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Pre-service Teachers' Confidence and Attitudes toward Teaching English Learners

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ABSTRACT: Research has shown that many pre-service teachers do not feel confident in their abilities to work with English learners (ELs), and that attitudes toward ELs can have an effect on their confidence in working with these students. The purpose of this quantitative study is to find out what factors affect the confidence and attitudes of pre-service teachers in regard to teaching ELs. Data consisted of a four-part survey of 244 pre-service teachers entering an elementary teacher education program. Findings revealed that attitudes toward ELs' use of L1 correlated with reported second language proficiency and diversity experience, and indirectly with international travel experience. In contrast, confidence levels did not correlate with these variables. The authors conclude with suggestions for ways that teacher education programs can change attitudes toward L1 use, develop confidence, and foster greater understanding of ELs in pre-service teachers.

Introduction

Today's pre-service teachers can expect that their eventual classrooms will include students who speak a home language other than English (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Yet, much recent scholarship indicates that teachers, both practicing and in-service, feel unprepared to teach ELs. In a survey of teacher preparedness, only 29.5 percent of teachers with ELs in their classrooms felt confident that they have had the training to effectively teach ELs (NCES, 1997), and 81.7 percent of teachers in Author's (2006) survey of 297 high school teachers reported they did not feel adequately trained to do so. Similarly, 57 percent of teacher participants in another study indicated that they needed more training in order to provide effective education for ELs (Alexander, Heaviside, & Farris, 1999). Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002) found that teachers' feelings of preparedness are significantly related to their confidence about their ability to teach effectively. In addition, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2002) found that "teachers did not feel that their teacher education programs adequately prepared them for certain tasks, such as using technology and teaching English Language

Learners” (p. 22). Teacher preparedness and subsequent teacher confidence for teaching ELs in the general education classroom are sorely lacking.

Teacher preparation institutions and policy makers have taken note of the lack of preparedness and confidence to teach ELs effectively. Currently, there are twenty states in the United States that require pre-service teachers to have some sort of EL teaching preparation (Menken & Atunéz, 2001). Menken and Atunéz (2001) found that less than one-sixth of the teacher preparation institutions, however, require courses in working with ELs in the classroom setting. With school populations becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, this need for all teacher preparation programs to incorporate ESL methodologies in their programs continues today (García et al., 2010; Bunch, 2013).

What teachers need to know and be able to do has received much recent attention in scholarship, and there is increasing consensus on what has been dubbed an “enhanced expertise” for teaching ELs in general education classrooms (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2013, p. 89). This expertise includes knowledge not only of research-tested teaching strategies but also solid understandings of second language learning processes, the language of school and content areas, and the impact that home and school cultures have on minority youths’ schooling and identity (Schleppegrell, 2004; Téllez & Waxman, 2006; Valdés, Capitelli, & Alvarez, 2010).

Despite a clear picture of the goal (what teachers ought to know and be able to do), we understand little about the initial attitudes and confidence levels of pre-service teachers as they begin their teaching journey with English learners in the classroom. What, for example, do new pre-service teachers believe about teaching ELs, second language learners, and immigrant/newcomer youth? How do particular experiences with cultural and linguistic diversity (or the lack of such experiences) inform new pre-service teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about teaching ELs? If teacher preparation programs are to move pre-service teachers along the path toward an enhanced expertise, we need to know where pre-service teachers are as they enter professional education.

Most U.S. teachers are European Americans from middle-class backgrounds and monolingual speakers of English (Gay, 2005). Many of their students, however, are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Subsequently many teachers do not share the same cultural frames of reference and points of view as their students (Daniel & Friedman, 2005) and overall, the teacher corps lacks diversity (García et al., 2010). This can lead to a disconnect in which teachers are unable to be responsive to the educational needs of their ELs. “Research indicates that teachers believe they have not been adequately prepared to teach children from cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own and that they need to learn more specific skills to do so” (Daniel & Friedman, 2005, 2). Hence, the attitudes that the pre-service teachers might have toward educating ELs even before starting their teacher education journey deserves more research attention.

Factors that Affect Attitudes and Confidence of Pre-service Teachers

Attitudes can affect pre-service teachers' confidence when working with ELs in a classroom setting. For a change in attitudes to occur, pre-service teachers must examine their own cultural experiences, beliefs, and values (Souto-Manning, 2013) and acknowledge the way that their own attitudes shape their teaching. Students' attitudes, confidence, and their ability to work successfully with ELs have been shown to be influenced by international experiences (such as living, traveling, or studying abroad), second language acquisition, and prior experiences working and being around ELs. Finally, attitudes and confidence toward working with ELs can be transformed by a well-designed set of teacher education experiences in the classroom and the practicum experiences.

International Experiences

Research has shown that there is little controversy surrounding the general value of international travel and/or study experiences on pre-service teachers (Willard-Holt, 2001). Study abroad and teaching abroad experiences have been shown to be highly beneficial in preparing teachers for global education defined by Merryfield as "education that develops the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are the basis for decision making and participation in a world characterized by cultural pluralism, interconnectedness, and international economic competition" (1995, p. 1). Willard-Holt (2001) reports that pre-service teachers documented professional changes as a result of their short visit to Mexico including their realizations of what it is like to be a minority. These professional changes resulted in teachers reporting that they were less likely to prejudge students based on cultural or linguistic differences. In addition, pre-service teachers reported a conceptual change in how they viewed teaching that pointed to a more global perspective. Pence and Macgillivray (2007) found that international field experiences provided pre-service teachers with benefits such as increased confidence and a better appreciation and respect for differences of others and other cultures. Furthermore, through observations and student comments in their reflective writing and questionnaires, the authors found that the international field experience (in Rome, in this case) "challenged their preconceptions of culturally different others, how schools and classrooms should be structured, their personal and professional beliefs, and, ultimately, helped them grow as individuals and future teachers" (p. 14). Finally, Sahin (2008) found that international travel experiences contributed in a positive way to pre-service teachers' cultural awareness and worked to "promote better understanding among peoples of the world" (p. 1786). Results from these studies point to the value of international experiences in developing cultural awareness, challenging stereotypes of the "other" and judging students based on differences in cultural and linguistic back-

grounds. Therefore, it is easy to see why these experiences (or lack of them) can make a difference in how well-prepared pre-service teachers believe to be able to work with ELs, who most often come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds than their teachers. However, very few of the studies conducted on international experiences include quantitative data that could increase our understanding of the correlation between these international experiences and confidence/attitudes of pre-service teachers.

Second Language Acquisition

Another factor impacting teacher attitudes and confidence in working with ELs is the pre-service teacher's own language learning experience and knowledge about language learning. Children who speak a language other than English enter U.S. schools with abilities and talents similar to those of native English-speaking children (Thomas & Collier, 2012). In addition, ELs have the ability to speak another language that, if properly nurtured, will benefit them throughout their lives. Despite research on the contrary, the use of ELs' native languages in general education classrooms has been a controversial issue and often an undervalued and misunderstood instructional tool. In 2006, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children conducted a meta-analysis study on reading instruction research in the students' first and second language and concluded that learning to read in the native language promotes reading achievement in the second language (August & Shanahan, 2006). This study (as well as other research in the field) informs us that ELs can transfer knowledge of one language to another language and that this transfer can be facilitated by teachers to help students learn the new information more easily (Goldenberg, 2008). In addition, Lucas and Villegas (2011) pointed to understanding the value for linguistic diversity and valuing students' linguistic resources as a fundamental orientation of linguistically responsive teachers. The authors also stated that showing respect for and interest in students' home languages can "send a welcoming message" to ELs (p. 60). These concepts can be difficult to understand for monolingual pre-service teachers who may have misconceptions about second language learning.

According to Reeves (2009), misconceptions about how languages are learned can occur when students don't have experience learning additional languages or being a second language learner themselves. Some misconceptions in the study included beliefs that ELs should be able to acquire English within two years, and that they should avoid using their L1 at home or at school while acquiring English (Reeves, 2009). While these myths can be dispelled in classes focused on second language acquisition, participating in a second language learning experience is one way in which students can feel empathy and begin to understand the process firsthand. Coady, Harper, and de Jong (2011) in their survey of Florida teachers

found a need for teachers to “develop some level of bilingual proficiency along with relevant cultural knowledge” (p. 237). Moreover, in Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly and Driscoll’s (2005) study on California teachers’ professional development needs, the authors found that knowledge of language uses, forms, mechanics, and how to teach these were key skills that contributed to successful EL learning. Additionally, Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) point to a need for pre-service teachers to study “the development of language skills and the acquisition of the structures and vocabulary required for literacy development” as well as second language learning and linguistics (p. 33–34).

Unfortunately, many teacher education programs do not require second language proficiency (as opposed to other countries such as Spain, that do), although research has clearly demonstrated its benefits (Pizarro, 2013). Language study (whether at home or abroad) can increase students’ recognition of language value in general because students are able to see its significance when they start using their additional languages in daily life. The above research has shown that experience learning languages or being a second language learner can greatly enhance teachers’ ability to work with ELs through the knowledge they acquire about language learning in their own language learning process.

Previous Experiences with Diversity

A final factor that affects the attitudes and confidence of pre-service teachers to work successfully with ELs is their previous experiences with diversity. Research suggests that all too often U.S. teachers have not worked with students who are diverse with regard to culture and language regardless of the teacher’s own ethnic or racial backgrounds (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Since pre-service teachers have limited experience with populations that are culturally/linguistically or ethnically different than their own, there appears to be a widening cultural and social gap between those individuals entering teacher education and the students they intend to teach (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999). Because of their lack of experience and interaction with diverse populations, they may develop negative attitudes and rely on misconceptions and stereotypes. “These views are at least partly due to the fact that teacher education and developmental psychology have not historically positioned culture as a central aspect of teacher preparation programs” (Souto-Manning, 2013, p. 79).

Current Research Study

As teacher educators, we need to better understand the attitudes, knowledge, and confidence that pre-services teachers hold when they come into a teacher

education program in order to adapt our programs to what students need most. Examining their knowledge of second language acquisition processes and experiences with diverse populations and international travel can provide us with valuable information that could affect how we shape our teacher education programs. When we understand their beliefs, we are able to build an educational program that is culturally responsive and boosts their confidence in working with ELs in their future classrooms. This leads us to the central research question of this study:

Do pre-service-teacher attitudes and confidence in working with ELs differ as a function of their self-reported L2 proficiency, diversity experience, and international travel experience at the beginning of their teacher education program?

Method

Participants and setting

The study included a sample of 244 undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university in four cohorts from consecutive semesters ($N_1 = 53$, $N_2 = 77$, $N_3 = 62$, $N_4 = 52$). Participants were pre-service teachers entering an elementary teacher education program. Students entering the elementary education programs at this institution are typically admitted to the program during their sophomore year after 3–4 semesters of general education and pre-professional course work. The majority of the participants were female (89%), native English speakers (99.5%), with 0.5 percent of the students speaking a first language other than English. Ninety-six percent of the participants were white, 1 percent African American, 1% Asian, 0.5 percent Hispanic, 0.5 percent Kurdish, and 1 percent did not report.

Measures

A four-part survey instrument (see Appendix A) was constructed based on extant literature to gauge pre-service teachers' attitudes toward various aspects of teaching ELs. The survey included participants' attitudes toward the use of ELs' first language, levels of confidence to teach ELs, and attributions of academic outcomes of EL. Each of these aspects is based on previous research and considered pivotal (Reeves, 2006; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Harper, Moy & Konstan, 2009; Harper & de Jong, 2004). We examined validity and reliability for each theoretically used factor using factor analysis and internal consistency respectively, which will be examined in the following sections.

Data Analysis

Attitudes Toward English learners L1 Use

There is strong research evidence demonstrating that L1 maintenance does not hinder English acquisition (Reeves, 2010; García-Nevarez, Stafford and Arias 2005; Wong, Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Despite that, many pre- and in-service teachers were found to be ambivalent toward the use of L1 by ELs (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). As a result, we created a series of six Items (Items 1.1–1.6 in Appendix A document) to gauge participants' attitudes toward the use of the students' first language (L1) during academic situation. We start with a general statement that asks pre-service teachers whether ELs should maintain their first language while learning English (which in principle is easy to agree with) and then we continue with a series of statements that specify exactly in which educational settings the L1 should be included (if any), ending with a statement about the teacher's use of the English learners' L1 in content instruction. This last statement places the most onus on the teacher. We expected the items to be related but we predicted the students to agree less with the statements as the demands on the classroom teacher increased. Each item was measured along a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Unsure = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). We used average score for the scale to maintain the interpretability of scores.

Confidence to Teach with ELs

In previous research (Pettit, 2011), pre-service teachers have reported low confidence in their ability and readiness to teach ELs. We collected information about self-efficacy to teach English learners that replicates this finding and uncovers the relationships between pre-service teachers' confidence to teach ELs and previous experiences with language, culture, and diversity. Three items measured pre-service teacher confidence: Item 1.7 *I look forward to having ELs in my general education classroom*, Item 1.8 *I am confident in my ability to teach ELs in the general education classroom*, and Item 1.9 *I feel confident that I can facilitate a collaboration between ELs' families and school*. Each item was measured along a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Unsure = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). We used average score for the scale to maintain the interpretability of scores.

Attributions for ELs' Academic Success

Research into pre-service teachers' beliefs indicated problematic assumptions about ELs' first languages and cultures (Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva, Wodrich, and Kasai, 2014). In order to investigate what pre-service teachers believed about the conditions that undergird ELs' academic performance, we constructed a rated response section of the survey. In this section respon-

Table 1. Item by Factor Matrix for the Factor and its importance in ELs' success in the general education classroom

<i>Language/Literacy Background</i>	<i>ELs' Personal Characteristics</i>	<i>School Context</i>
2.1 English learners' proficiency in English.	2.2 English learners' age.	2.3 English learners' previous schooling experience.
2.4 English learners' literacy skills in their first language.	2.5 English learners' personality.	
2.6 English learners' family attitude toward school/education.	2.7 English learners' friendship(s) with native English speakers.	2.8 The general education teacher's confidence/ability to teach ELs.
		2.9 Daily English as a second language classes with a certified EL teacher.

dents rated each of nine factors for “*its importance in ELs' success in the general education classroom.*” The nine items (Items 2.1–2.9) were divided into three theoretical categories: language/learning background, ELs' personal characteristics, and school context presented in Table 1. The factors were validated through a factor analysis.

Pre-service Teachers Experiences with Language, Culture, and Diversity

Research has shown that formative personal experiences have an impact on attitudes of pre-service teachers toward ELs. We created three items to capture experiences with a second language, culture, and diversity using the last three items in the survey. Each was evaluated on a Likert scale between 0 and 10. To create dichotomous variables, we used a median split that yielded for low/high groups for each of the three variables.

Results

Descriptive analysis results are presented in Table 2. The reliability of survey factors ranged from .60 to .72. Factor analysis validated all five factors.

Attitude toward L1 Use

We examined the differences between the items addressing L1 use in the classroom. Based on the literature, we hypothesized that teachers will agree less with the use of L1 as it presents more demands on their practice. Results confirmed this hypothesis, indicating differences among the items $F(5,1529)=105.083, p < .001$. The score on Item 1.1 was the highest ($M = 4.42, SD=.70$) and the score on Item 1.6 was the lowest ($M = 2.93, SD=.89$). This difference shows that pre-service teachers have internalized a superficial view of the value of L1 use. However, in practice, they are much less likely to try and use the L1 in instruction. In fact, the effect size between general intent and actual intent to use L1 by the teacher is very large ($d = 1.5$). The homogeneous subsets output (Table 3) shows that Item 1.2, *ELs should be allowed to use their first language in informal ways at school*, and Item 1.3, *ELs should be allowed to use first language dictionaries/websites to assist with their content-area work*, do not differ significantly from each other. Item 1.4, *ELs should be allowed to use first language dictionary/websites to assist with content-area assessments*, and Item 1.5, *ELs should be allowed to use their language with other first language speakers in the classroom to do content area work*, do not differ significantly from each other but they do differ significantly from other items. Items that stand alone included Item 1.1, *ELs should maintain their first language while learning English*, and Item 1.6, *Teachers should use ELs' L1 wherever possible during content instruction*.

Next, we conducted an ANOVA to examine whether pre-service teachers' attitudes toward L1 use varied as a function of their proficiency in a second language, diversity experiences, and international travel (Table 3). Results revealed a significant difference in pre-service teachers' attitudes toward L2 use due to their self-reported proficiency in a second language, $F(1,243)=5.37$,

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability, and Correlations among Factors

Factors	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
L1 Use	3.68	.55	.70	-			
Confidence	3.58	.74	.72	.14	-		
Language/Academic Background	4.16	.58	.60	.13	.05	-	
Personal Characteristics	3.65	.68	.67	.08	.08	.48*	-
School Context	4.34	.65	.62	.07	.02	.47*	.41*

Note. N=255. * $p < .001$.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of L1 Use, by Item

Item No.	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6
Mean	4.42 _a	4.06 _b	4.00 _b	3.38 _c	3.27 _c	2.93 _d
(SD)	(.70)	(.85)	(.74)	(1.01)	(1.04)	(.89)

Note. Means not sharing subscripts differ at $p < .05$ according to Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference comparison.

$p = .02$, $d = .31$. Pre-service teachers with high proficiency in a second language reported higher scores on their attitudes toward L1 use ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .55$) than those with low proficiency of a second language ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .54$). We also found a significant difference in pre-service teachers' attitudes toward L1 use based on experience with diversity, $F(1,243) = 4.10$, $p = .044$, $d = .28$, but not international travel experience. Pre-service teachers with high-diversity experiences reported a higher score on their attitude toward L1 use ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .55$) than those with few experiences with diversity ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .54$). Both effect sizes were low-moderate indicating that while they are statistically significant, there is low variance within each group.

Pre-service teachers' Confidence Teaching English Learners

This factor was found to be valid and reliable (internal consistency .72) based on the factor analysis. The only significant difference was between Item 1.7 *I look forward to having ELs in my general education classroom* ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .77$) and Item 1.8 *I am confident in my ability to teach ELs in the general Ed classroom* ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.05$). This result is similar to the attitudes of L1 use. As we move from a general attitude "I welcome" to a specific practice "ability to teach," pre-service teachers are considerably less confident.

We then conducted an ANOVA to examine whether pre-service teachers' confidence working with English learners differed as a function of the three variables: their proficiency in a second language, diversity experiences, and international travel (Table 4). Results revealed that despite variability among participants in proficiency in a second language, diversity experiences, and international travel, no significant differences were found between levels of confidence in working with ELs among participants.

Pre-service Teachers' Attributed Factors for ELs' School Performance

The three categories that measured pre-service teachers' understanding of why English learners succeed or fail academically are: Language/Literacy Background, ELs' Personal Characteristics, and School Context (see Table 1). Factor analysis confirmed the theoretical factors, and reliability approached the established criteria of .70. As a result, we must exercise caution interpreting the results with regard to these factors.

We conducted a separate ANOVA to examine whether pre-service teachers had different beliefs on the attribution as a function of the three independent variables (i.e., their proficiency of a second language, diversity experiences, and international travel). Results revealed a significant difference in pre-service teachers' reported importance of Language/Literacy Background as a function of their proficiency of a second language $F(1,243) = 4.16$, $p = .042$, $d = .26$. Specifically, pre-service teachers with high proficiency in a second language scored higher on the importance of Language/Literacy Background

Table 4. ANOVA results

Independent Variables	L1 Use		Confidence		Language Background		Personal Characteristics		School Context	
	F ^a	p	F ^a	p	F ^a	η^2	F ^a	p	F ^a	p
L2 Proficiency	5.37	.021	3.65	.057	4.16	.02	.96	.330	7.12	.008
Diversity	4.10	.044	.03	.850	3.43	.01	.17	.680	1.42	.234
Experience					.77	.380	1.02	.310	5.12	.025
International Travel	2.03	.155	.48	.480		.00		.00		.02

Note. ^aUnivariate *df* = 1, 243.

of English learners ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .58$) than those with low proficiency of a second language ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .58$) although the effect size was small.

Similarly, the impact of diversity experiences on attribution of Language/Literacy Background was significant, $F(1,243) = 3.43$, $p = .045$, $d = .24$. Pre-service teachers with high levels of diversity experience reported higher scores on the importance of Language/Literacy Background of English learners ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .55$) than those with low levels of diversity experience ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .60$), indicating pre-service teachers with high-diversity experiences attributed ELs' success more to ELs' Language/Literacy Background than pre-service teachers with low diversity experiences did.

When we examined the impact of international travel experience on the attribution of Language/Literacy Background (see Table 3) we found no significant differences. Similarly, when we examined the attributions regarding ELs' Personal Characteristics, there were no significant differences found in pre-service teachers' reported reason of ELs' Personal Characteristics as a function of the three independent variables (e.g., proficiency in a second language, diversity experience, and international travel).

However, a significant difference was found in pre-service teachers' reported reason of School Context as a function of their proficiency in a second language $F(1,243)=7.12$, $p = .008$, $d=-.34$, and their reported international travel, $F(1,243)=5.12$, $p=.025$, $d=-.30$, but not diversity experience (see Table 3). Specifically, pre-service teachers with high self-reported proficiency in a second language scored lower on the reason of School Context for English learners ($M = 4.22$, $SD=.72$) than those with low proficiency in a second language ($M = 4.44$, $SD=.55$), indicating that pre-service teachers with low L2 proficiency contributed more of ELs' success to School Context than pre-service teachers with high L2 proficiency. Pre-service teachers with high international travel reported lower scores on the reason of School Context ($M = 4.24$, $SD=.64$) than those with low international travel ($M = 4.42$, $SD=.64$), indicating pre-service teachers with low international travel contributed ELs' success more to School Context than pre-service teachers with high international travel. No difference was found for the groups with different diversity experiences.

Discussion

General Attitudes Toward ELs

The survey results indicate that pre-service teachers report a generally positive attitude toward educating English learners in their future classrooms even before the start of their formal training. The generally positive attitude may be influenced by the fact that they have not yet faced the challenge of teaching ELs in their classroom. At the same time these future teachers have grown up in an era that recognizes that English learners are more and more

common in today's classrooms. In fact, it may show that pre-service teachers accept their responsibility to teach English learners regardless of their personal ideology.

Factors Affecting Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes

This study examined three potential predictors of attitudes toward English learners in the mainstream classroom. Out of the three predictors: diversity experience, second language proficiency, and international travel, two had a significant influence over pre-service teachers' attitudes. Both diversity experiences and second language proficiency predicted teacher attitudes in teaching ELs and toward the use of L1 in the classroom. While we cannot change the experiences of our students before they enter teacher education, this finding indicates the need for providing pre-service teachers experiences with diverse student populations and second language learning opportunities.

Interestingly, international travel was not a significant factor in predicting teacher confidence or attitudes in teaching ELs. This finding is inconsistent with the research in this area which suggests the opposite, given that international experiences expose our students to different languages and unique perspectives, and provide insights into cultures that may be different from their own. According to the literature, international travel can provide pre-service teachers with understandings of learning a new language and culture that would allow them to be more likely to empathize with the ELs in their classroom. Why then was international travel not a significant factor for our participants?

One explanation of this finding relates to the nature of the survey instrument. That is, in the survey, we asked students to describe their international travel history as extensive, some, or none, and then list what countries they have traveled to. Around 42.7 percent of respondents had some or no travel (with no scores higher than 3 on a scale of 0–5). However, the survey did not ask about the type of international travel they had. For example, did they go on a cruise? Did they study abroad as part of a class? Did they go on a tour with family? We believe that because we did not make this distinction on the survey, it is likely that most of the students surveyed had not been on a study abroad program, but instead had traveled for vacation purposes, which did not provide opportunities for students to interact with locals, experiment with learning a second language, and reflect on their experiences with professors trained in intercultural communication. We believe this is the case, because since the present study began, our faculty have created and implemented study abroad programs designed to encourage exactly this type of language study and discussion/reflection on study abroad experiences. In evaluations from these programs, students have explicitly pointed to the connection between their study abroad program and increased empathy for ELs, and their increased confidence and desire to work with these types of students.

These 3 + 1 travel programs (in which the students first take a 2-credit course in working with ELs and then engage in a 1-credit study abroad program on immigrant education in other countries) are now available at our institution for any elementary education student who completes the introductory EL course, and currently include a three-year rotation to the Netherlands, Italy, and/or the UK. In order to confirm our suspicion that well-designed study abroad programs will make a difference in levels of confidence of our pre-service teachers in working with ELs, we intend to conduct further research that specifies the type of international experience the students have, including qualitative data such as interviews that can help us understand the types of programs that would make a difference on the attitudes and confidence levels of our students and their work with ELs.

In general, pre-service teachers entering the teacher education program did not have high levels of confidence in their abilities to teach English learners. We contend that this is a positive entry point as it may indicate a willingness to learn and a motivation to explore teaching methods designed to accommodate the needs of English learners in the general classroom setting. Research has shown that the more interaction pre-service teachers have with ELs, the more confident they feel in working with them (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005), and our study confirms this finding. Teachers have reported that observing skilled teachers working successfully with ELs was one of the best formats for them to learn the necessary skills, and giving students opportunities to work in their practicums (and not just student teaching experiences) can add to the confidence levels that students feel about their ability to teach ELs. According to Banks et al. (2005), pre-service teachers should be given numerous opportunities to “get to know their students, what they care about, what languages they speak, and what customs and traditions are valued in their homes” (p. 265). This could include practicum experiences but should also include opportunities for students to spend time in their student communities. Moll and González (2004) advocate for a “funds-of-knowledge” approach, which is based on ethnographic methods that include visits to student homes for the purpose of developing a rapport with family members and documenting their knowledge and social capital so they can incorporate these resources into the classroom. Whatever their field experiences are with ELs, these experiences gain much more value if accompanied by opportunities for students to “reflect on and challenge the initial assumptions they carry with them into the field” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 265).

In addition, field experiences of working with ELs must not be carried out as a standalone program but should be part of a holistic program that centers on recognizing and valuing diversity, equity, and social justice (Banks et al., 2005). Thus, teacher education programs that go beyond just providing educational content and pedagogical knowledge to providing ample field experiences with ELs better prepare teacher candidates for today’s classrooms.

Conclusion

The quantitative data from this study has revealed that pre-service teachers' attitudes in working with ELs at the beginning of their teacher education program correlate with their self-reported second language proficiency and experiences working with ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students. Although confidence levels did not correlate with these same variables, we learned that confidence levels in working with ELs were low. We also learned that pre-service teachers need to understand the fundamental principles regarding how children learn second languages, effective research-based instructional practices, and how cultural factors impact ELs' schooling experience while examining their own beliefs about ELs in the future classrooms. Culturally responsive teacher preparation programs should include dedicated coursework, practicum experience, embedded practices in all method classes and assessment of student capacity to teach ELs in the schools. In addition, because proficiency in a second language was a large factor in the confidence and attitudes of the students at the beginning of their programs, we recommend that more teacher education programs seriously reconsider the foreign language requirements for pre-service teachers and create more possibilities for students to learn a language in the country/ies where they are spoken so that they may gain experiences similar to what English learners go through.

In addition, teacher preparation programs need to include field experiences with ELs. These field experiences can improve confidence in working with ELs because they provide a context where pre-service teachers can interact and engage with these students which will aid them in understanding how they can teach ELs more effectively. Although international travel experiences were not a factor in how confident pre-service teachers are in working with ELs at the beginning of their program, they have been shown to effect teacher candidates' abilities to work with these students indirectly because study abroad opportunities can allow for students to gain proficiency in a second language, which was one of the factors that did influence the attitudes of the pre-service teachers. Thus, this research study is important for teacher preparation institutions to realize that students are not coming into their programs with high levels of confidence in working with ELs, and that in order to address this, teacher preparation programs should look at re-designing their programs to include more opportunities for second language study as well as interaction with ELs.

One limitation of the study is that we suspect that some of the results may be due to subjective self-evaluation of foreign language, diversity, and international experiences. In addition, the quantitative data did not allow us to see differences in the types of experiences the students had with diverse populations or with international travel. We recommend more qualitative studies in the future that would allow for a greater understanding of the types of international experiences that might affect teacher confidence and attitudes.

Also, since our participants were 89 percent female, 96 percent White, and 99 percent native speakers of English, a more detailed measure with a more diverse group of pre-service teachers may yield very different results.

Currently, we are continuing to explore pre-service teachers' beliefs toward educating English learners. Future research topics include: students' use of their native language, educational comparison in study abroad experiences, exploring English learning families, and the impacts of our teacher preparation program.

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