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# Using Second Language Learning to Improve Self-Esteem among K-12 Homeless School Children of Dallas, Texas

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Southern Methodist University

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Children of Dallas, Texas

Miller Walker

The Engaged Learning Program

November 25<sup>th</sup> 2013

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## Table of Contents

Cover Page .....	1
Table of Contents .....	2
Original Project Proposal .....	3-6
Project Dissertation .....	7-17
Project Process .....	7-9
Project Summary .....	10-11
Project Findings .....	12-14
Plans for the Future .....	15-16
Conclusion .....	17
Works Cited .....	18-19

**Original Project Proposal:**

*"Si un niño, en sus primeros años de vida, se cría en un hogar de pobreza significativa, esto va a tener consecuencias en un crecimiento neuronal insuficiente. Con el tiempo, esto va a resultar en capacidades de aprendizaje disminuidas, capacidades de utilización del lenguaje reducidas y recursos biológicos deficientes. Será difícil, en esas condiciones, que algún día ese niño pueda salir de la pobreza".*

–Bernardo Kliksberg

*"If a child, in the first years of his or her life, grows up in an impoverished home, this is going to result in insufficient neurological growth. With this, there will be a result of diminished learning capacities, reduced language capacities, and deficient biological resources. It will be difficult, in these conditions, that one day this child will be able to leave his life of poverty."*<sup>1</sup>

–Bernardo Kliksberg

Using Second Language Learning to Improve Self-Esteem among K-12 Homeless School Children of Dallas, Texas is a project that is designed to reach out to the homeless children of Dallas. As a student at SMU, I work with Arlington Park Elementary, a public school in the Dallas Independent School District. Arlington Park is one of more than 15 schools in DISD that houses the growing population of homeless students of Dallas, which is currently over 4000.<sup>2</sup> Arlington Park has slightly less than 300 students, 25% of whom are officially homeless; however, all but 9 are living below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> The homeless epidemic is rapidly growing, and unfortunately, these students are notorious for getting caught in a cycle of poverty that starts in their childhood and carries them well into their adulthood.<sup>4</sup> There are many reasons for the continuation of a life of poverty; however, it cannot be denied that a quality education is key for breaking free of this poverty cycle.<sup>5</sup> Although these children are in school five days a week,

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<sup>1</sup>Translation my own.

<sup>2</sup> Haag, Matthew.

<sup>3</sup> Haag, Matthew.

<sup>4</sup> Morrell-Bellai, Tammy, Paula N. Goering, and Katherine M. Boydell.

<sup>5</sup> Muller, Denis.

there is still more that the community must do to ensure that these children can rise above their upbringing and become successful adults in life. There are many organizations that help these homeless students on an occasional basis; however, the majority of these organizations cater to the younger students or focus on providing food for the children, not additional academic assistance. In addition, many of these programs do not meet daily, on the weekends, or in the summer.

I am a French major and an education minor at SMU. My French studies, both in Dallas and abroad in France, have inspired me to propose this project. A large part of the French program focuses on the study of French literature. In one of my classes with Dr. Heather Pelletier, we read a piece of French literature by Jean-Jacques Rousseau entitled “Emile, or on Education.” This story talked about the importance of educating children through the use of hands-on learning rather than just lecture-based lessons. Many times, students, especially in lower-income communities, do not have the opportunity to leave the classroom and experience the world around them. My project proposes integrating French language and culture, through direct communication with students in France, into the lives of homeless students. They will have the opportunity to experience a new culture and talk with people from a different country. In addition to my French classes, my education classes have played a part in my plans for this project. In my Integrated Teaching and Learning class, we are learning about the importance of finding more than one way to present information to students. No two students are the same, and therefore no two students should be expected to learn exactly the same way. With this information, I am inspired to find a myriad of different activities for learning and teaching techniques so that these homeless students can learn in the way that best satisfies their specific learning needs. Finally, my study abroad experiences in Cannes, France this past summer have

inspired me to create this program. Living and studying in France gave me a taste of what it is like to live in a different culture. The experience was eye-opening and invaluable to my development as a well-rounded individual. It is essential that people experience different cultures and open their minds to new possibilities. By bringing my experiences from France into this program, as well as by creating a pen-pal system between my Dallas students and French students in Cannes, these homeless students will be able to experience a new culture.

With your approval, we want to create a program for the homeless students of Dallas that will teach them basic French and culture. Studies have shown that consistent academic activities, such as learning another language, stimulate greater motivation to do well in school. In other words, such activities create a desire to earn better grades in school.<sup>6</sup> By achieving greater academic success in school, homeless children are more apt to receive scholarships to colleges which will help them get better jobs and thus break free of the poverty cycle.

In addition to learning about the French language, we intend to establish a pen-pal system between a school in Cannes, France and the Dallas students with whom we will be working. Many of these homeless students have very low levels of self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> Being told by society - and oftentimes their own families - that they will never have successful careers, many of these students lose hope for breaking free from their impoverished lifestyles. From learning a second language comes a newfound sense of pride and accomplishment. These students will develop a skill that many others in their age group do not have. By establishing a connection to a group of students in France, these students will also see that there is more to the world than the community of Dallas. Awareness of global communities will create aspirations to explore the

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

<sup>7</sup> The National Center on Family Homelessness.

world. It will also boost these students' self-esteem by showing them that there is a group of students elsewhere in the world that cares enough about them to send letters and converse through Skype.

In order to achieve these goals, we need to research successful ways of presenting the French language and culture to young children. Dr. Pelletier and I will be traveling to Cannes, France this June. While there, I will observe classes at a French school so that I can learn more about language acquisition in young children. I will then talk with these students about forming a communication system between them and our students so that once our program begins during the 2012-2013 school year, we can immediately begin communication between these two groups of students. It is important for us to observe and talk to these French students with whom our Dallas students will communicate. I need to learn about their personalities so that we can appropriately pair them up with our Dallas students so that they can benefit fully from this cultural experience. As our program progresses, Dr. Pelletier and I will administer periodic surveys to our students so that we can assess any changes in self-esteem. We will then compare results from the beginning and end of our program to see how much of an impact our program has had on these children. I am working with Dr. Jennifer Depetro, licensed psychologist and licensed specialist in school psychology, to formulate these surveys that will help us assess the results of our program.

This program has the potential to vastly change the lives of the homeless students who participate in it. These students are often extremely intelligent and have great potential. They simply need someone to advocate for them, someone who will stand up for them when no one else will. Our program will do just that.

**Project Process:**

Upon receiving the SMU Engaged Learning Program's approval of my project, I had to complete two main objectives: finding a school in Dallas to conduct my program and also, finding a school to correspond with in France. The first task was simple; having a SMU work study job at an inner-city public school in Dallas provided me with an immediate connection to the district. Once I decided to use Arlington Park Elementary (now part of Hernandez Elementary School), I had to contact the district's main offices to speak to the department in charge of after school programs.<sup>8</sup> There were certain forms that were required for me to fill out so that I could state the purpose of my program. These forms were later reviewed by the district who then gave me permission to formally present my plan to the principal of Hernandez Elementary. I had to present a series of forms to the principal that included: advertising for my program, permission forms, goals and objectives of the Engaged Learning Program, and finally, the name of a Hernandez Elementary School teacher who would oversee my program from week to week. Because of my ties to DISD from my work study position, I was able to use a fifth grade teacher at Hernandez Elementary, Loretta Alston, as my overseer of the program. This part of my program was all set in motion in the spring of 2012 – a good six months before I would be able to start working with students.

The next step was to find a school in France that would be willing to be pen-pals with my Dallas students. Using my connections that I made in France while participating in the SMU study abroad program in the south of France, I was able to gain access to a primary school in Cannes, France. This was largely due to a professor who taught me in the SMU in the south of France study aboard program, Barbara Agré. While I was fortunate enough to not have to handle

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<sup>8</sup> Dallas Independent School District.

any paperwork or other information first-hand regarding gaining access to a French school, Barbara had to work quite hard to convince the headmaster of the school to allow me to work with their students. To my surprise, at the end of the process, I was granted access not only to the school grounds, but I was also allowed to give a presentation to a class of French students who were learning English. Thus, the next step was to travel to France.

Thanks to the generosity of the Engaged Learning Program at SMU, I was able to use part of my budget to travel to France for a week to spend time gathering information that I could use in my program. In addition, I planned to speak to the students in Cannes who would be writing letters to my Dallas students. I spent quite a bit of time looking in bookstores and other educational shops in an attempt to find scholarly French tools to assist me in teaching my lessons in Dallas. I found many useful items such as children's books written in French, stickers, stamps, French notebook paper, and French candy which I would use as rewards in my classroom. On the last day of my trip, I walked to the primary school where I met with Barbara Agré. Barbara took me into the school where I met with the headmaster. We spoke for a few minutes about my project and what I hoped to achieve by working with her students before she led me to a classroom with about twenty eager French students. My presentation went smoothly and all of the young scholars were eager to write to my Dallas students in the fall. I exchanged information with the classroom teacher before leaving the school.

Upon my arrival back to Dallas, I had to start planning my lessons, keeping in mind my ultimate goals of teaching French and raising the self-esteem of my students. To begin the process, I worked with Dr. Jennifer Depetro who is a licensed psychologist and licensed specialist in school psychology in order to formulate a series of surveys that would help me in measuring my student's self-esteem throughout my program. Dr. Depetro and I were able to

locate reliable and valid self-esteem measurement surveys that would be suitable for my program. With this information, I had to appeal to the Ethics Committee at SMU who would grant my project's final approval to proceed. The Ethics Committee wanted to verify that my program and all self-esteem surveys would be appropriate for my students and would not harm them in any way. With their stamp of approval, I was ready to plan my lessons and to officially begin my program.

**Project Summary:**

My program met once a week for sixteen weeks starting in the fall of 2012 and officially ending in the early spring of 2013. After sending home flyers and permission slips to the students selected to participate in my program, I was notified that we had seven students who wanted to participate. With this information and my lesson plans that I had previously written with the help of Dr. Pelletier, I walked into my first class, eager to begin teaching my new French students.

My first task was to administer the self-esteem measurement test that Dr. Depetro and I found to all of my students. This test would serve the purpose of showing me the current self-esteem levels of my students. After about 15 minutes of testing, my students had completed the test and we were ready to work. We spent the day learning about France: where it is located, what the country is like, what food they eat, etc. Most importantly however, we learned about the language that they speak in France. I was astonished at how many of these fifth grade students did not know where France was located, or even where Europe was. I decided to use this time to teach a little geography so that my students could understand just how far away France is from the USA. My students took a special interest in the different currency that is used in France. We talked about different cultures and how they can use different money, speak different languages, etc. This was a natural segue into the introduction of the French language. I chose to present French vocabulary in units based on topics such as: introductions/greetings, clothing, food, weather, colors/numbers, etc. After presenting the words of the day to my students, we wrote letters (mostly in English) that would be sent to the students in France whom I had met the previous summer.

Each class consisted of a similar routine as the first class (with the exception of giving the self-esteem test) for a span of 16 weeks. We completed a new unit of vocabulary each week and then reviewed past vocabulary units during the next session before adding new words to the students' rapidly expanding French vocabulary. All students were given a folder and notebook where they could write down new words that they learned. As my students became more and more comfortable with using their new words, they would implement them into the letters that they wrote to the students in France. I always saved the last few minutes of class to review the day's lesson as well as to allow students time to ask me for French translations of words that they were especially curious to learn.

After 16 weeks of class, I was notified that DISD was cutting the afterschool program budget which meant that my program, along with many others, was going to be discontinued. While I was hoping to be able to conduct this program for at least 20 weeks, I had no choice but to end it early. At the last session, I administered to all present students the same self-esteem measurement test that was given at the commencement of my program. These results would then be compared to the results from the test given at the beginning of the program to see if self-esteem in my students was affected by participating in the French language after-school program.

## Project Findings:

After 16 weeks of working with the students from Hernandez Elementary, I compared the self-esteem tests that I had my students take in order to validate my hypothesis that second language learning would raise the self-esteem of the homeless students who were learning the target language (French). The results from this project are listed below in Figure 1. One notices

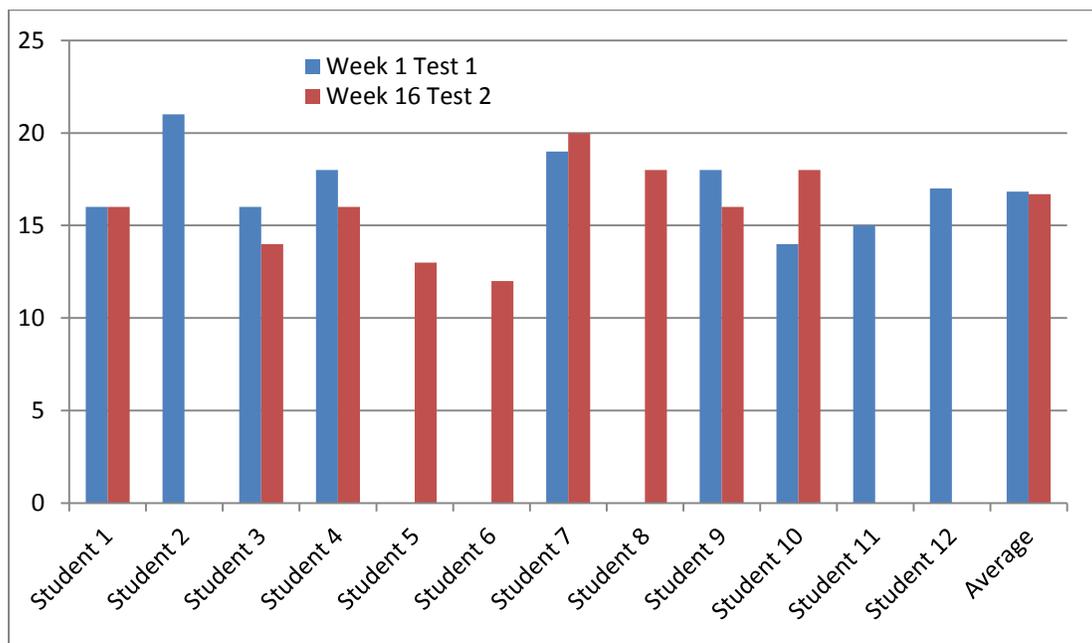


Figure 1: Bar Chart showing the results of the 2 self-esteem measurement tests that were administered to the participants of Miller Walker's French program.

right away from the chart in Figure 1 that there are some students who took a test only at the beginning of the class while others were only able to take the test at the end of the class. Statistically, 97% of homeless families move as many as 3 times per year; 30% of these families move due to being evicted from their homes – be it temporary shelter housing, hotel rooms, or

low-income apartments.<sup>9</sup> During the 16 weeks that I worked with students, I had many new students join our group as well as many students who no longer could participate due to changing schools. While I included data in the Figure 1 chart from all students who participated in my program, it is important to note that only 3 of the 12 participating students attended every session and took both self-esteem measurement tests. These students are: Student 1, Student 7, and Student 10. All others came to only part of the sessions and/or did not take both self-esteem measurement tests. Therefore, we can only consider Students 1, 7, and 10 when validating my hypothesis. Figure 1 shows that Student 1 maintained the same level of self-esteem throughout the entire duration of the program. Students 7 and 10 show a rise in self-esteem from week 1 to week 16. None of the 3 qualifying students had lower self-esteem at the end of the program. With 67% of qualifying students showing a rise in their self-esteem after completing my program, I am pleased to state that my hypothesis that second language learning can raise self-esteem in homeless students was validated.

One must keep in mind the environment in which the sessions were given in relation to other second language learning situations when considering these self-esteem results. My sessions were given to students who statistically have lower than normal self-esteem.<sup>10</sup> In addition, these sessions were conducted in a way that was safe and encouraging for students. No formal homework or grades were given during the program as this could have potentially created stress for my students, in turn lowering their self-esteem. We only incorporated engaging, safe, and fun academic activities in these sessions.

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<sup>9</sup> The National Center on Family Homelessness.

<sup>10</sup> The National Center on Family Homelessness.

Another key point in terms of this project's results is the program duration. The duration of this program was 16 weeks. In this short amount of time, I saw positive results in 67% of the students with whom I was working. However, it stands to reason that projects such as these which measure character changes in humans would tend to produce more substantial results if the duration is a longer period of time. By having a longer project duration period, it would have been possible to administer more than 2 self-esteem measurement tests. It is also likely that the results of the project would have indicated a more significant change in the self-esteem levels of all qualifying students. That being said, in just 16 weeks, I did see positive results in the majority of the qualifying participants.

### **Plans for the Future:**

Completing this project has opened many doors for future students. This project has allowed me to pursue jobs in the education field where I have been able to continue my research. Currently, I am working at The Einstein School in Plano, Texas where I teach Spanish and French to adolescents as well as high school students. Using my findings from this Engaged Learning project has helped me to formulate second language learning lessons that pay close attention to the age group I am working with. These lessons also take into account my findings that prove that it is easier to learn a second language earlier in life.<sup>11</sup> My elementary and middle school students retain information such as vocabulary and grammar much more accurately and easily than those in my high school classes.<sup>12</sup> The Einstein School creates a unique learning environment that allows for research projects such as this one to thrive. Their motto is:

“We believe that the basis for a sound education rests not solely on the rout memorization of facts, equations and rules but on the ability of the student to creatively imagine the implications of this material on the world around them. We seek to education the whole child; a child well armed with knowledge and with an ability to apply what has been learned to the world around them. Einstein students work in an environment where creative thinking is not just encouraged but applauded and cherished. A rigorous education; abiding curiosity; and respect, compassion, and service to others are the principled foundation on which Einstein students will build their future and the reason that an Einstein education is special.”<sup>13</sup>

I have been able to successfully foster an interest in foreign languages in my students at The Einstein School by creating classes for elementary and middle school children despite the fact that the state of Texas does not require students to take foreign language classes during this period of their studies.<sup>14</sup> As the idea of learning second languages at earlier ages spreads, my

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<sup>11</sup> Parrish, Sarah.

<sup>12</sup> Source: 2013 academic records of students at the Einstein School in Plano. \*Names of students are kept confidential in accordance with Texas State laws.

<sup>13</sup> Van Blarcum, Jan.

<sup>14</sup> Dallas Independent School District.

hope is that more programs such as the one that I started in Dallas will become the norm across the country. For now, I will work one step at a time to ensure that the schools I work with provide an option to learn a second language to its students at as early an age as possible.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, my program, Using Second Language Learning to Improve Self-Esteem among K-12 Homeless School Children of Dallas, Texas, has verified my hypothesis that self-esteem in homeless students can be raised through the use of academic afterschool activities. After 16 weeks of teaching basic French and culture to a group of homeless elementary school students, I saw a rise in self-esteem in 67% of qualifying students. With more time to work with these students, I hypothesize that our results would have been more significant. Academic activities that give students a newfound sense of pride and accomplishment not only raise these students' self-esteem, they also motivate these students to stay in school. With these positive results and discoveries, one hopes that programs such as mine will be implemented in other impoverished schools so that we can start taking steps towards helping these homeless students escape from the poverty-stricken life that they are currently living.

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