

Chapter 2

Preparing Pre-Service Teachers’ Expectations and Resilience: Service-Learning with English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to describe an ongoing service-learning project that brings pre-service teachers in an MA graduate program in Teaching English as a Second Language to tutor English language learners in a low-income urban high school. Excerpts from nine different teachers on sessions with the same learner offer snapshots of the learner’s progress as he interacts with them. Impact on teacher expectations and demonstrated resilience working with this student is evaluated in concert with how well the project embodies the standards of service-learning as mutually beneficial practice. An analogy will be drawn between the behaviors of passengers in a stopped subway train and the varied ways teacher candidates and the project as a whole embodies culturally responsive teaching.

INTRODUCTION

It’s 2:00 pm and I’m standing on a crowded subway car adding comments to a student’s Google Doc on my iPhone, pleased at my strategy to make the commute to the South Bronx more efficient. The crowded train or midday congestion does not faze me. Born and raised in New York, I have been here before: earbuds in, without the volume, block out the noise and I focus on my small screen despite the crunch of passengers. I read of my graduate student’s experience working with a high school student “who does not like to read.” I touch-type: “I have something you might try. Remind me in class to show you the digital story a tutor made from the wordless picture book, *Paradiso*. It worked well with another “reluctant reader”.

As the subway grinds to a halt midway between stops, a loud garbled voice announces a delay. For the first time, I look into the faces of the passengers closest to me and I see a diverse crowd—in dress,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0871-7.ch002

age, race, gender expression, language and much else-- I imagine. A tourist looks up from her Japanese guidebook: only eyeballs moving. Another face puzzled by the garbled voice questions out loud, "Was that English?". Our jolt back into movement seconds later is followed only by a full stop.

This time even the expressionless faces of the seen-it-all-before New Yorkers, me included, display question marks. Others check their cell phones to see if they can get out a message that they will be late. A woman with a big biology book and highlighter presses on through her pages, leveraging the extra time to study. We do not move for what seems an eternity. I hear, "let's get off at the next stop and take a cab" and some slurs against the MTA. A mother in Spanish asks her daughter, "Léeme ese poema." The five-year old slowly reads "The Poetry in Motion" poem on the wall: "Like hot food, I love you..." Some commuters smile at the precious moment. One, approvingly, says, "Eres Hermosa -- you are beautiful." A cranky or critical passenger, depending on your point of view, asserts: "Smart, to put that poem there to distract us from this crappy system". Now the announcement, "Due to an earlier incident this train will run express," angers some passengers and relieves others. I help the tourist re-route her trip. We are both delighted that I speak Japanese.

Above ground, I realize the subway car is like the classroom of my destination that day. I am going to a service-learning tutoring program I have been facilitating for the last two years, in which my graduate students interact with high school English language learners. I have "passengers"—graduate and high school students-- who, by degree, are waiting to get out; who are new to this route; who are struck by the expected and unexpected challenges; who are making the best of it; and who, at times, are discouraged, feeling suddenly on unsure footing. Like subway passengers, at different times, they notice and reflect, even smile. At other times they want to phone-in for help, and/or want to be heard in multiple languages. Ten of the English language learners (ELLs) at this afterschool program are Spanish-dominant. Two students are from Ghana though they speak different languages, Twi and Hausa (See Table 1). Like the subway, the project has carried diverse participants through the same physical space at the same time; they shared both similarities and differences in age, education, life histories, points of view, purposes, languages, cultures, and literacy practices, as well as in levels of flexibility with and handling of unexpected events and time pressure, to name but just two factors. In this paper I will continue to use the subway analogy as an organizing principle to describe the ups and downs of service-learning.

BEFORE ENTERING: A SERVICE CHECK

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (Hayes, 2014) about 13 percent of the American workforce of 3.4 million public school teachers either moves or leaves the profession each year. New teachers are particularly vulnerable. Some might counter that "newbies" in other professions make the same decisions, and that it is the enormity and complexity of the education system that accounts for losing 230,122 teachers and having 227, 016 teachers move from one school to another (total 457, 138). While this may be true, when you are new on that crowded train, or to extend the metaphor, new to teaching in what some literature refers to as a "high poverty" school, these numbers are alarming. You question if you want to make the commute (to teach) daily.

In the context of this study, New York City Public Schools, about 50 percent of the new teachers hired in 2008-2009 left their original school within three years. The schools they left were disproportionately schools serving "low income" students. Nationally, "high poverty" schools experience a teacher turnover rate of about 20 percent per calendar year. In New York City 30 percent of the new teachers

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