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Classroom to Communities of Practice: Benefits for English Learners and Teacher Candidates Through Partnerships

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This study investigates a service-learning program for university students seeking teacher certification examined through the lens of sociocultural theory. Data was collected from teacher candidates (TCs) in the form of surveys and an open-ended writing assignment. Administrators from the partner schools were also interviewed to provide their perspectives of the service learning. Findings show that the service-learning program allowed TCs and their English learners (ELs) to form communities of practice that were mutually beneficial. Teacher candidates reported numerous opportunities to apply the strategies learned in their methods course, as well as an increase in their sense of preparation for teaching ELs. Administrators provided positive feedback about the service-learning program in terms of the relationship between the partner school and the university. Difficulties arose in terms of TCs' accountability and the level of participation afforded to the TCs by the classroom teacher. Implications highlight the importance of negotiating expectations that address the needs of both parties equally in order to support a strong community of practice that prepares TCs to meet the needs of ELs.

Introduction

In order to address the educational needs of the approximate 4.5 million English learners (ELs) enrolled in public PreK–12 schools in the United States (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2017), teacher candidates (TCs) must have prior experiences with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Although the U.S. student population is becoming increasingly diverse, the teaching force remains at

approximately 83% White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). In order to address the challenges that may come with teaching students from diverse backgrounds more effectively, universities have seen an increase in the amount of multicultural education courses in their teacher preparation programs addressing the cultural and linguistic needs of ELs (Pappamihiel, 2007). However, course work alone cannot address the mismatch between student and teacher backgrounds. Service learning provides an authentic, real-world context that allows TCs to put into practice lessons about language, race, and immigration by providing interaction with students whose backgrounds may differ from their own (Fitzgerald, 2009). The purpose of this study is to investigate a service-learning partnership formed between a university teacher education program and local K–12 schools (partner schools) designed to provide TCs with experience in a culturally and linguistically diverse setting.

What is Service Learning?

Service learning is commonly defined as volunteer community service that is integrated as a component of academic coursework (Berger Kaye, 2010; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Chapin, 1998; Jacoby, 1996; Koliba, Campbell, & Shapiro, 2006; Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). Service learning emphasizes the idea of experiential learning over traditional classroom instruction (Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). According to Eyler and Giles (1999), service learning experiences combine meaningful service with learning goals that are met through active participation and reflection. One key difference between service learning and other types of community service is that service learning is intended to benefit both the volunteer and the community partners receiving the service. In order to provide educational benefits to the volunteer, service learning must be carefully planned and integrated with the curriculum of an academic course (LeSourd, 1997) and acknowledge that opportunities for reflection throughout the course are an essential component to the

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success of service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Crossman & Kite, 2007; He & Prater, 2014).

Teacher Candidates and Service Learning

Studies regarding teacher preparation in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) have shown the benefits of service learning for TCs. Research has shown that TCs who participated in service learning with ELs reported a greater sense of efficacy (Marchel, Shields, & Winter, 2011), positive perceptions of the school environment (Moore, 2013), additional opportunities to form their identities as teachers (Rodriguez, 2013), and higher grade point averages (Rusu, Copaci, & Soos, 2015). In terms of academic preparation, research has provided some general findings about TCs engaging in service learning with ELs. Teacher candidates who participated in service learning furthered their understanding of how to adapt lessons for ELs (Uzum, Petró, & Berg, 2014) and reported benefits of applying their course work to actual learners (Moore, 2013). A study conducted by Fan (2013) indicated that TCs reported growth in their ability to make language and content “more explicit and relevant” (p. 88) for their ELs after their involvement with service learning. During service learning, TCs have expressed positive feelings towards their service learning experiences as an opportunity to apply theory and teaching skills that were learned during their coursework (Pappamihel, 2007). In Purmensky’s (2006) study of TCs completing a service learning activity with elementary ELs, TCs reported an increased ability to apply their learning in classroom settings as a result of the service-learning opportunity.

Critiques of Service Learning

Through service learning, TCs gain valuable experience in the field and form collaborations with the partner schools in their communities by fulfilling a need (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). However, service-learning research has been criticized due to the lack of attention focused on the needs of the partner institutions (Eby, 1998) and the perspective that individuals completing service learning are providers of charity (Stanton & Erasmus, 2013). Stoecker, Tyron, and Hilgendorf’s (2009) study of service-learning partnerships found a large number of institutions reported problems with the disruptive nature of short-term service learning. Also, partner institutions reported that a lack of specific skills limited the type of work that the institutions could arrange for those completing the service learning. Vogel, Seifer, and Gelmon (2010) conducted a series of interviews with universities that pioneered the adoption of

service learning as an educational tool. They found that the traits contributing to successful service learning included building a mutually beneficial relationship, requiring long-term commitment from the university, maintaining open communication, and fostering equitable interactions.

Theoretical Framework

The current research is situated within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky’s (1987) sociocultural theory as it pertains to teacher preparation for ELs. According to sociocultural theory, development is socially mediated through activity-based interactions (Ellis, 2008). Learning that takes place in a social context is called situated learning and is viewed as an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). Lave and Wenger (1991) described this situated learning as a community of practice where participants co-construct knowledge in a shared social context. As it relates to the current study, TCs are developing their instructional and communicative skillset for teaching ELs in a classroom setting. The classroom teachers, TCs, and ELs form a community of practice in the social context of the service-learning setting contributing to the relationship between the university and partner schools. The findings that result from the TCs’ engagement with ELs in their service learning will be discussed within the framework of sociocultural theory.

Purpose

While there has been ample research on the general experiences of service learners, more research is needed on the specific learning that occurs for TCs in applying teaching strategies for ELs. Also, there is an insufficient amount of research on the needs of the partner schools where TCs are assigned for their service learning. In order to prepare TCs to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, service-learning programs must provide quality experiences for TCs while meeting the needs of the partner schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the quality of the service learning experience for both the TCs as well as the partner schools. The following questions are addressed in this investigation:

- How do TCs describe their use of ESOL strategies in the service-learning experience?
- What are TCs’ perceptions of the role of service learning in their preparation to work with ELs?
- How do administrators perceive the experience of hosting TCs completing service learning with ELs?

Methodology

Setting

The participants in this study include undergraduate students enrolled in an ESOL methods course as part of the university's teacher preparation program. This course is part of the One Plus Model, which addresses and assesses ESOL specific objectives for PreK–12 teachers of all subjects and grade levels (Nutta, Mokhtari, & Strelbel, 2012). Every TC is required to complete the ESOL methods course focused on various modification strategies designed to scaffold the linguistic needs of ELs. Such strategies include the use of leveled questions (i.e., questions targeted to various English proficiency levels), sentence frames (i.e., providing an EL with a partial sentence and a word bank), speech modification, visuals, and text simplification. In addition to the academic needs of ELs, topics addressing multiculturalism in education are infused into the course including an examination of unconscious bias and the concepts of power and privilege. The academic and multicultural topics integrated in the methods course are similar to Lucas and Villegas' (2013) framework regarding the preparation of linguistically responsive teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills.

In order to provide field experience for TCs to apply their learning from the ESOL methods course and to fulfill the PreK–12 schools' requests for university student tutors, faculty and staff of the ESOL program formed a partnership with a local PreK–12 school district serving a large population of ELs. The methods course requires 15 hours of service learning with ELs at one of the local partner schools. Prior to the start of the service learning, TCs participate in an interactive workshop focused on modification strategies. During the service-learning hours, TCs are paired with a classroom teacher to support ELs by applying the strategies either in whole class instruction, small groups, or individualized tutoring. As TCs complete their service learning, class sessions of the ESOL methods course address issues of unconscious bias, power, and privilege, which are connected to various class discussions of the service-learning experience and a class activity where TCs examine their own biases.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants from this study including both TCs from the ESOL methods course and administrators from the four partner schools. Data was collected over the course of one semester in four different sections of the ESOL methods course with a total enrollment of 95. Of the 60 TCs who participated in the study, 73.3% are female and 26.7%

male with the majority of TCs being majors in elementary education (61.3%) and the remainder in various secondary content areas or related fields, such as educational psychology. In terms of race and ethnicity, 66.5% identify as Caucasian, 16.2% Latino, and 13% Black, with the remainder identifying as multiracial or "other."

In order to prepare TCs to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, service-learning programs must provide quality experiences for TCs while meeting the needs of the partner schools.

The four administrators who chose to participate in this study represent the partner schools hosting the majority of TCs for service learning. The administrators were chosen for their key role in establishing the university-school partnerships. There were two high school principals; one who identifies as a Caucasian, non-Hispanic female and another who identifies as a male of Caucasian-Hispanic descent. Also included was one elementary school principal who identifies as Hispanic, and one elementary ESOL coordinator who identifies as Black. The four partner schools represented by these administrators reflect the varying student diversity of the area with an EL population ranging from 5.5% to 36.8% across the four schools. Of the ELs in the participating schools, the majority identify as Hispanic (ranging from 39.8% to 79.3%), with a smaller number who identify as Asian (ranging from 2.1% to 7.1%). Racially, the schools range from 5.2% to 26.9% White and 4.1% to 48.3% Black. The four partner schools fall into the category of low socioeconomic status as reflected in the free and reduced lunch program rates ranging from 59.7%–100% across the four schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected on the TCs' experiences during the service-learning program via an electronic survey and a reflective writing assignment. The survey contained a total of 12 questions. Nine questions were based on a Likert scale with the first five addressing the candidates' experiences using specific strategies for teaching ELs (see Appendix A). Four questions investigated TCs' perceived level of preparation to teach ELs upon completion of the service-learning project. The final

three questions were open-ended to allow candidates to provide further information. In addition to the surveys, TCs were required to turn in a writing assignment reflecting upon their experiences during service learning. These reflections provided further data about the TCs' individual experiences with the service-learning project. The candidates were asked to describe any learning activities they conducted with students (specifically, the use of any ESOL-specific strategies that were presented in the methods course) and to reflect upon what they learned during their service-learning experience. To obtain the perspective of the partner school sites, an interview was conducted with each of the four school administrators to examine their experience with the service-learning program. The interview questions were developed based on Vogel et al.'s (2010) study on sustainable service-learning programs and adapted for this study (see Appendix B). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

All numerical data from the surveys was calculated and crossed-checked for inter-rater reliability. Qualitative data from the TCs' open-ended questions, reflective writing assignments, and transcripts from the administrator interviews were analyzed in a reflective, analysis style. Each piece of information was broken into segments and then analyzed for meaningful units and themes (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Using descriptive and open coding, themes were coded and synthesized providing the basis for a structural description of the common elements observed for each interview. The findings reported in this article are the most frequent recurring themes. The transcriptions were member-checked to ensure reliability. Themes from TCs' open-ended questions and reflective writing assignments were compared to the results of the survey data. Finally, the TC data was examined for alignment with administrators' perceptions.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data collected in this study. The themes include the role of the academic preparation of TCs, the candidates' own sense of preparation to meet the needs of ELs, and the partnerships built between the university and partner schools as a result of the service learning. Both qualitative and quantitative data that align with the research questions will be presented according to theme within the framework of socio-cultural theory. The numerical data taken from the surveys will be presented in frequency tables. Following each table, sample quotations from open-ended questions, reflective writing assignments, and administrator interviews will be presented to support the numerical data and provide a narrative for discussion of each theme.

The Role of Academic Preparation of the Teacher Candidates

Evidence of the role of TCs' academic preparation can be found in responses to the survey questions (see Appendix A) about their use of ESOL strategies during their service-learning experience. Candidates were asked about their use of leveled questions, sentence frames, visuals, text simplification, and other strategies. Table 1 shows the frequency of the TCs' responses to the five questions addressing their use of specific ESOL strategies during the service learning. The frequency number reported refers to the amount of TCs who indicated that they used each specific strategy.

The vast majority of TCs elaborated on their use of leveled questions, visuals, and text simplification strategies with ELs in their service-learning reflection assignments. Quotations from this assignment support the survey data reported in Table 1. One elementary TC described leveled questions as useful when her ELs did not understand the teacher. She indicated, "[I] used leveled questions to make the assignments understandable and at their appropriate learning level." Two different TCs remarked that using leveled questions was an effective method to differentiate instruction and scaffolding for their ELs. One of the two, an educational psychology major, remarked, "I formed some questions for each subject to make the questions more up to their level and not just 'yes' and 'no' questions."

The TCs who commented on their use of text simplification all remarked on using this strategy to break down words and phrases through chunking. As one elementary TC stated, "I have gone through handouts with my EL, getting rid of unnecessary information so that she can focus on the key parts of a question. This has helped her greatly because she doesn't get as frustrated with trying to comprehend all of the extraneous information." Fewer candidates, although still a majority, reported the use of sentence frames for writing activities and the use of visuals for building vocabulary. In the question about "use of other strategies" on the survey, TCs had the opportunity to fill in any strategies used that were not addressed in the other four questions. Candidates noted a total of 27 other strategies used. The most frequent strategy mentioned was Total Physical Response (TPR), noted by 16 candidates, followed by games, color-coding, bilingual dictionaries, flashcards, and modeling.

Several TCs noted consciousness and adjustment of their own speech as a strategy used during the service-learning experience, as shown in Table 2. The candidates further elaborated on their adjustment of speech in their service-learning reflections. One candidate described how her first interactions with her ELs were difficult until she realized how to effectively use various communication strategies. The majority of TCs who elaborated on these speech strategies commented on

Table 1. ESOL strategies implemented by TCs in their ESOL service-learning experiences.

	Leveled questions	Sentence framing	Visuals	Text simplification	Other strategies
No. of TCs who used the strategy (<i>n</i> = 60)	58	42	57	53	41
No. of TCs who did not use the strategy (<i>n</i> = 60)	2	18	3	7	19

their focus for pace, prosody, intonation, gestures, and facial expressions. One elementary candidate’s comment summarized this pattern very well, “When helping students, I was being very expressive with my speech. I emphasized sounds, mouth shape, and facial expression with the ELs.” Table 2 shows the types of speech strategies reported by TCs and the number of times each strategy was reported (labeled as occurrences).

The combination of coursework with meaningful service (Eyler & Giles, 1999) provided the TCs with a unique, situated learning experience in the service learning. The opportunities to use specific strategies, such as leveled questions and adjusting speech, within their communities of practice were noted by TCs in their surveys and reflections. Prior research shows that service learning benefits TCs by providing opportunities apply classroom theory and teaching skills (Fan, 2013; Pappamihiel, 2007; Purmensky, 2006) in addition to practice adapting instruction for ELs (Uzum et al., 2014). The findings of this study align with past research supporting the benefits of service learning (Marchel et al., 2011; Moore, 2013; Rodriguez, 2013), and provide more detail regarding TCs’ use of specific ESOL strategies.

Despite the positive feedback, five TCs indicated in the open-ended survey questions that service learning was not a valuable experience. For example, two of the TCs felt that the classroom teacher did not provide enough opportunities for the TCs to work with ELs. “I was never in contact with the [ELs] because of the way [the teacher] taught the class,” one elementary candidate explained. A TC majoring in general education studies indicated that her classroom teacher did not trust the TCs enough to relinquish instructional power and independence with the ELs. She reflected, “I wished that the teacher would trust me a bit more to take the

lead, but I understand that it is still ultimately not my class.” In both of these cases, the TCs did not have an opportunity to fully participate in a community of practice with their ELs.

TCs’ Sense of Preparation

The service-learning experience allowed TCs to build their confidence and sense of preparation as they worked with ELs. Evidence of increased feelings of preparation can be found in the Likert scale survey results. In the questions addressing preparation, TCs noted how the strategies learned in their ESOL course and the service-learning experience contributed to their sense of preparation to work with ELs. Table 3 shows that the majority of TCs responded favorably to the first, third, and fourth questions from the survey regarding the TCs’ sense of preparedness to work and teach ELs and learning more about ELs in general as a result from the service-learning experience. Interestingly, despite these questions not receiving positive responses from all 60 TCs, all candidates felt that they gained valuable experience working with ELs as a result of the service learning that they completed with ELs. The survey questions regarding preparation and numbers of participants who agreed and disagreed with each are listed in Table 3.

The candidates’ experiences regarding the survey questions from Table 3 were further explained in both their service-learning reflection assignments, as well as an open-ended section of the survey itself. Nineteen TCs reflected on their sense of preparation by reporting how their community of practice prepared them to become better teachers for ELs. One TC, an education minor, reflected on her initial uncertainty with ELs and the confidence that the service-learning experience gave her to work with ELs. She reflected, “I felt very unprepared, but this was one of the first times I was helping students with anything so it was a great experience. I feel much more confident assisting ELs.” An elementary TC stated, “I learned that learning a completely new language and culture is intimidating and scary. It’s up to us to ensure that these students transition comfortably.” These findings support research that shows service learning contributes to TCs’ identity as teachers and increased sense of preparation (Marchel et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2013). None of the TCs who disagreed with the survey questions provided any further reflection statements.

Table 2. Speech consciousness-related strategies in TCs’ ESOL service-learning experiences.

Type of strategy (respectively)	No. of occurrences
Speech reduction (simplified speech and slowing pace)	19
Exaggerated pronunciation and enunciation	17
Repetition of what TCs said	12
Intentionally speaking clearly	4
Exaggerated expression and prosody of speech	3
Attention to mouth detail while speaking	3

Table 3. ESOL service-learning survey questions and responses.

Survey questions	No. of TCs who agreed (<i>n</i> = 60)	No. of TCs who disagreed (<i>n</i> = 60)
I felt at least somewhat prepared to work with ELs during service learning.	58	2
I gained valuable experience as a result of the service learning.	60	0
I learned more about ELs during my service-learning hours.	57	3
I feel better prepared to teach ELs as a result of my service learning.	56	4

Building Partnerships

The relationships built between TCs and ELs in the communities of practice contributed to the partnerships built between the university and the partner school. This partnership is reflected in interview data from the administrators that show overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the service-learning experience. One high school administrator stated, “At the beginning, [our ELs] were stiff and apprehensive. Then they began to look forward to [the service learners].” Another elementary administrator commented on observations of the TCs, “I could tell they were passionate about education and about children. I could tell they love children just by their demeanor and the way they [interacted with children].” One high school administrator explained that some of the TCs stayed with their service learning longer than their original time commitment because of the connections they formed with ELs and stated, “Some of those volunteers formed bonds with those classes and with those students and then returned at the end of the year for their end of the year ceremonies.” This aligns with prior findings that service learning in PreK–12 schools can provide benefits to ELs’ attendance, comfort level in class, and reading skills (Purmensky, 2006).

Interview data also show that administrators reported academic benefits of having additional assistants in the classroom working with ELs. An elementary administrator specifically mentioned the role of the TCs’ preparation, “In a dream world I would have a teacher assistant in each classroom, but we don’t have the funds for that. So, any time you can bring in volunteers that are trained people that want to become teachers, [it is beneficial].” One high school administrator credited the service-learning program as an influence in academic gains made by ELs and stated, “My students all made gains. All of them. What those [TCs] did contributed to the fact that all our students made progress.” Another high school administrator related the service-learning experience to the progress ELs had made on state assessments, “The program definitely has a positive impact. We had 40 students who didn’t graduate with a diploma. Ninety

percent were ELs. They had struggles with the state exit exam testing, but the extra hands equaled differentiated, one-on-one instruction for these students. This has decreased this group’s failure rate on this exam.” Although this quote is remarkable, there is no empirical evidence to support the decrease in failure rate that can be attributed to the service learning. However, this administrator clearly views the service learning as contributing to the academic benefit of ELs. These findings address the criticism of service-learning projects that provide unskilled volunteers to the institutions they serve (Stoecker et al., 2009) by showing the positive impact of the TCs’ preparation prior to service learning.

Overall, the findings from administrators were positive. However, the negative comments administrators made about the service-learning program related to issues of time commitment and the desire to lengthen the time period of the service learning. Some administrators expressed the desire to continue the service learning for the entire school year rather than one semester. One administrator stated, “Consistency is the best thing for students. It builds a rapport.” Another spoke about TCs who did not keep their appointments, “I ask that you commit to the term of service that you committed to. Keep your word.” Unfortunately, these administrator quotes resonate with prior research showing that service learning can be disruptive to the partner institution if scheduling needs are not designed to meet the needs of partner schools (Stoecker et al., 2009).

Implications

The results of this study highlight the role of the TCs’ academic preparation as it contributed to administrators’ perceptions of the partnership. Furthermore, TCs provided positive feedback about the opportunities to use strategies learned in the methods course. However, mutually agreed upon expectations for service learning, such as scheduling and accountability, can make the difference between a community of practice that is beneficial for all parties involved and one whose benefits are limited. Service learning allows the university to increase its visibility in the community (Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). However, a university teacher education program must avoid the impression of being a provider of charity when courses require TCs who are mainly White, native speakers of English to volunteer in a school serving a culturally and linguistically diverse population. One way to address this negative impression is to view the needs of the partner school as equal to those of the TCs and teacher education program. As Eby (1998) found, attention must be given to the needs of the partner schools to ensure a successful working relationship. If service learning is truly designed to be mutually

beneficial, issues such as scheduling and accountability must be considered with options for grading consequences for TCs who do not honor their time commitments.

Additionally, attention must be paid to TCs who are not having a quality experience in their service learning due to lack of interaction with ELs. If the goal of service learning is to provide TCs with interactions in classrooms of culturally and linguistically diverse students, TCs must be in a setting where those interactions can take place. One limitation of this study is that teachers in the partner schools were not contacted to provide their perspective. Communication about service learning must go beyond the administrative level. Clear lines of communication between the partner schools' classroom teachers and methods course instructors can be put in place to resolve issues of scheduling and lack of interaction before they become problematic. This increased communication can better support the community of practice leading to a stronger partnership and benefits to ELs.

Conclusion

Based on the outcome of this investigation, the findings suggest that partner schools found the service-learning communities of practice to be beneficial for their ELs. Also, TCs had a positive perspective of their service-learning experience. The partner schools emphasized the value of TCs who are trained in specific ESOL strategies as an option for differentiation of instruction and influencing the learning outcomes of ELs. Also, administrators noted the benefits of the relationships formed in the communities of practice. However, partner schools suggest more time be allocated for service learning and to increase accountability of TCs. From the perspective of the TCs, they found it valuable to have the opportunity to apply the strategies learned in their coursework with ELs and increased their sense of preparation as a result. Candidates with limited involvement expressed the desire to be more engaged with ELs. While further work is needed to examine effective partnerships, service learning remains an opportunity that merges theory with practice and can function to prepare TCs to better meet the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse population.

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Appendix A

	Did not use	Unsuccessful	Somewhat successful	Successful
I used leveled questions with ELs to help determine what the student understood about the content.				
I used sentence frames with ELs to help them speak or write in English.				
I used visuals with ELs to help convey information effectively.				
I used text simplification with ELs to help during reading.				
I used other strategies not covered in the course.				
			Agree	Disagree
I felt at least somewhat prepared to work with ELs during service learning.				
I gained valuable experience as a result of the service learning.				
I learned more about ELs during my service learning hours.				
I feel better prepared to teach ELs as a result of my service-learning.				

In a few sentences, please describe your service learning experience.

In a few sentences, please answer: What did you learn about the education of ELs as a result of your service learning experience?

Appendix B

1. Describe how you view the mission and goals of your department at this school.
2. How do you view the service-learning partnership as contributing to this mission?

3. How do the services of the service-learning program fulfill specific needs articulated by your organization's mission?
4. How can the program improve in doing this?
5. Describe your experience with continuity. How do new cohorts improve or impede upon the experience with the previous cohort?
6. Describe your experience with the university service-learning coordinator.
7. Can you imagine any examples of this that would benefit the mission of your school?
8. Describe your observations of service-learning volunteers in the classrooms.
9. Describe your observations of students when service-learning volunteers are interacting with them.
10. Please share any advice that you have that may benefit the partnership going forward in the future.