

Sofia Perez

Honors Independent Study Abroad Reflection

Monday, November 8th

In July of 2021, I accepted a week-long substitute teaching position for summer school in Chesterfield County for 4th and 5th grade English Language Learners. When I first accepted the job, I did not know the full extent to which my responsibilities would be, but it ended up being a wonderful learning experience. For typical substitute positions, the lesson plans are pre-made as well as the schedule, but for this job, I was responsible for planning for the full day using the unit requirements as a guide. Essentially, I took on the role of a temporary teacher. I also had the responsibility of working with a high school student from a Spanish specialty center who was completing their summer immersion project.

I learned the most from both the planning component and from my interactions with the students socially. In planning, I spent a lot of time doing preliminary research regarding best practices for English Language Learners. The majority of what I found included these principles, “cultivate relationships and be culturally responsive, teach language skills across the curriculum, and differentiate” (Edutopia). I attempted to incorporate these into my lessons, from allowing students to complete themed mad-libs, create their own buildings from popsicle sticks, listen to stories, to acting in mini-plays. I tried to differentiate in everything I had the students do, and incorporate different methods of learning and teaching.

Something I noticed was that the students responded particularly positively when I asked them to teach me words in Spanish and tell me about their diverse cultures. Allowing the students to be the expert and educate me on something they know the most about building their

confidence and their comfortability around me. At first, many of them were timid, but the more I interacted with them at recess and lunch, the more they began to participate in class. This shows that making an effort to be actively interested in a person's culture and background builds relationships that allow authentic learning to occur. Acceptance is key for English Language Learners as they are new to the country.

The final thing I learned was the importance of being able to communicate with parents, and the constraints that come with many of them not speaking English in the case of English Language Learners. There was an instance in which 4 of the students missed their bus, and the translator for the school had already gone home. Calling the parents of those students was extremely difficult and stressful, as the students were too young to lead the conversation and the faculty present had limited Spanish speaking skills. In the end, we were able to get all of the students home safely, but the process was prolonged by the language barrier. I had never considered how scary it must be for both parents and children who speak little English to be in situations like that.

Overall, this experience was one that has taught me many skills that I can incorporate into my career as a teacher. I have an increased understanding of what ELL education looks like on a day-to-day basis and the constraints that come with it. The students understand more English than they are given credit for, even if they are unable to speak as much as they might like to. The main thing I noticed was that many of the students were timid and sometimes scared, which makes sense as they are in a new country that does not speak the same language that they do. The biggest thing adults that are responsible for these students can do is foster a welcoming environment, and show interest in the students' hobbies and cultural background.