

## Engaging High-Ability Students in Literacy: A University and Elementary School Transformational Partnership

*Denise K. Frazier*  
Purdue University Northwest

*The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine how a service learning literacy course impacted preservice teacher perceptions of intermediate-aged high-ability children in a mid-high poverty school, and how the educators in the partnering school viewed the experience. Pre- and post-experience responses from preservice teachers and open-ended survey responses from participating educators at the partnering school helped evaluate service learning and measure the impact of the partnership. Results indicated that, after the service learning program, preservice teachers better understood both the developmental literacy needs of intermediate students as well as how to lead a novel study while challenging and mentoring gifted students. Using engaging, diverse books with strong themes and rich vocabulary, the school received formerly lacking literacy curriculum and instruction for gifted children that seemed to contribute to improved student test scores and building a school community of readers. Connections between the university and school were established through email, texts, face-to-face interactions, and Google Docs. This led to a university and school partnership that was mutually beneficial because the program planning was intentional, developed by leaders of both entities, and continually assessed.*

### Introduction

Historically, teacher education involves preservice teachers (PSTs) becoming involved in some sort of experiential education (Dewey, 1938) to gain practical knowledge (Glazier, Bolick, & Stutts, 2017). One type of experiential education is service learning (Barnes, 2017), with partnerships between higher education and K-12 schools being the most popular form (Pickerel, 2003).

This study examined PSTs' perceptions of intermediate-aged gifted, or to use the terms interchangeably, high-ability (HA) students in a mid-poverty school while they led book studies as a component of a *Literacy in Grades 4-6* course. This lecture class was transformed into a service learning course as the instructor of the university course and school leaders (the principal and instructional coach) worked together to co-create a literacy curriculum to ensure both the school and university needs were met. For example, the school was lacking in literacy curriculum and instruction for their HA students, and the instructor sought to put literacy theory into practice by providing an experiential teaching experience. By involving the school community in university planning, open communication was established, joint ownership was created, and the purpose of service learning became self-evident. This collaboration was significantly different from traditional school field experiences, where PSTs may simply observe in a classroom, mainly benefitting only the university. It was important to gather the perceptions of school leaders and teachers to examine the impact of the service learning endeavor and reflect on ways to improve the experience for both the school and university.

## Partnership Goals and Benefits

Local Elementary School (LES) is a racially diverse K-6 school with 71.7% free/reduced meals. The school is led by a long-term principal and instructional coach who support the school's mission to promote academic integrity and excellence, including a culturally competent curriculum promoting a diverse learning experience. As a mid-poverty school (between 25-75% of students receiving free/reduced lunch) both financial and personnel resources are focused on academically struggling students. Therefore, LES was not providing any HA literacy curriculum or instruction to meet the learning needs of their HA students. Gifted students need academic challenges, just as struggling students need individualized help meeting their unique learning needs. If nothing else, all students must show academic growth on standardized tests, even those HA students who are already performing at or above grade level.

Along with providing HA curriculum and instruction, other school goals included using diverse books with strong themes and rich vocabulary that would be engaging for intermediate-aged HA students in order to align with the school's mission. The project also focused on strengthening vocabulary as this was shown to be an area of weakness for LES on a school assessment. Research from Hart and Risley (1995) found differences in vocabulary size varied considerably among socioeconomic groups so a focus on vocabulary development would support this school's students. Additionally, LES wanted to build a community of readers to promote literacy school wide. This benefitted a broader range of students, as HA students talked to their peers about books they were reading with the PSTs which encouraged more students to read. Finally, school leaders wanted their students to be mentored by university students to promote higher education. When LES students work with university preservice teachers, they may be more likely to see themselves as college students in the future.

Elementary education undergraduate majors take the course *Literacy in Grades 4-6* in the second semester of their junior year to learn how to employ teaching strategies to meet the literacy needs of intermediate-aged children. This course was recently updated to include a service learning component. The instructor's and the university's goal for the course was to provide a richer learning experience for PSTs, by immersing them in a school environment where relevant experience could be gained while working with intermediate-aged students as literacy theory was put into practice. A semester-long novel study assignment, where a book is read for both interpretation and enjoyment, was co-planned by the instructor, principal, and instructional coach at LES to provide an authentic teaching experience for PSTs. A Novel Study Checklist (see Appendix) was created by the instructor for PSTs to complete throughout the semester as they team taught and worked with LES students. The checklist includes items teachers should cover while instructing children on reading and interpreting novels. For example, children need to learn unknown vocabulary words in order to understand what they are reading. PSTs learn about research-based literacy strategies (i.e. how to teach vocabulary) from the university classroom, then immediately implement these strategies in novel studies with LES children.

LES had originally hosted one university early childhood course in 2012. Based on its success, the relationship slowly expanded over five years. The university officially partnered in 2017 with LES, resulting in the hosting of two early childhood courses, a reading interventions course, and the *Literacy in Grades 4-6* course during that year. As noted, the school and university engaged

in deliberate co-planning of the service learning experience, which led to mutual benefits for both entities, open communication, and frequent reflection and assessment.

Communication was very important in this partnership. Face-to-face meetings, emails, and text messages were utilized with the instructor, principal, and instructional coach. Google Docs were created to promote communication between preservice and classroom teachers, with access provided to the instructor, principal, and instructional coach. Weekly lesson plans including state standards, learning objectives, assessments, and activities were shared and all parties had editing privileges to allow for feedback and open communication. PSTs co-taught in small groups, then reflected on the experience through pre- and post-experience prompts as well as in a large group under the supervision of the instructor.

Fifteen PSTs were enrolled in the university literacy course. The class met once a week for three hours at LES. Traditional classroom instruction took place for the first hour, followed by 45 minutes of novel studies with LES HA fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students, followed by 15 minutes of whole-group reflection, and concluding with an additional hour of university classroom instruction. The instructor observed novel study groups weekly, immediately followed by PST group discussion and reflection concerning literacy course content and working with LES students. Throughout the semester, teaching groups met individually with the instructor to “check in” and address any small group concerns regarding novel studies, team work, students, and related assignments.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does a service learning component of a literacy course impact preservice teachers' perceptions of intermediate HA students?
2. How do elementary school leaders and cooperating teachers perceive the experience?

This case study was examined under the umbrella of experiential learning, broadly defined as learning which supports students while they apply their knowledge in real-world situations as the teacher directs and facilitates learning (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). Service learning is a form of experiential education where students participate in both service and reflection that intentionally focuses on both the benefit to the community and the learning of curricular knowledge (Garcia & Hallu, 2017; Tietjen, 2016). Specifically, in teacher education, service learning is an active pedagogy with assessment of instruction and learning in authentic environments that contribute to desired student learning outcomes (Steinberg, Bringle, & McGuire, 2013).

### **Review of the Literature**

Authentic service learning should include a reciprocal relationship where a community need is met, there is an integration of academic content and the service learning experience, and ongoing reflection occurs to connect content and personal growth (Novak, Murray, Scheuermann, and Curran, 2009).

Service learning happens in a variety of university courses, but in teacher education it is especially pertinent as it provides PSTs the opportunity to construct meaning in an authentic learning experience while engaging in a service activity (Baker & Murray, 2011). It is more than simply providing a service, as course learning objectives and the service must be related (Gonsier-Gerdin & Royce-Davis, 2005). Reflection, a key component of both service learning and teaching in general, is utilized as educators ponder the impact of lessons and learning (Gonsier-Gerdin & Royce-Davis, 2005) and consider the contribution of the service activity to their professional development. Service learning integration, most notably in teacher education, has continued to increase over the past 20 years (Blodgett, 2017), yet school districts are hesitant to create partnerships as they often feel universities “use” schools to train teachers (Pickeral, 2003), and fail to benefit host schools (Furco, 1996). Still, these experiences are key in preparing teachers outside of college and university classrooms as PSTs need clinical practice and exposure to the pedagogy of experienced teachers (Zeichner, 2006). Service learning is effective in applying course content while promoting both personal and professional growth for future teachers (Bartolome, 2013).

Partnership opportunities with area schools are especially important when supporting PSTs as they learn the best practices to teach reading. Practical knowledge is needed to teach in the literacy area (Hartocollis, 2005). Reading is important for all elementary children. Yet students in grades 4, 5, and 6 are oftentimes overlooked, as older students are generally beyond learning to read and instead are reading to learn through more nonfiction or informational texts (Chall, 1983) in the content areas of social studies and science (Cecil, Gipe, & Merrill, 2014). Upper elementary children can benefit from university/school partnerships when they receive one-on-one or small group instruction.

Intermediate-aged (9-12 years) students are unique in their development and learning. These students tend to be enthusiastic and are able to examine ideas critically, at a much higher level than most primary-aged children are able. They need to build reading skills such as vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, as state standards require them to think critically by examining ties between fiction and informational texts and making connections to reading and writing. Many developmental changes—physical, emotional, and intellectual—impacting students’ literacy needs are occurring at this time as well. These changes reinforce the importance of peers, social learning, and student voice and choice, which are unique aspects of children in this age group (Cecil et al., 2014). For example, children may go from enjoying reading to not, based on what their peers think, or they may or may not enjoy particular books based on maturity level. Research indicates students are more likely to read a book recommended by a peer than by a teacher (Wagstaff, 2014). This can be especially true with HA students.

High-ability students, especially in mid or high-poverty schools, are often underserved as strained financial and personnel resources supplement underperforming students instead (DeLacy, 2004). This contributes to HA student neglect and underperformance as they fail to be challenged. However, school finances may not be the sole reason. How to differentiate instruction for gifted students is frequently left out of teacher preparation programs (Chamberlin & Moore, 2006). This lack of information may lead to the strengthening of preconceived notions; one study found the majority of PSTs believed gifted students would be successful if left alone in the classroom and thought gifted education was elitist (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Sager-Brown,

2007). However, by combining university classroom discussions on gifted education with actual experiences with HA students, future teachers will be better prepared to meet the unique academic and socio-emotional needs of the gifted student, such as anxiety, perfectionism, stress, and issues with peers (Bangel, Enersen, Capobianco, and Moon, 2006; Galbraith & Delisle, 2015). Beyond these challenges, HA students in poverty may also face socio-emotional instability such as poor school performance and behavior issues which can be negated with strong, secure relationships (Jensen, 2016). PSTs also, then, need to understand the importance of building positive relationships with students.

As relationships strengthen through service learning, PSTs become emotionally invested in the children and seek knowledge to better serve them (Griffith & Zhang, 2013). These service learning experiences need to be carefully planned, monitored, and integrated with the rest of the teacher education program to ensure a quality experience (Darling-Hammond, 2000). This involves teacher educators being present to make connections between university coursework and school placements. Michael et al. (2018) lists ways (as cited in Zeichner, 2006, p. 336) to optimize school partnerships, including embracing school communities as full partners and situating teacher instruction in specific teaching contexts to ensure quality service learning experiences.

There are many benefits to university/school partnerships. For example, when university students are satisfied with the service learning experience, they demonstrate more academic persistence and success (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Universities benefit from finding a community partner that recognizes the aspects of successful collaborations including open communication, a shared mission, and a balance of power, so they can better prepare their students for future employment (Jacoby, 2003). Such a framework ensures both parties have a voice in the partnership. This moves beyond traditional school fieldwork to a focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996).

Closeness between community partners can range on a continuum from unaware to transformational. The range of closeness between the community partner and university considers several items, including the frequency of interaction between the two entities and the influence on each other. In order for a mutually beneficial partnership to be transformational, the qualities of closeness, equity, and integrity must be examined (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009; Enos & Morton, 2003). The closer the relationship, the greater equity and integrity, with transformational partnerships having the greatest degree of all three (Bringle et al., 2009). Both LES and the university in this case study hoped to create a transformational partnership.

### **Methodology**

This case study (Yin, 2003) took place from August 2017 to December 2017. Instructor observations, qualitative data collection, and *Qualtrics* data were gathered to evaluate service learning and to measure the impact of the partnership. Data were collected and reported to determine whether service learning was perceived to be valuable for all stakeholders—the university, PSTs, HA children, and LES.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Two participant groups provided data for this study: PSTs and LES educators.

**PSTs.** PSTs responded to open-ended questions, also referred to as pre- and post- experience questions. The first prompts were given in August 2017 at the start of the *Literacy in Grades 4-6* course, which was prior to the service learning experience at LES. The pre-experience questions were written by the instructor to gauge previous experience and knowledge regarding children in grades 4-6, intermediate literacy, gifted education, and service learning. The post-experience questions were completed in December 2017 at the end of the semester and after novel studies were finished, to assess both knowledge gained as well as changes in perceptions of children in grades 4-6, intermediate literacy, gifted education and service learning. PSTs were aware they were part of an IRB-approved study and their participation was optional; all chose to participate.

The qualitative data from pre- and post-experience questions were gathered and analyzed for themes (Creswell, 2014). To add interrater reliability, two researchers coded the responses to allow for emergent themes. Group discussion happened weekly following each novel study session with the instructor taking field notes both during and after discussion. This data is not included, as it focused on teaching-related topics and was not relevant to this study. The instructor also observed every group each week throughout the semester for 5-10 minutes with observations focusing on literacy teaching methods. All PSTs completed the pre- and post-experience questions and participated in the group discussions.

**LES educators.** A *Qualtrics*-designed LES survey consisting of five open-ended items was sent to the principal, instructional coach, and the five participating fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers in December 2017. The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback from LES educators in order to assess the impact of the partnership and the service learning endeavor and to look for ways to improve. Only the principal and instructional coach had been involved in planning related to the partnership, though the classroom teachers had input in book selections, so it was important to gather data from all stakeholders. A survey was chosen for ease of completion by the educators; however, only three of the seven LES educators completed the survey. This data was also analyzed for themes (Creswell, 2014).

## Literacy Materials

The fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers worked with the instructional coach to determine student participants. A total of 29 LES students participated: ten fourth graders, eleven fifth graders, and eight sixth graders; these students were recommended to the instructional coach by the classroom teachers.

Book suggestions were requested from these participating teachers. The university instructor discussed a range of books with school leaders, sharing with LES educators a variety of current texts with demanding vocabulary that were challenging for intermediate-aged HA students, and the final candidates were approved by the classroom teachers. As the instructor gave book talks on each novel, school educators determined whether they thought the text would be engaging for their participating students. School educators know their students, so they could predict what

story lines would be most appealing to their students. For example, books by Christopher Paul Curtis were discussed for the fifth grade, but it was determined to eliminate those because one teacher already used his books in her classroom. Instead, *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012) was chosen; school leaders liked the variety of characters and that each chapter was told from a different point of view, as well as the theme of “choose kind.” They believed the students would enjoy the story about a character who looked different on the outside, which might prompt anti-bullying discussions. Additionally, the movie was set to be released that semester, and they believed that would motivate the students to read. The following novels were chosen: *Save Me a Seat* by Sarah Weeks for fourth grade, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio for fifth grade, and *Rules* by Cynthia Lord for sixth grade. All books included rich vocabulary and racially diverse characters who had to overcome adversity, along with common themes of anti-bullying and treating others with kindness. The school had grant money available to purchase the books. Providing books for both LES students and university PSTs demonstrated additional support of the partnership and the service learning endeavor on the part of LES.

**Results**

**Pre-service Teacher Perceptions of HA Students: Pre-experience Responses**

Examination of the pre-experience responses revealed that few PSTs (20%) had any educational experience working with fourth, fifth, or sixth grade children, and no one had worked with gifted, or HA, students. The pre-experience prompts regarding previous knowledge or experience touched on areas including children in grades 4-6, intermediate literacy, gifted education, and service learning. Table 1 lists the pre-experience prompts and the related subject area.

Table 1  
*Pre-experience Prompts*

Pre-Experience Prompts	Subject Matter
Prompt 1: Detail what you expect to see when working with fourth, fifth, or sixth grade students in this literacy course this semester.	Children in Grades 4-6
Prompt 2: Explain what you know about novel studies.	Intermediate Literacy
Prompt 3: List characteristics you expect high ability students to exhibit.	Gifted Education
Prompt 4: What types of activities do you anticipate being the most engaging for high-ability intermediate-aged students?	Gifted Education
Prompt 5: What will be your role this semester in working with the LES students?	Service Learning
Prompt 6: What do you expect to take away from this experience?	Service Learning
Prompt 7: What do you expect to give or contribute to this experience?	Service Learning

This group of PSTs had worked with kindergarten, first, second, and third grade students during the previous semester. When asked to rank their teaching preferences, all but two students, who preferred sixth grade, asked to teach fourth grade.

Responding to the first pre-experience prompt regarding working with intermediate-aged students, PST responses indicated apprehension, since this was a new teaching experience. Expectations and concerns included student behavior issues such as “challenging the rules,” “attitude from students,” and concerns that HA students would act like they “know it all.” Additional responses were more positive as PSTs anticipated older students’ ability to read fluently and participate in deep conversation and in-depth projects. Other responses referenced “reading to learn,” in contrast to the K-3 literacy of learning to read, and the varying reading levels of LES participants. In other words, although the children were HA, PSTs anticipated different levels of reading ability among the students. Overall, they anticipated a wide variety of academic skills and concerns regarding student behavior.

The second prompt asked about knowledge of intermediate literacy in the form of novel studies. PSTs were not able to describe novel studies; the majority answered that they did not know what novel studies were. Vague answers such as “like a book group” were mentioned three times.

Prompts 3 and 4 were in regards to gifted education. Participants overall perceived HA students positively and appropriately. This perception emerged via adjectives such as curious, skilled, independent, confident, and helpful. Only one PST mentioned “cockiness,” perceived by the researchers as a negative trait. “Bored with grade-level work” was also mentioned, which is not uncommon for HA children who need to be challenged (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). Although they had no direct experience with HA students, PSTs had accurate general knowledge of how to work with HA students. They were able to provide descriptions of what they thought engaging school work should be for their future students (creative, challenging, hands-on, choice, group work, discussions, and higher-order thinking activities), which corresponded to the needs for choice and social learning for intermediate-aged children. However, specific engaging activities, such as fishbowl discussion, were not mentioned.

Responses to the service learning prompts focused on teaching literacy, with no mention of building positive student relationships to meet social-emotional needs, an important part of both teaching and service learning within the context of school communities (Jensen, 2016). Two PSTs mentioned developing a love for reading, but the other responses focused on the literacy role:

My role will switch. I might be a cheerleader to encourage book reading, or a librarian who can point out new books to try.

Assisting them in their reading and writing.

With older kids, I think it will be more of a supervising/scaffolding role.



**Pre-service Teacher Perceptions of HA Students: Post-experience Responses**

Possible changes in PST perceptions following the service learning experience and the *Literacy in Grades 4-6* course were also examined. The post-experience prompts for PSTs were generally the same as the pre-experience questions and are found in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Post-experience Prompts*

Post-Experience Prompts	Subject Matter
Prompt 1: How did your expectations of working with fourth, fifth, or sixth grade students in this literacy course change (if any) throughout this semester?	Children in Grades 4-6
Prompt 2: Explain what you know about novel studies.	Intermediate Literacy
Prompt 3: List characteristics of high ability students.	Gifted Education
Prompt 4: What types of activities, or specific activities, did your students find most engaging?	Gifted Education
Prompt 5: What was your role this semester in working with the LES students?	Service Learning
Prompt 6: What did you take away from this experience?	Service Learning
Prompt 7: What did you contribute to this experience?	Service Learning

In response to post-experience prompt 1, prior to working with intermediate-aged LES students, PSTs anticipated behavior issues. Yet after working with the children, no one mentioned negative behaviors. One PST responded:

I was really hesitant to work with any grade over third because they’re older and bigger, generally. But after the first few meet-ups with them I started to really connect, and realized they are still children, just a little bit older and bigger. So throughout the semester I learned to really enjoy how much easier it is to relate/connect to older students.

PSTs overall had positive perceptions of these upper elementary children as fun, independent, and creative thinkers who enjoyed challenges. One respondent stated, “My thoughts are different—I now want to work with older students,” and, “I wasn’t sure at first, but if given the opportunity, I would work with this age group again.” One student wondered if the lack of behavior issues was due to working with the high-ability population. Overall, the PSTs found it easier to work with this age group once they had experienced working with older children.

For prompt 2, there was a major change regarding novel study knowledge. Pre-experience responses were vague. Post-experience responses showed that all PSTs were able to explain some components of novel studies. They had become quite familiar with the Novel Study

Checklist, as they had to complete it weekly for the course and incorporate similar information in Google Docs for LES educators. They now understood the many aspects of literacy such as fluency, comprehension, and writing, and how those elements of literature can be taught with engaging activities using a high-quality novel. By leading a novel study with the LES children, PSTs gained deeper and wider knowledge of how to teach novels to intermediate-aged students.

Post-experience feedback in prompts 3 and 4 regarding gifted education was similar to the earlier responses yet richer following the service learning experience. For example, although earlier responses were general yet appropriate (i.e., HA students would be “skilled”), post-experience responses included detailed characteristics of HA students such as, competitive, skeptical, motivated, and hard on themselves. One PST stated, “HA students often become bored with current material and finish work at a quicker pace than other students. They need activities that expand the current topic and challenge the student to make more and broader connections.” By working directly with students, PSTs went beyond textbook answers and listed memorable attributes of the students they taught.

Post-experience, PSTs were able to name a variety of challenging and engaging activities HA students favored as the PSTs had planned, facilitated, and reflected on lessons taught. Responses included general activities such as small group work, discussion, and competitive games, but they also mentioned specific activities such as a nonfiction read aloud and Jeopardy. Eight of the PSTs specifically mentioned the culminating activity as the most engaging activity. This was the final activity of novel studies, meant to develop organically as student interests were revealed throughout the semester. PSTs acted as facilitators of a variety of activities, such as a competitive Jeopardy game between two groups that read *Save Me a Seat*, an anti-bullying skit written and performed by sixth grade students who had read *Rules*, and creative, positive “choose kind” posters displayed throughout the school to support the theme of *Wonder*. PST comments included, “I think our culminating activity was most engaging. It allowed for a lot of choice and creativity which my students loved.” Another wrote “The last activity was engaging and demanding. They (LES students) picked what they wanted to do and made [wrote] the dialogue.”

The final three questions regarded service learning. Prior to their experience, responses focused on resources for reading skills and knowledge of literature. In post-experience responses, PSTs perceived their contributions as serving as positive role models while providing challenging curriculum and quality instruction which contributed to a community of readers. For example, one wrote, “My role was to help build community. The students I worked with learned how to accept one another and reflect the positive attitude toward the public, family, and the school.” Another PST saw her role as “a mentor, and someone who encouraged students to think about what they were reading and how it applies to their lives.” Four PSTs used the term “facilitate” instead of “teach” to allude to students building their own knowledge, in contrast to teachers simply providing it.

Responses from the pre-experience prompts indicated PSTs generally anticipated gaining confidence in their ability to teach literacy. In their post-experience responses, they discussed the ability to differentiate their future classroom instruction by meeting the needs of their HA students (i.e., by challenging them, not simply giving them more work), but they also elaborated on their role. By working directly with students, they grasped literacy teaching skills but also

saw the importance of planning engaging and challenging activities based on student need and interest. As one put it,

This semester my role with LES students was to give them challenging experiences which is something they may not get if we weren't there to work with them. I was expected to provide them with opportunities that not only challenged them, but help them grow with their literacy skills.

**LES Educator Perceptions of School/University Partnership**

School leaders and fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers who had students participate in novel studies were anonymously surveyed using open-ended items via a *Qualtrics* survey at the conclusion of the semester in December 2017. *Qualtrics* survey questions are listed in Table 3. Responses were limited as only three educators completed the survey.

Table 3  
*LES Educator Survey Questions*

LES Educator Survey Questions
1. The University officially partnered with LES in the spring of 2017. How do you view this partnership?
2. Part of this partnership involves PSTs leading novel studies with fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students who are at or above grade level. As educators, what benefits have you seen from novel studies?
3. In regard to novel studies, as educators, what negatives have you seen, or what changes do you recommend?
4. What feedback have you received from LES students?
5. What other suggestions do you have for the University's partnership with LES?

The first question related to the partnership, given that four university classes were held at LES during the fall 2017 semester (two early childhood classes, a reading interventions class, and *Literacy in Grades 4-6*). Results indicate the partnership was viewed positively. Respondents stated, as one put it, that “it has helped us to provide extra services to students in various areas that we wouldn't normally be able to with our current resources.” Since the partnership had been “official” for a year, educators perceived relationship building to also be positive. For example, the semester following the *Literacy in Grades 4-6* course, a literacy interventions course was taught at LES. The PSTs in the current study returned to LES for this course. Although they were no longer working with HA children, they had the opportunity to return and tutor struggling readers.

One educator shared:

I love our partnership. I think it is a great opportunity for the preservice teachers to get exposure into classrooms on a regular basis. They are able to see a school functioning on

a regular basis and how it is day to day. It has also been a great opportunity for us here at LES and our students. They get to consistently work with individuals they get to know over time. It is neat to see them see their old [university] buddies in the hallway.

Finally, service learning was viewed being facilitated through “open communication through emails, face-to-face and with Google Docs” (educator response). The three respondents felt positively about the collaboration, appreciated the access to Google Docs, and were involved in the face-to-face interactions that happened on a weekly basis.

Questions 2 and 3 asked specifically about the advantages and disadvantages of novel studies from the *Literacy in Grades 4-6* course. Benefits to LES students, according to the educators, included meeting students’ socio-emotional needs and an increase in reading enjoyment, including sharing book themes throughout the school. For example, after reading *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012), participants shared with other grade levels, through the class culminating activities, the importance of treating others with respect, as well as how kindness matters. One surprising result was that teachers perceived an increase in reading levels and improved discussion skills among the students. This was unanticipated, because the expectation was for more general comments related to providing HA services or enrichment, such as students’ desire to continue participation in novel studies. PSTs were not directly asked about educational benefits to the LES students; typically, assessment of service learning-related educational benefits are assumed to accrue to the university students involved. One helpful comment noted:

We have seen many benefits as a result of the novel studies. Our students who participated in the study have shown an increase in their reading levels. We have also noticed their increased ability to discuss literature with their peers by providing evidence from the text and respecting other's point of view. Finally, the theme presented to our students supported our entire building. Students who participated shared with other grade levels, their understanding of treating others with respect and that kindness matters. The novel studies are not only meeting student needs in academics but also socially-emotionally.

Negative comments included the need for more information regarding the pacing of the novels throughout the semester, concerns about novel study groups only meeting once per week due to university scheduling, and LES students having to read too many pages of their novels on their own time.

The fourth question inquired about LES student feedback as expressed to educators. Only positive remarks were offered. For example, students enjoyed the relationships they had built and enjoyed novel study participation in general. One teacher stated, “All students loved their novel study and want to participate again next semester.” Although the final question asked for suggestions to improve the overall university/school partnership, responses focused on the *Literacy in Grades 4- 6* course. There was a desire for more funding for books, which was logical, considering a one-time LES grant had paid for the fall semester’s materials. There was also a request for differentiated whole-class novel study groups from a respondent who hoped PSTs could serve all students instead of only HA students.

## Discussion

Experiential education is often hastily planned, discrete and disconnected (Glazier, Bolick, & Stutts, 2017) and the evaluation of the impact of service learning is often overlooked in university/school partnerships (Billig, 2000; Zhang et al., 2011). The development of a quality literacy teacher requires time in the field to allow PSTs opportunities to put their coursework to use (Galline & Moely, 2003; Helfrich & Bean, 2011; International Literacy Association (ILA), 2007). Without the opportunity to experience various school environments, PSTs often resort to practices they experienced in classrooms themselves (Glazier, Bolick, & Stutts, 2017) when they actually begin teaching. Teachers need to work directly with children as much as possible to strengthen their craft. Service learning is one approach of experiential education that leads to well-trained literacy teachers (ILA, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to examine how a service learning component of a university literacy course impacted preservice teachers' perceptions of intermediate high-ability students, and how elementary school leaders and cooperating teachers perceived the experience. The goals of the university were to create an authentic literacy learning experience and for PSTs to have the opportunity to work with intermediate-aged HA students. By incorporating service learning through the use of the Novel Study Checklist, PSTs learned the components of teaching novel study and discovered engaging activities while meeting state standards. Post-experience responses indicated university goals were met as PSTs better understood the developmental literacy needs of HA intermediate-aged children and how to lead novel studies. By reading and teaching quality literature with impactful themes, PSTs comprehend the importance of choosing engaging books. PSTs received the additional benefit of working with a HA population, a rare opportunity during most university educational experiences (Chamberlin & Moore, 2006).

LES also benefited from the partnership. Oftentimes, the community partner's needs go unnoticed by the university as the focus is more on the learning opportunities for undergraduates than on service to the partner. Yet the components of both "service" and "learning" are mutually reinforcing; these students learn more if they perceive they have provided a meaningful service (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and the community partner is more likely to invest in student learning when they realize the organizational benefits (Batenburg, 1995; Geller, Zuckerman, & Seidel, 2016). LES's school goals of the service learning endeavor included incorporating previously lacking HA literacy curriculum and instruction, building a community of readers, and providing mentoring for their students. Vocabulary development was an overall school need that was especially important as all students need large vocabularies to comprehend both narrative and expository texts (Calfee & Patrick, 1995).

These goals were accomplished by bringing in more engaging, diverse books with strong themes and vocabulary to contribute to building a community of readers. By incorporating service learning, the instructor introduced books meeting the school's criteria while school leaders, with teacher input, chose the books they deemed most appropriate for their classrooms. One unanticipated result, as reported by an LES educator, was that HA students' reading levels, as well as their ability to discuss literature and respect others, had improved. These results will be examined in a future study.

LES faculty wanted novel study participants to talk about the books they were reading with other children in the school to create a community of readers. They hoped HA children would talk about their novel studies with their friends and share the books they were reading with the PSTs. Student book recommendations are especially important with intermediate grade students as they strongly value peers' opinions at this age (Cecil, Gipe, & Merrill, 2014; Wagstaff, 2014). One way this was done was through the culminating activities. For example, one group that read the book *Wonder* made an iMovie using a research-based fluency strategy, Readers Theater (Cecil, Gipe, & Merrill, 2014). The iMovie was shown in all classrooms so students could better understand the theme of "choosing kind" while encouraging others to read the novel. One of the sixth grade groups wrote an anti-bullying skit and performed it live for the third grade classrooms. The sixth graders specifically requested a third grade audience as they felt this age group would listen to them and be open to make changes in their behavior. They presented different scenarios of bullying, then stopped the skit to ask the third graders how they would respond in that situation. These activities were related to the novel *Rules*, which they had read during the service learning endeavor. The instructor and instructional coach were part of the audience and were able to see how powerful this was. The third graders were very engaged, raising their hands to respond to the scenarios, and were listening intently. They appeared to be genuinely excited to have the sixth graders there and working with them, taking the skits seriously and responding appropriately. Overall, these universal themes benefitted the school as a whole and contributed toward building a community of readers.

Finally, LES school leaders desired student mentoring by university students. This is especially important for schools in poverty, as university/school partnerships can help meet the socio-emotional needs of students (Sanders, 2003). Still, this outcome tends to go unnoticed since usually the focus is on the university's needs. Both LES feedback and PSTs' post-experience responses highlighted the importance of establishing positive student/teacher relationships.

During whole-group novel study reflection, PSTs consistently circled back to how novel studies were mutually beneficial. They shared teaching methods that did and did not work with each other. This resulted in stronger pedagogy that supported LES students as the teacher-student relationships strengthened. The PSTs valued the relationships built with LES students as demonstrated when several PSTs in this study returned to LES to volunteer at a literacy night during the spring 2018 semester. Over half of the literacy activity stations were planned and led by the instructor's former and current students from the *Literacy in Grades 4-6* class. This type of commitment to the students and the school demonstrates another benefit of service learning. By developing relationships with LES students, PSTs saw the importance of getting to know their students in order to provide engaging and appropriate instruction and activities, a key component of teaching and meeting the socio-emotional needs of children (Jensen, 2016).

In order to continually improve the service learning initiative, LES educator suggestions were requested. While the novel study groups cannot meet more than once a week due to university scheduling, and expanding the program to other non-HA students will have to wait until there are more PSTs available, shorter books were chosen for the following semester to decrease the amount of outside reading LES students would have to do. LES educators requested the purchase of additional books, and the course instructor found funding which provided all novel study participants a summer reading book, chosen with LES input. This was meant to encourage

continued reading and reduce the summer slide, a tendency for students, especially those from low-income families, to lose some academic skills and knowledge over the summer (Smith, 2012).

The results overall illustrate the importance of establishing purposeful partnerships between universities and local schools in order to benefit both parties, not just out of ease or for the convenience of the university (Wasserman, 2009). In the case of the partnership with LES, just as struggling readers need differentiated or individualized instruction to meet their needs, high-ability readers need to be challenged so they can reach their full potential. It is imperative that PSTs see the importance of meeting individual student needs in order to create an inclusive classroom, since they will have many types of learners in their future classrooms.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted in one Midwestern school community. School needs vary. The generalizability of these findings may be limited as high-ability programming may differ based on the school location and may not be needed at all schools, since some feature self-contained gifted education or clustering, or require classroom teachers to differentiate within their classrooms to meet the individual needs of their high-ability students.

In addition, not all school leaders are willing to welcome university instructors and PSTs into their schools. Many schools have experienced universities coming in to provide teaching experience for their PSTs without contributing to the school community. Without instructors supervising PSTs, classroom teachers are often left to guide these developing teachers, adding to their already heavy load. Literacy instruction time is valuable, and schools are not always willing to give that time to PSTs. Additionally, teachers are accountable for student standardized test scores and often are unwilling to trust PSTs with their students. Universities need to use the allotted school time to best provide for both their PSTs **and** the school children being served.

Finally, in this study, few educators responded to the survey. It would have been ideal to have more educators respond in order to hear all voices and a range of feedback. December is a busy time in schools, so another time might be a better choice to reach out, or focus groups might be a more effective avenue for soliciting input.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this study could influence how teacher educators incorporate service learning. Although this was a literacy course, this model could apply to other university teacher education courses as well. The Novel Study Checklist was developed by the instructor, and could be replicated to provide general literacy instruction for various grade levels, or adapted to serve any underserved population, such as the high-ability learners in this study.

Service learning is a way to provide services such as enrichment or remediation to children in partner schools when school funding is unavailable. In this partnership, HA children received challenging curriculum and instruction while meeting university course objectives at the same time. University/school partnerships can be transformational (Bringle et al., 2009) if both parties

demonstrate closeness, equity, and integrity as they collaborate over time and recognize the importance of open communication and reflection for continuous improvement. Assessing the impact of service learning aids in providing mutually beneficial or transformational partnerships and ventures.

Unfortunately, service to communities is not always valued in higher education, but it is critical, especially within financially struggling schools with underserved populations (Kijinski, 2018). This study has important implications for school leaders who may be looking for ways to address a school need or enrich students. In the case of this study, open communication with school leaders established awareness of a need for literacy curriculum and instruction for gifted students. Having created a mutually beneficial relationship with LES, an important component of service learning will be to nurture it so that it may be sustained and continue to evolve as the needs of the university and the school change. Through purposeful communication, the goal is to continue to create meaningful experiences benefitting the underserved HA population at LES as well as the university PSTs.

### **Author Notes**

*Denise K. Frazier* is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at Purdue University Northwest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Denise K. Frazier at frazierd@pnw.edu.



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**Appendix: Novel Study Checklist**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

**Novel Study Checklist**

A novel study is “an in-depth reading and interpretation of a novel (or a group of stories by one author), addressing both efferent (reading for information) and aesthetic (reading for enjoyment) dimensions.” (Cecil, Gipe, & Merrill, 2014, p. 151). Goals include introducing students to quality literature; teaching students to interpret literature and see meaning and relevance in a variety of genres; and familiarizing students with various literary awards.

**Please place an “X” next to each item, providing a brief explanation of how you did this with your students. EACH AREA SHOULD INCLUDE A STATE STANDARD YOU COVERED. Additionally, please add a one-sentence reflection on how each lesson went. If applicable, attach documentation such as student work.**

- \_\_\_ Book introduction (how did you introduce the novel/begin your study?)
- \_\_\_ How did you address your students’ prior knowledge (or lack of)?
- \_\_\_ Literary elements (plot, characterization, theme, mood, symbolism, etc. What did you emphasize and how did you do it?)
- \_\_\_ Comprehension (what strategies did you use?)
- \_\_\_ Vocabulary activity (describe research-based activity/attach documentation if appropriate)
- \_\_\_ Fluency (how did you incorporate reading and/or writing fluency?)
- \_\_\_ Writing (how did you have your students respond to literature?)
- \_\_\_ Oral language (how did you foster oral language/listening?)
- \_\_\_ Paired a nonfiction book or text (list citation and briefly how you used it)
- \_\_\_ Culminating activity (what was your final activity?)
- \_\_\_ What choices did you offer your students?
- \_\_\_ Assessment (how do you know you met the goals of a novel study?)
- \_\_\_ What did your students find most engaging?
- \_\_\_ How did your group work together? Did all team members contribute equally?
- \_\_\_ Reflection: What did you find most meaningful/most challenging? Provide a brief response.