.g., education theories), but also an acute awareness of the local context including: “the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Therefore, practical experiences enable preservice teachers to perform the roles and duties of a teacher and develop a professional perspective that understands and values the diverse needs and interests of their students.

The importance of local context brings into question the appropriateness of “best practices” in each and every setting (Lortie, 1975). Instead of looking to create gold standards of education, many researchers argue for the need to go beyond the search for “best method” and work toward developing a teacher’s capacity to devise pedagogical practices to address the needs of the local context (Gordon, 2004). Teachers should develop the ability to create their own methodology based on the needs of a local context rather than following predetermined best practice guidelines that are supposedly designed to fit all (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Although the importance of field experiences has been established in the literature, our program still does not have a formal field component. Advocating for the addition of this field experience is important, but the wheels of change move slowly. Action was needed immediately. Consequently, we looked to service learning to provide the experiences with ELLs that our preservice teachers desperately needed. Service learning is already strongly supported and promoted at the institutional level at our university. In other words, we found a way to circumvent the limited scope of the existing curriculum by utilizing service learning to provide our pre-service teachers with an opportunity to meet the needs of the community and engage with ELLs in the public school classroom.

Service learning has the potential for addressing social justice issues, including systemic educational inequities for ELLs in the area of teacher preparation. We define service learning in accordance with the definition provided by Berger Kaye (2010):

Service learning can be defined as a research-based teaching method where guided or classroom learning is applied through action that addresses an authentic community need in a process that allows for youth initiative and provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of acquired skills and knowledge (p. 9).

Service learning must be carefully planned and executed in order to achieve an authentic learning experience for students as well as producing positive outcomes in the community. According to Bollin (2007), service learning should originate in community needs. Students must have the opportunity to apply content they are learning in the formal classroom to community settings. Finally, students need to reflect on these community experiences so as to connect classroom learning to community learning through a formalized structure. Service learning is inherently constructivist since students are actively participating in authentic and meaningful community projects (Rodriguez, 2013).

In an effort to provide our preservice teachers with the much needed opportunity to work with ELLs and address the pressing needs of our local community, we integrated a service learning project into the ESL methods classes. This project was designed in collaboration with a local middle school located in a low income school district with limited resources. The middle school also has a history of poor academic outcomes among the ELL population. As a result of the field experience, preservice teachers had the opportunity to teach a class with ELLs for the first time and reflect on their teaching experience. The field experience via service learning contributed to the professional development of preservice teachers by creating a space for innovation, collaboration and exploration of social justice issues related to ELLs. At the same time, they provided a valuable service to ELLs in the local community.

Discussion

The service learning project supported the preservice teachers' development of a social justice perspective by providing a venue to: a) establish a professional identity that values equity in education (Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Kaur, 2012); b) negotiate and reflect on prior beliefs about ELLs; c) interact with a diverse group of students; and d) develop context specific methods and strategies to address the needs of ELLs. In designing this service learning project, there were four critical components we believed had to form an integral part of the experience. First, the project needed to be done in collaboration with the teachers in the middle school so that the needs and interests of both sides were discussed and addressed in an equitable manner. Second, middle school teachers had to be afforded the opportunity to make curricular choices based upon their most pressing needs. They would choose the content objectives to be covered in the classes. Third, preservice teachers would contribute their developing knowledge of ESL methods by teaching these objectives using the SIOP method (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2000). We teach this method because of its strong research base and acceptance in U.S. public schools. Finally, we wanted preservice teachers to reflect on the experience in a way that forced them to think about social justice issues in the education of ELLs in Texas.

We recognize the limited nature of the service learning project; however, there is evidence that preservice teachers gained an understanding of the diverse needs of ELLs and the importance of context specific methods and strategies as part of an equitable learning environment for ELLs. Preservice teachers' reflections indicated that the field experience they had via service learning had a powerful impact in three major areas: interaction with diverse populations, recognition that limited English proficiency did not mean limited cognitive ability, and understanding of the necessity to differentiate instruction due to language proficiency. With

respect to diversity, the experience brought preservice teachers into contact with ELLs for the first time. Typically, when we ask students in our classes what programs existed for ELLs in the schools they attended, they state that they did not know because they did not have contact with ELLs. This is not unusual considering segregation patterns in Texas (Heilig & Holme, 2013). Consequently, many of the preservice teachers initially expressed a fear of teaching ELLs as is evident in the following quote:

I was so nervous and scared to mess up teaching ELL's before entering the classroom. I thought I couldn't teach ELL's because I didn't know how to speak their native language...After being in the classroom, I realized this was not the case.

The experience served to humanize ELLs in a way that textbooks and videos could not and enabled preservice teachers to see beyond any language barriers.

Preservice teachers also recognized that language proficiency and cognitive ability are distinct entities. In other words, the ability to think critically is independent of one's proficiency in English. One preservice teacher was particularly articulate in stating the epiphany she had with respect to this issue:

These students [ELLs] can still be challenged because critical thinking is not necessarily a language objective. All students can think critically even if they are not native English speakers. That is why the complexity of the language can be reduced, but not the intellectual demands.

The “dumbing down” of the curriculum and failure to promote higher levels of thinking is a serious issue with ELLs as noted in the literature (de Jong, Harper & Cody, 2013; Verplaetse & Migliacci, 2008). The realization that ELLs can think critically is an important step in meeting their academic needs. As Danling Fu (2004) stated, “We need to understand that they are as intelligent as other students of their age” (p. 10).

Finally, preservice teachers grasped the importance of differentiating instruction to accommodate for language proficiency. They understood it was a difficult, but necessary proposition as noted by the following quote in a preservice teacher's final reflection:

I have learned that there is so much to do with ESL students. This is related to differentiated instruction, giving them more time, and using a lot more visuals, among many other things. From the experiences I have had in an ESL classroom, I had to make adjustments to my lesson so that the students understood the material more. Would it have been easier to stick with my lesson? Yes. Would it have been easier to not pay attention to their needs? Probably. However, this is not a good way to teach! You have to expect the unexpected and that is definitely true when it comes to an ESL class. You have to tweak your lessons and add and take away some material. For any lesson, you need to be willing to change if you see that the students are struggling.

The recognition that they needed to make accommodations for ELLs was uppermost in their minds. They frequently discussed lessons that failed because they did not scaffold the content in accordance with ELLs' proficiency and those that were successful as a result of on the spot changes they made. They also made frequent note of the importance of knowing what the English language proficiency level of a student was.

Practical Implications for Teacher Educators

The bleak picture of ELLs in Texas as is evident from the statistics is not uncommon in the rest of the U.S. (Kim, 2011). Teacher educators dedicated to social justice cannot wait for colleges of education to catch up with changing demographics. It is critical that teacher educators themselves develop opportunities to engage pre-service teachers as part of the solution. Service learning presents itself as viable and practical alternative in the absence of formal field experiences. In order to design and implement a successful service learning project with ELLs, we suggest that teacher educators keep in mind the following steps which guided our service learning project. First, they must be aware of the local context for ELLs. This means it is necessary to leave the university and immerse themselves in local public schools. Second, teachers must be asked what they need rather than told what they should do. Third, pre-service teachers should collaborate with the classroom teachers at every stage of the project. They must put community needs at the forefront of their practice. Finally, reflection should be a key component for all: pre-service teachers, classroom teachers, and teacher educators. Every stakeholder should be afforded a venue to discuss process, outcomes, challenges, successes and failures.

All in all, while this service learning project certainly did not provide the extensive field experience that we wished was present in their educator preparation program, it represented an attempt to plant the seeds of change. Rather than waiting for administrative solutions, we worked within the existing system and our primary sphere of influence: preparing the next generation of teachers. We encourage other ESL teacher educators to look for similar service learning and community engagement projects. As is evident in the statistics we presented at the beginning of this chapter, ELLs cannot wait for colleges of education or state education agencies or school districts to do what is needed.

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