# Developing Adult Learners in a Preservice Teacher Learning Community

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A preservice teacher learning community at California Polytechnic University was created to guide adult learners in being able to effectively teach diverse learners. From the spring quarter of 2008 to 2009, these preservice teachers engaged in working with each other to write their own lesson plans and teach mathematics and literacy to English Language Learners. The findings from this study revealed that the learning community assumed an essential role in the development of these adult learners in the following areas: gaining multiple perspectives from their peers in exploring possible solutions, building strong relationships with their peers and students as the bases of their learning, and challenging their own assumptions about teaching English Language Learners.

## Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects of guiding adult learners in preservice programs is preparing them to teach diverse populations, especially English Language Learners (Brisk, 2007; Hollins, 2008; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Valdes, Bunch, Snow, Lee & Matos, 2005; Walqui, 2008). The Hispanic and English Language Learner (ELL) populations occupy approximately 50% and 25% respectively of California's student population (State of California Education Profile, 2010); consequently, the need to address how to successfully teach these students and other diverse populations has become one of the central foci of teacher education programs. This is evidenced by the Teaching Performance Expectations developed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. The urgency in preparing preservice teachers to teach diverse populations is heightened by Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) who stated that a major challenge facing teacher education today is the preparation of teachers who can teach diverse populations, those students who come from different cultural, language, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Their assertion stems from the alarming lack of achievement in mathematics and reading, especially among ethnic minority students nationwide. For example, in the United States, while 51% of White fourth-graders scored at or above the proficient level, only 15% of African American, 22% of Hispanic, and 26% of Native-American students reached such level in mathematics. Similarly in reading, while 42% of

White fourth-graders scored at or above the proficient level, only 14% of African American, 17% of Hispanic, and 20% of Native-American students scored at the same level (NCES, 2007).

In order to respond to these urgent needs, a preservice teacher learning community was conceived by the author at a university in California to facilitate and guide adult learners in their learning to be able to effectively teach diverse learners.  The idea of creating such a learning community is based on Hollins' (2006) assertion that:

> To truly improve teaching, urban schools need to transform their culture of practice from one that assumes that barriers to learning reside in the students to one that expects teachers to collectively assume responsibility for making sure all students learn (p.48).

Moreover, according to Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001), cultivating a teacher learning community promotes opportunities for teacher and student learning by enabling teachers to work together toward a common goal.

During the spring quarter of 2008, the first preservice teacher learning community consisting of ten adult learners was initiated in preparation for a summer program to tutor 20 low-performing 6th grade ELLs. One of the main features included a structured weekly forum to discuss literature on teaching diverse learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Gardner, 1983; Hollins, 2008; Moses & Cobb, 2001; The National council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2005). These preservice teachers then applied what they learned in the literature to create lesson plans that tapped into multisensory methods such as Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile (VAKT) methods (Rose & Zirkel, 2007). In addition to the whole group learning community, these adult learners were assigned a partner with whom they would collaborate. After weekly meetings, they participated on the electronic discussion board to post their reflections and to reply to others' reflections. At the heart of this learning community was Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which stressed that social group learning and peer collaborations are useful, as teachers and students alike construct knowledge in a social environment. Grossman et al. (2001) gave three reasons for creating such teacher learning communities: (a) intellectual renewal, (b) a venue for new learning, and (c) a venue for cultivating leadership. They claimed that creating such learning communities could provide opportunities to reinvigorate teachers' energy and acquisition of new knowledge, which are essential components in teachers' professional development. In short, the goal of creating a learning community among preservice teachers was to provide multiple venues for these adult learners, as they made sense of their learning and as they developed into reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1990) even before obtaining their teaching credentials.

During the summer quarter of 2008, the intensive daily tutoring program took place. Monday through Thursday these preservice teachers taught

mathematics and literacy to 6th grade ELLs, who were identified by their principal to be the lowest performers in this particular grade. At the end of every day, these preservice teachers participated in a daily 30-minute debriefing session led by the lead teacher and the researcher. At these debriefings, they were able to discuss any issues that they encountered that day and plan for the next sessions. As a follow-up, at the end of the day, they tapped into the on-line discussion board at home. This provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their teaching and experiences with students. They often raised questions and concerns, as they grappled with issues such as student behavior problems and disengagement. Using this asynchronic device, they stepped in to respond to each other's discussion board entries and posed questions and offered responses. Moreover, each two-member team spent time together to work on their lesson plans for the upcoming days and week. In addition, those preservice teachers who were able to attend a workshop every Friday for three hours gathered together to prepare for the following weeks. During this time, they shaped the curriculum based on the California Math Standards and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Math Standards. Along with the guidance of the math lead teacher and their partners, they continued to create innovative daily lesson plans that focused on such fundamental concepts as multiplications, divisions, fractions, and equations. At the same time, the team utilized multisensory teaching methods in order to address different learning styles (Rose & Zirkel, 2007). At least half of their teaching took place outside the classroom to learn kinesthetically. For example, students drew the number line with chalk on the playground and they also practiced multiplication problems while throwing a ball to each other. In addition, the other half of the class time took place inside the classroom with visual and tactile activities, deliberately avoiding a traditional "lecture" style. The tutoring program continued into the 2008–2009 academic year as an after-school program on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, keeping the same 30-minute debriefing sessions and weekly Friday workshops.

## Review of the Literature

An emerging body of literature has supported the significance of creating teacher learning communities (Beers & Davidson, 2009; Grossman, et al, 2001; Hollins, 2006; Loughran et al. 2009). In their seminal study, Grossman et al. (2001) described a key rationale for teacher learning communities as entities which provide "an ongoing venue for teacher learning" (p. 947). As they examined 22 high school teachers in Washington over a period of two and half years, Grossman et al. identified four distinct markers of teacher learning communities: (a) formation of group identity and norms of interaction (i.e. a sense of communal responsibility for the regulation of norms and behavior), (b) navigating fault lines (i.e. acknowledging differences), (c) negotiating the essential tension (i.e. realizing the interrelationship of teacher and student learning); and (d) communal responsibil-

ity for individual growth (i.e. willingness of its members to assume responsibility for colleagues' growth and development). Teacher learning communities thus encouraged individual voices and different perspectives to be heard and respected, as the underlying premise of such communities rest with the assertion that "the wisdom of the collective exceeds the wisdom of any one individual" (p. 1000).

Hollins' study (2006) also pointed to the need for a learning community in which inservice teachers regularly collaborate as part of their professional development that leads to transforming practice in low-income, urban schools. Through the collaborative project between a university and public schools in Dayton, Ohio, inservice teachers participated in weekly meetings with their peers to discuss their successes and challenges surrounding the improvement of student literacy. Hollins found that initially, teachers tended to focus on students as problems. However, as time progressed, the teachers began to take responsibility for their student learning as they focused on their own teaching practices. Hollins concluded that when teachers participated in structured dialogue with one another as a learning community for a sustained period of time, it not only resulted in improved student achievement, but also resulted in "greater collaboration, increased trust in their peers, and a greater sense of responsibility for their struggling students" (p. 48).

In a more recent study, Beers and Davidson (2009) found that when a learning community was implemented in combination with a mathematics content course and methods course at their university's teacher preparation program, the preservice teachers' confidence and competence increased for teaching elementary school mathematics. In addition, their ability to learn mathematics independently was strengthened. Finally, Loughran et al. (2009) reported their findings of teachers' learning from their participation in a professional learning community. Seventy-five teachers who were responsible for leading professional learning in their school sites participated in a four-day structured program over a year and in small peer support research networks of seven to ten teachers between these meetings. These teachers met and supported each other, exploring issues, concerns, and dilemmas in their own practice by documenting their professional learning through case writing. At the completion of the program, twelve participants were interviewed about their experience in the program. Loughran et al. found that based on the interviews, the most significant perceived value of this learning community was "learning through sharing with like-minded people and colleagues in similar roles" (p. 7). They concluded that through this type of a program, these teachers were able to strengthen the knowledge they already possessed or learned by corroborating with other teachers, enhancing their skills and knowledge to a higher and deeper level.

Central to the idea of a teacher learning community was the Social Constructivist model of learning by Vygotsky, which emerged as an essential theoretical underpinning of the project (Vygotsky, 1978). According to

Schunk (2004), Social Constructivist views such as Vygotsky's stress that social group learning and peer collaborations are useful, as teachers and students alike construct knowledge in a social environment. One of the hallmarks of Vygotsky's theory, which is different from other Constructivist theories, is the critical importance of social interactions where knowledge is constructed between two or more people (Schunk, 2004).

Knowledge is not constructed in a vacuum but is constructed in a dynamic social environment while interacting with their peers and/or adults. Based on this notion, the project was structured with a strong focus on a social environment in which the preservice teachers supported each other and reflected on their teaching experiences daily after teaching at a debriefing session, on-line discussion board, and weekly Friday workshop. The lead teacher and researcher stepped in as necessary to guide them, as they grappled with their peers' questions. In this way, Social Constructivism provided the solid foundation in creating the preservice teacher learning community, a forum to construct knowledge with their peers, and the guidance by the more knowledgeable others (i.e. lead teacher and researcher).

# Method

## *Setting*
In order to provide access to the preservice teachers, the majority of the training and meetings took place at a university in California. In addition, the teaching during the summer quarter of 2008 and the after school program throughout the academic year 2008–2009 took place at a low-performing middle school in the suburb of Los Angeles where 85% of the students were Hispanic, 47% were ELLs, and 79% were socio-economically disadvantaged. The middle school site was identified (a) based on the needs of the school, (b) the principal's willingness to participate in the program and (c) the school's status as the Program Improvement school in its fifth year under the No Child Left Behind Act.

## Participants
The project started out with ten preservice teachers, seven female and three male, who were all taking teacher education pre-requisite courses from the researcher in the fall quarter of 2007 and/or the winter quarter of 2008. They were selected by the researcher based on their willingness to rethink their teaching and their willingness to an intensive three-month training program and an eight-week summer school teaching program. Of the ten, five were Hispanic, three were Asian, and two were White. Since five left at the end of summer (two took positions as full-time paid intern teachers; one began her student teaching full time; and two had schedule conflicts), adjustments were made to add one new member in the fall quarter of 2008 and two in the winter quarter of 2009 while one continuing member left after the fall quarter of 2008. As a result, there was a total of seven preservice

teachers in the spring quarter of 2009. It is important to note that for the spring quarter of 2009, in order to promote the sustainability of the program, the researcher decided to create a leadership team in which the most committed preservice teachers were identified to take a leadership role in planning the tutoring sessions and Friday workshops, creating lesson plans, and so forth.

The researcher asked the middle school principal to identify the lowest performers among 6th grade ELLs going into 7th grade. Thirteen were girls and seven were boys. The criteria for the selection included: near-failing or failing math grades, "below proficiency" or "far below proficiency" on the California Standardized Tests and the district-wide math and English tests. As it turned out, 12 out of the 20 students actually failed in math in the previous academic year. During the summer quarter of 2008, most of them participated in the tutoring program consistently with occasional absences. However, after the summer quarter in the 2008–2009 academic year, as the tutoring program became a voluntary after-school program, some of them stopped participating due to competing extra curricular activities and peer pressure.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the large volume of data collected from the spring quarter of 2008 to the spring quarter of 2009, this article focuses primarily on the overall number of discussion board entries during these 16 months as well as the exit surveys that were conducted at the end of the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009. First, quantitative data included the number of on-line discussion board entries that the preservice teachers posted on the daily basis, including the responses made to each other's entries. Guiding questions to facilitate their reflections were given for the summer quarter of 2008, the winter quarter of 2009, and the spring quarter of 2009. No guiding questions were given for the spring quarter of 2008 and the fall quarter of 2009 to allow for open-ended responses. These overall number of discussion board entries were indicative of the value of the learning community the preservice teachers held. In addition, an exit survey was administered twice: once at the end of the summer quarter of 2008 and once at the end of the spring quarter of 2009. All of the exit survey questions were identical except that there was one fewer question for the spring quarter of 2009. In particular, out of the 11 quantitative questions, four were examined.

Qualitative data included the three open-ended questions about the preservice teachers' overall experience of the project for both the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009. In particular, the qualitative section of the exit survey focused on the preservice teachers' opinions about the Friday workshops, the tutoring program, and challenges of teaching mathematics to ELLs. Due to the natural attrition of the participants as mentioned earlier, it should be recognized that the purpose of this paper

was not to show the exact match between the two survey results, but rather, to get a general indication of their growth and improvement in certain areas, which will be described in the next section.

Data were analyzed as follows. For the quantitative data on the discussion board entries, the numbers were added from each quarter to see the trajectory of the preservice teachers' growth in their participation. For the four quantitative questions in the exit surveys, the percentage of participants who responded to the questions with "strongly agree" (highest value) was calculated and compared between the surveys. In analyzing the qualitative data, which were the three open-ended questions about the preservice teachers' overall experience of the project, the researcher first read all of the responses to identify key concepts, which formed categories. This open-coding process enabled the researcher to identify the salient themes, which emerged from the categories. Finally, these themes were compared across responses and questions in order to understand how the preservice teachers constructed knowledge and overcame multiple challenges in teaching ELLs.

# Findings

## Quantitative Results

Despite some fluctuations in the numbers of preservice teachers that participated in this program from quarter to quarter, overall, there was a marked increase in the number of discussion board entries that the preservice teachers participated in from the spring quarter of 2008 to the spring quarter of 2009 (See Figure 1). All together, 135 different forums were created by the researcher during these 16 months in which the preservice teachers participated. They posted over 2700 entries, including their reflections and responses to each other's reflections. In the spring, summer, and fall quarters of 2008 and winter and spring quarters of 2009, there were 432, 447, 189, 465, and 1171 posts respectively recorded. The exponential growth in their discussion board entries from the spring quarter of 2008 to the spring quarter of 2009, from 432 to 1171 entries, clearly indicates that the preservice teachers went beyond the required numbers of one entry a day. For example, on some days, there were ten responses to one entry, giving their feedback and encouragement to their peer's reflection. They engaged in dialogue, exchanged ideas, and provided support for each other. In particular, the exponential increase in the spring quarter of 2009 seems to suggest that as time progressed, the relationship among the preservice teachers became deeper and more interactive. Especially with the creation of the leadership team in the spring quarter of 2009, the preservice teachers developed a close-knit community where they maximized their learning utilizing the electronic devices such as the discussion board.

The second quantitative data came from the exit survey with 11 questions, which was administered at the end of the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009 to all of the participating preservice teachers
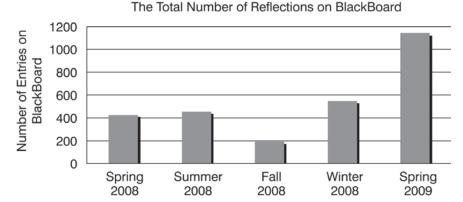
The Total Number of Reflections on BlackBoard



**Figure 1.** Total Number of Blackboard Discussion Board Reflections.

(See Appendix). For the purpose of this paper, responses to Question 1, 3, 4, and 9 are examined, since they were particularly relevant to teaching ELLs and preservice teacher growth in a learning community. First, while only 70% of the preservice teachers in the summer quarter of 2008 responded to Question 1 "I feel I learned more from working in a team in constructing knowledge" as "strongly agree," 100% of the preservice teachers in the spring quarter of 2009 responded to the same question as "strongly agree." While many challenging variables existed, such as changes in preservice teacher participants and a lack of regular attendance by the middle school students and their reluctance to participate in an after-school program, as the time passed, the preservice teachers seemed to value and rely more on their peers when working with challenging issues. Similarly, concerning the value of the Friday workshops related to teaching ELLs, there was a clear difference between the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009: Whereas 60% of the preservice teachers in the summer quarter of 2008 responded as "strongly agree," 85% of the preservice teachers in the spring quarter of 2009 responded to the same question as "strongly agree." This suggests that by participating in the Friday workshops on a regular basis with their peers, the preservice teachers were able to make sense of issues related to ELLs such as how to keep students engaged when they were not motivated to learn and how to help them succeed in their classes and on their tests. It became clear that the preservice teachers increasingly valued this type of a regular support system as they spent more time together. This is evidenced in Question 4 "I feel the Friday workshops were beneficial for me to teach this year's tutoring sessions" where 70% and 100% of the preservice teachers responded as "strongly agree" in the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009 respectively.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009 lies in the question on their confidence in teaching ELLs (Question 9: I feel more confident about how to teach ELLs). At both times, only about 70% of the preservice teachers stated as

"strongly agree," showing that the confidence level did not improve much over time. In spite of their high rating in the value of the Friday workshops related to teaching ELLs, the preservice teachers seemed to continue to struggle with a lack of confidence in teaching ELLs successfully. In order to get a better picture of this result, the next section on qualitative data includes the actual account of some of the preservice teachers' feelings about the challenges of teaching ELLs.

## Qualitative Results

This section focuses on the three qualitative questions about the project experience. The first question asked about the most beneficial and least beneficial aspects of the training/workshop sessions, respectively at the end of the summer quarter of 2008 and the spring quarter of 2009. The second question dealt with the most and least beneficial aspects of the tutoring program as a whole. The final question dealt with the greatest challenge in teaching math to ELLs. In the following sections, the most salient themes from the responses are explained.

*2008 spring training sessions and 2009 Friday workshops.* In describing the components of the benefits of the training sessions in the spring quarter of 2008, there were differing opinions among the preservice teachers. Some stated that collaboration and hearing others' points of view as most beneficial. Other preservice teachers mentioned creating lesson plans and acquiring new knowledge in math concepts and how to teach ELLs were helpful. On the other hand, four out of the seven preservice teachers mentioned working with the same partner or uncommitted partner as least beneficial. There seemed to have been some tension among the preservice teachers during the spring and summer quarters of 2008, as the learning community had just been created.

On the other hand, at the end of the spring quarter of 2009, regarding the Friday workshops, all of the seven preservice teachers unanimously pointed out the strength of collaborating or working with each other in whole and small groups as most important, as they explored different perspectives and approaches covering vast areas of teaching such as activity plans and behavioral problems. One preservice teacher reflected on his or her experience this way:

> The benefits from having Friday workshops are numerous. To start off, the feeling of collaboration was present in the workshops. I feel those collaborations are beneficial in order for us to grow as preservice teachers. I know that collaboration with our peers, the university, and the school site will help us be competent professional teachers in the future. But the chance to plan ahead with activities and to have feedback from our peers was also a great benefit because it allowed me to grow at a phenomenal rate.

Similarly, another preservice teacher wrote: "There are seven other people around you willing to help and give you their perspective on the matter. You learn how to approach a situation that you probably wouldn't have thought of on your own." In these and others' responses, it was evident that

these preservice teachers deeply valued working with their peers and getting feedback from each other on various issues of teaching. They seemed to be able to overcome many issues of teaching through their learning community, as they shared insights and offered support for one another.

When addressing the least beneficial aspects of the Friday workshops in the spring quarter of 2009, two preservice teachers wrote that there was not enough time to work out all of the problems. One preservice teacher additionally noted that at times there was a lack of communication, which made him/her feel left out. These two points indicated their desire to spend more time with their peers to work out various problems and the need for clear communication.

*Tutoring program.* From the summer quarter of 2008, most of the preservice teachers cited hands-on, real-life teaching experience as the most beneficial aspect of the tutoring program. Working with students occupied most of their focus rather than working with other teachers. When asked to identify the least beneficial aspect of the tutoring program, half of the group members identified their dissatisfaction with the unstructured and insufficient debriefing time or disagreement with other teachers.

In contrast, the most dominant theme that emerged from the question on the most beneficial aspects of the tutoring program from the spring quarter of 2009 was "relationships," relationships with students and with their peers. All of the preservice teachers except one stated that getting to know and working with their students were most beneficial. One preservice teacher stated that the students who had the most severe behavioral issues were the students he or she learned the most from. Similarly, another preservice teacher explained his or her perspective as follows:

> The most beneficial aspect of this year's tutoring program for me was the chance to gain more experience working with students. I feel that with experience and tutoring I have grown so much and as I reflect on this past year's experience, I hope to gain a better understanding of my teaching style.

There was only one preservice teacher who did not directly mention the relationship with students. Rather, he or she emphasized benefits of the discussion board and Friday workshops in which "the exchange of ideas and discussions really helped you think differently about approaching a certain situation (i.e. student's behavior, or helping the student understand a concept)." This seems to suggest the importance of the preservice teacher learning community as a platform to cope with issues related to teaching such as student behavioral problems and pedagogy. Providing and receiving constant support and feedback from multiple perspectives within such a community encourages preservice teachers to grapple with complex aspects of teaching with depth and open-mindedness.

In addition, one preservice teacher mentioned his or her growth in self-confidence as a result of participating in this program. This particular preservice teacher explained that he or she has more confidence in his or her classes as a result of participating in this program. Working in a small

group setting seemed to have provided a safe environment for the preservice teachers to experience more confidence and skills as a teacher. They were not afraid of making mistakes, as these preservice teachers were continuously supported by their peers, lead teacher, and the researcher in a non-threatening environment.

Finally, three preservice teachers cited the non-mandatory nature of the program, the drawing station, and a lack of communication as the least beneficial aspects of the tutoring program in the spring quarter of 2009.

*Challenges in teaching mathematics to English Language Learners.* Based on the survey from the summer quarter of 2008, eight out of ten preservice teachers identified language as the greatest challenge in teaching mathematics to ELLs. This includes teaching vocabulary, reading and writing, and the teacher not being able to speak Spanish with his or her students spoke. Other challenges included student behavior problems and lack of engagement.

On the same question given at the end of the spring quarter of 2009, keeping students engaged, adapting activity plans, talking with parents, and teaching mathematical concepts were among the main challenges mentioned. Out of the seven preservice teachers, four of them cited teaching mathematical terminology or vocabulary as the most challenging. They struggled with finding appropriate and modified math vocabulary for the students when explaining math concepts. One of the preservice teachers recounted his or her experience this way:

> I feel the greatest challenge teaching math to Second Language Learners was the fact that the students were honestly struggling with math. I felt as if their language barrier truly does impede them from learning the concepts they should be learning of their grade level. Because I feel they're of a disadvantage because of the school and their language, I felt a heavy burden of responsibility to teach them the math concepts they will need to succeed in their future.

As this response showed, this preservice teacher struggled not only in making mathematical concepts relevant and understandable by the ELLs, but he or she also struggled with finding the appropriate level of vocabulary in order to make concepts comprehensible at the current level of the ELLs. This dual task of both attending to teaching concepts and vocabulary for ELLs seemed to pose an enormous challenge to preservice teachers preparing to enter the field of teaching. While being expected to have deep content knowledge, preservice teachers must also be able to utilize appropriate vocabulary to teach essential concepts to ELLs. The following reflection further revealed how a preservice teacher has grappled to challenge his or her own assumptions about teaching ELLs:

> My biggest challenge was getting over my assumptions that these (or others as well) basic math concepts were easy to understand and that all of the students would understand what to do without even hesitating. I quickly learned, however, that my assumptions were wrong and that I need to start thinking about what we were doing in a different way. Instead of thinking that these concepts were easy, I started to think that mastering these basic math concepts was essential. The students needed to have a

better understanding about these concepts or else failure was the only other option. Once I started to think about teaching Second Language Learners this way, I started to see that it was important for me not to assume or make assumptions about anyone's ability. Instead I needed to work with students at their current level and use a hands-on approach when it came to teaching a concept, and how to make it relatable to the students.

In the course of examining his or her assumptions about ELLs, this particular preservice teacher's testimony made clear the importance of assessing ELLs' current level of mathematical concepts and English vocabulary before introducing new concepts and vocabulary. The fundamental problem lay in teacher assumptions that certain concepts and words were easy, thus overlooking the potential disconnect or gap ELLs experience in learning. This indicated that providing continuous scaffolding from the current level to the optimal or grade level was one of their greatest challenges in teaching ELLs.

Just as the literature supported the importance of scaffolding in teaching ELLs (Walqui, 2008; Lucas et al. 2008), these preservice teachers also grappled with meeting the needs of ELLs between what they know and what they should know at their grade level. The complexity of teaching ELLs while teaching abstract mathematical concepts probably helps explain why only 70% of the preservice teachers responded positively about their confidence in teaching ELLs on their surveys (Question 9).

## Limitations

As in any study, this particular study has its own limitations. The first limitation was the small sample size of participants. By the end of the spring quarter of 2009, there were only seven preservice teachers participating in the project. As such, it is difficult to generalize to a larger population. In addition, in a fast-paced program in which a teaching credential was designed to be completed within a year, it was a great challenge to keep the same preservice teachers in a program for more than one academic quarter. When comparing the two survey results and even the discussion board posts, the exact match across quarters was thus not possible. Finally, the researcher had built a close and trusting relationship with all of the participants since all of them took her class(es) previously. Because of this relationship between the researcher and the participants, it is possible that they felt more inclined to state their experiences positively on the surveys, influencing their responses and perceptions.

## Discussion

According to Grossman et al. (2001), participating in a teacher learning community promotes opportunities for teacher and student learning by enabling teachers to work together toward a common goal. In this case, the preservice teachers met every Friday for three hours in addition to debriefing time after each tutoring session to work toward their common goal of

helping English Language Learners: (a) creating effective lesson plans, (b) evaluating their teaching, (c) discussing student behavior, and (d) implementing proposed solutions. Comparing 70% at the end of the summer quarter of 2008 with 100% at the end of the spring quarter of 2009 regarding the benefit of working in a team (Question 1), it was evident that these preservice teachers initially focused more on specific aspects of teaching such as classroom management and content knowledge. However, by the end of the spring quarter of 2009, such issues as classroom management and content knowledge became encompassed in a much larger picture of a "community relationship" that took the central role and meaning for these preservice teachers' learning. They increasingly valued working with their peers. Looking back at the big picture of how this project was conceptualized and framed, Vygotsky's Social Constructivism seemed to have played a vital role and laid a solid foundation in fostering a learning community among preservice teachers in which relationships were at the core of their learning. They identified this community as a safe environment where they could freely make mistakes and explore different possibilities to solve a given problem. In essence, their collective wisdom exceeded the wisdom of any one preservice teacher (Grossman et al.).

Moreover, gaining multiple perspectives surfaced as another benefit of utilizing the teacher learning community. Grossman et al (2001) explained that a teacher learning community encouraged individual voices and different perspectives to be heard and respected. This was precisely what happened in this project: As a result of interacting with other preservice teachers, they not only heard one perspective, but multiple perspectives on a given issue from their peers. As one preservice teacher wrote, the Friday workshops and the discussion board helped him/her think differently about approaching a certain situation. Through multiple venues of learning such as on-line discussion board and face-to-face debriefing meetings and workshops, these preservice teachers had continuous access to support to raise questions and hear different perspectives on a given issue. This seemed to be one of the biggest strengths of this project.

Finally, the relationships between preservice teachers and their students emerged as one of the most salient themes. While some preservice teachers cited student behavior as challenges in teaching ELLs at the end of the summer quarter of 2008, by the end of the spring quarter of 2009, their focus was on building relationships with their students, no longer criticizing or blaming students for their misbehavior or disengagement. They honestly struggled and grappled with how to bring meaningful teaching to their students in a manner that they could understand. Their continuous effort to examine teaching from their students' lenses did not exist in the summer quarter of 2008, but it did in the spring quarter of 2009. This was evidenced by an example of a preservice teacher who stated that his or her biggest challenge was getting over his or her assumptions about the students. In this case, he or she challenged his or her own assumptions and shifted his or her way of thinking about ELLs from a deficit perspective to an additive per-

spective. Not making assumptions about students' ability, but working with their current academic level spoke loudly about this preservice teacher's dramatic shift in his or her thinking about teaching and students. This particular shift in the preservice teachers' thinking concurred with Hollins' study (2006), which described the transformation of their inservice teachers through their learning community from focusing on students as problems to focusing on their own teaching practices. The transformation in these adult learners was one of the most significant benefits of learning communities.

## Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, the findings from this study indicated that despite multiple challenges of teaching ELLs, the preservice teachers were still able to construct knowledge in their learning community, making sense of their questions, frustrations, and sometimes anger by turning to their peers within their learning community. In addition, when relationships were at the core of their learning, the preservice teachers were able to cope with the complexity of teaching concepts, classroom management, and student motivation, which are overwhelming for preservice and novice teachers. As Hollins (2006) and Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2010) asserted, a learning community is a powerful instrument for empowering teachers. This study furthermore confirmed that such a learning community is also a powerful instrument for empowering preservice teachers. The need to provide a support structure early in the teacher education programs for teacher candidates is apparent, especially as these programs aim to meet the needs of preparing teachers who can teach diverse populations. As Grossman et al. (2001) clearly stated:

> Of all the habits of mind modeled in schools, the habit of working to understand others, of striving to make sense of differences, of extending to others the assumption of good faith, of working toward the enlarged understanding of the group—in short, the pursuit of community—may be the most important (p.1000).

This clear focus on the preservice teacher community will continue to guide this project, as new members will continue to be added each quarter in order to impact the learning of diverse populations, especially ELLs.

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