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Increasing Literacy Rates among English Learners: The Impact of College Student Volunteers in the Classroom Post-Covid-19

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(Photograph. n.d. <https://Action.Mla.Org/Stories-Volunteering-for-Book-Lovers-a-Guide/>.)

Background:

Too many English Learners (EL) in California have low literacy rates. With around 20% of the student population being English Learners, where 82% speak Spanish and are of Hispanic descent, the prevalence of low literacy rates puts this community at a higher risk of poverty. Research shows that the majority of English Learners attend Title 1 districts, which suffer from limited funding, scarce resources, and underdeveloped curriculums for EL students.¹ As a result, EL faced greater technological challenges during Covid-19, with teachers being less prepared for online learning and struggling to find suitable accommodations.²

Can the participation of college student volunteers in K-12 classrooms improve literacy rates among EL?

Interviews with 7 college student volunteers (who tutored privately, as part of a class requirement, and as participants of College Corps) revealed that personalized support significantly improved ELs' reading, writing, and comprehension skills. Moreover, the peer-to-peer interaction led to unexpected positive

¹ The Disparate Impact of Covid-19 Remote Learning on English Learners in ..., accessed February 25, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/tesj.546>.

² Ibid.

spillover effects, where volunteers and EL students formed a “family-like” bond that increased English Learner’s academic confidence in the long-run.

The “Covid-19 Learning Slide”:

Covid-19 had devastating effects on many English Learners. In the 2020-21 academic year, only 11.31% of English learners met the English Language Arts (ELA) standard, down from 12.81% in 2018-19.³ Notably, 3rd graders experienced a decline, with only 16.81% meeting standards in 2021-22 compared to 18.43% in 2018-19.⁴ Similarly, 6th graders saw a drop, with only 9.09% meeting standards in 2021-22 compared to 9.50% in 2018-19.⁵ Meanwhile, 11th graders experienced no changes, with only 7.83% meeting ELA standards in both the 2018-19 and 2021-22 academic years.⁶

Studies show that students unable to read proficiently by third grade are more likely to drop out of school, earn lower wages, and have limited job opportunities in the long run.⁷ Without intervention, California's literacy rates will continue to decline. Currently, California is the least literate state in the U.S., with only 77% reading at a "mid-to-high" proficiency level, and "1 in 4 people over the age of 15 lack the skills to decipher the words in this sentence."⁸

College Student Volunteers in the Classrooms:

The college student volunteers interviewed tutored students from 3rd to 11th grade during the academic years 2019-2023, engaging with English Learners from diverse ethnic backgrounds who spoke various languages, such as Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin.

Activities:

Volunteers engaged in various activities that enhanced language skills, including interpreting pictures, silent reading, solving grammar puzzles, and reading out loud. Completing English assignments, summarizing main ideas, and working on grammar worksheets that focused on noun, verb, and adjective conjugations were also ways in which volunteers assisted EL students. In lower grade levels, activities like sing-alongs, additional reading time, and read-aloud exercises were adapted to assess progress.

Results:

Throughout their sessions, volunteers reported increases in reading, writing, and comprehension proficiency among EL students. One EL student's grammar exam score increased from 2/10 to an impressive 9/10. Others gained confidence in their oral skills, pronouncing words in English more confidently and improving word recognition. Additionally, EL students who attended a volunteer’s writing sessions achieved an 83% passing rate in their upcoming exams.

³ “English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments,” 2021–22 Smarter Balanced ELA and Mathematics Test Results at a Glance - CAASPP Reporting (CA Dept of Education), accessed February 3, 2023, <https://caaspp.ets.org/caaspp/DashViewReportSB?ps=true&lstTestYear=2022&lstTestType=B&lstGroup=4&lstSubGroup=6&lstGrade=13&lstSchoolType=B&lstCounty=00&lstDistrict=00000&lstSchool=0000000&lstFocus=a>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joe Hong, “Pandemic Catch up: What Will It Take for Left-behind Students to Learn to Read?” Cal Matters, December 19, 2022, <https://calmatters.org/education/k-12-education/2022/12/learning-loss-pandemic/>.

⁸ Karen D'Souza, “Update: California Has the Lowest Literacy Rate of Any State, Data Suggests,” EdSource (EdSource, March 2, 2022), <https://edsources.org/updates/california-has-the-lowest-literacy-rate-of-any-state-data-suggests#:~:text=Decades%20of%20underinvestment%20in%20schools,the%20words%20in%20this%20sentence.>

More surprising, volunteers used creative and out-of-the box strategies to engage with English Learners that fostered a personal bond between them and increased academic success. For instance, volunteers who couldn't speak the native language of ELs made efforts to learn their language to translate content, fostering a mutual learning experience between the volunteers and the English Learners. For younger ELs, volunteers utilized music and catchy hand gestures as effective tools to teach reading material and enhance word recognition. In older grade levels, volunteers incorporated the latest cultural trends into the classroom, making references to current shows, social media memes/trends, comics, and books that EL could discuss and engage with in English.

These efforts allowed volunteers to interact more personally and cater to each student's learning style. When one volunteer observed that her student found reading difficult and unenjoyable, she incorporated subjects they liked, such as Jazz and Harry Potter. Another began sessions with fun icebreakers that sparked conversation and made students feel comfortable. Another incentivized student engagement by bringing in snacks.

“Food is a great incentive...it makes them give an honest attempt at the work.”

- College Student Volunteer

The personal connections established by the volunteers, who became like "big sisters" or "big brothers" to the students, significantly boosted EL's confidence and academic excellence moving forward. EL's saw themselves in the volunteers, while the volunteers related to their experiences.

“I was able to just talk with them...I was there once, so I know what it feels like.”

- College Student Volunteer

Policy Recommendations: Investing in College Programs to Enhance Literacy Rates

To sustain and further increase literacy rates among English Learners in California, policymakers should continue to invest in college programs that encourage student volunteers in classrooms. Students who participated in College Corps found the stipend, structured working hours, and supportive staff beneficial to sustaining a healthy work-life balance given their college classes. Compared to students who were private or family tutors, programs like College Corps provided easier paths to connect with volunteer sites and engage with students who needed the most support.

Policymakers should therefore make volunteering sustainable and attainable for college students, by offering stipends, facilitating volunteering worksites, and providing strong support systems for volunteers.

“Fostering a culture of volunteerism and collaboration empowers us, enriches English Language Learner's lives, and helps improve literacy rates all around.”

- College Student Volunteer