

# In Service of Language Development: Outcomes of a Community-Engaged, Undergraduate SLP Course

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## Background

Service Learning: “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, nd).

In previous studies, SLP undergrads worked with preK children in urban areas (Peters, 2011; Nwokah & Leafblad, 2013).

Positive outcomes: Learning how to work with and building relationships with children; shifts in beliefs about homelessness and low SES (Nwokah & Leafblad, 2013); real-world, hands-on application of learning, students learned about the children and themselves (Peters, 2011); desire to be more engaged in the community (Allman, 2013).

Challenges: Students had to problem solve regarding child behaviors, and learn how to communicate with bilinguals (Nwokah & Leafblad, 2013).

## Methods

### SLP 330 Language Development with Service Learning at the Early Learning Center (ELC)

#### Student Learning Objectives

1. Describe, compare, and contrast **theories of language development** and apply them to observations at the ELC.
2. Define and provide examples of the **components of language** and identify examples in observations at the ELC.
3. Explain and provide examples of the **typical developmental milestones** for each of the major developmental stages and assess them in children at the ELC.
4. Explain and provide examples of **variation in language development** and observe them at the ELC.
5. Explain and provide examples of **language disorders**.

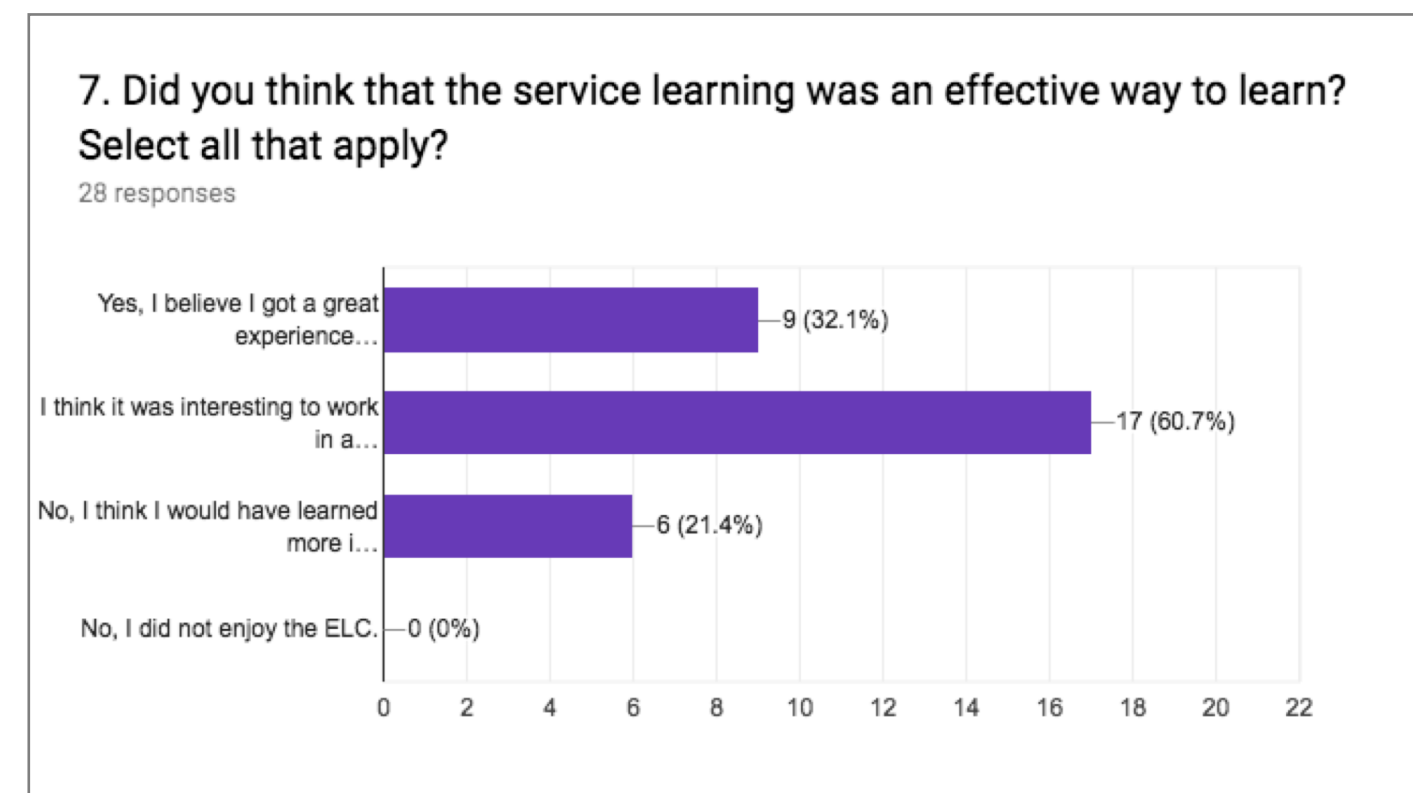
- **Community partner:** Early Learning Center (ELC) in urban CT; 265 children aged 0-5, diverse cultural-linguistic backgrounds.
- **Participants:** 38 undergraduate students (37 female); 21 anonymous ELC staff members; 66 anonymous ELC parents.
- **Procedure:** Students, in teams of 4, attended class once/week and ELC once/week for 10 weeks. Assignments included language observations/assessments, and reflections in the **Child Language Journal (CLJ)**. Teams also developed language enrichment activities and parent booklets for the ELC.
- **Data:** 1) 38 CLJs: 6 written reflections, including a Final Course Reflection; 2) Post-service online questionnaires: Completed by 28 students, 21 ELC staff, and 66 ELC parents.
- **Analyses:** Qualitative thematic analyses of the CLJs using NVivo software; quantitative results of questionnaires using Google forms.

## Results

### Quantitative Results

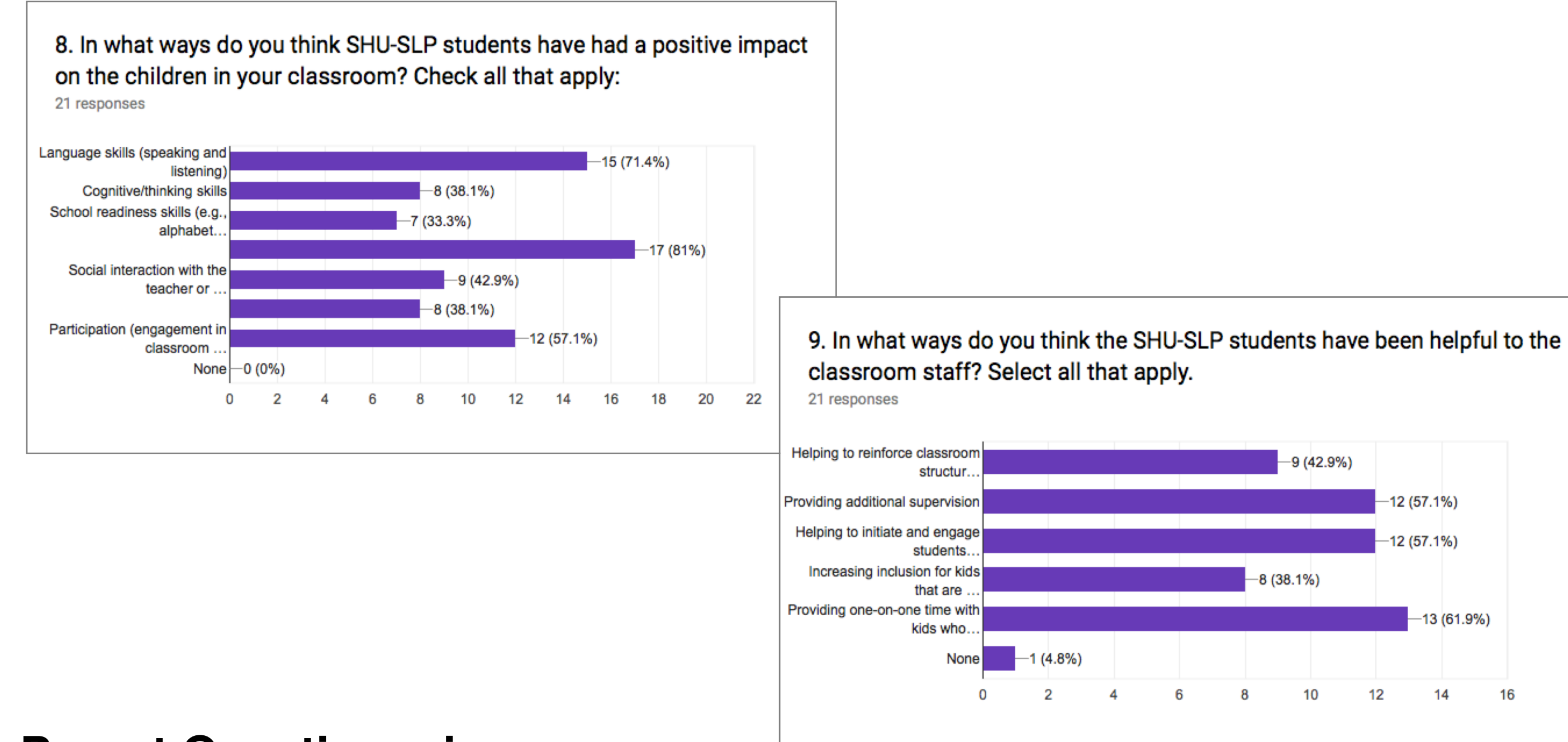
#### Student Questionnaire

- 18% of students said service learning should continue; 71% said it should continue with some changes.
- Students perceived they had a positive impact at the ELC, especially supporting children’s social interactions (89%).
- Students also perceived they were helpful to the ELC staff, especially supporting classroom structure (75%), and providing additional supervision (86%).



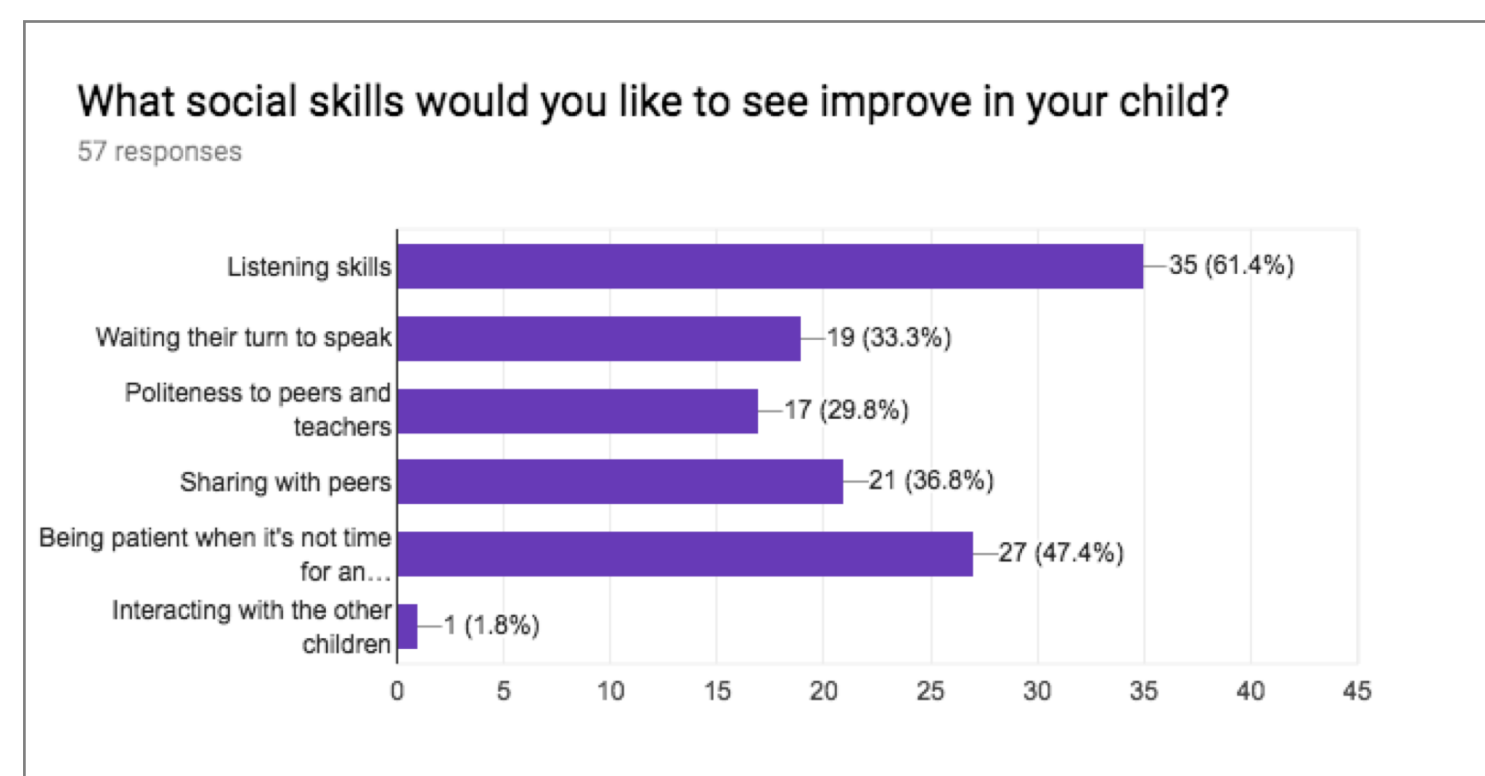
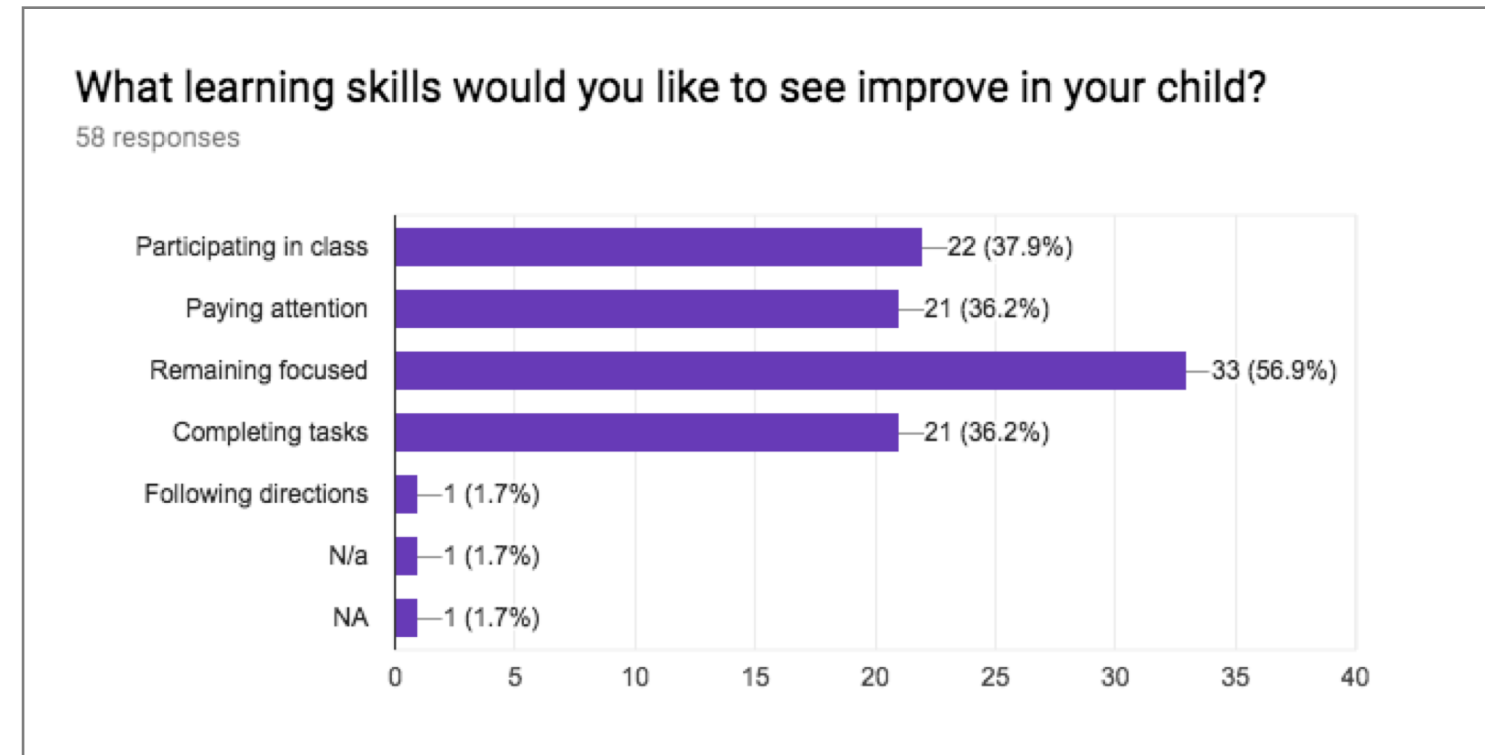
#### ELC Teacher Questionnaire

- 96% of staff said the experience with SLP students was good/very good.



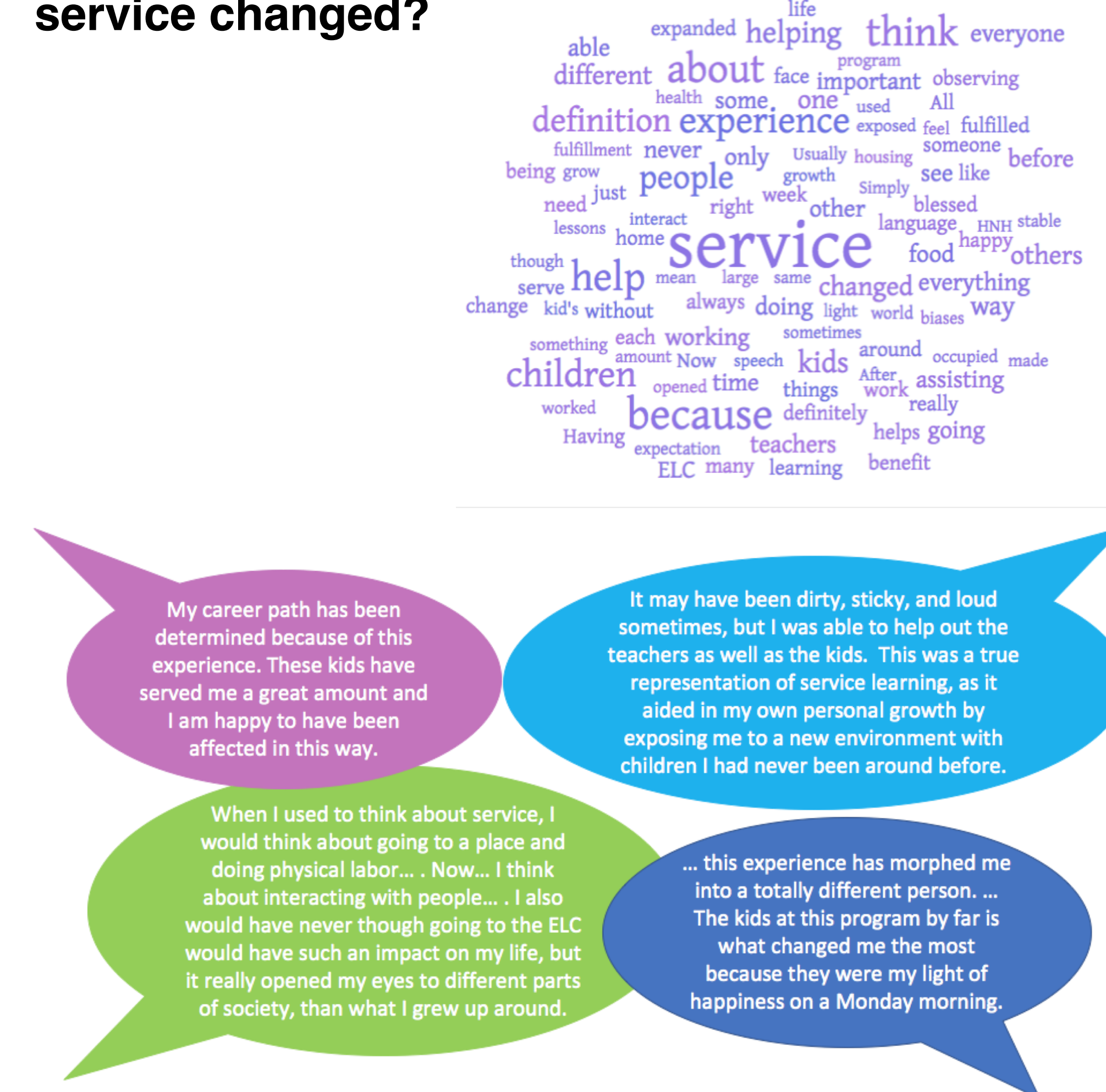
#### Parent Questionnaire

- 49% of parents would like improvement in their children’s pronunciation
- 43% of parents said they would be interested in having an SLP at school
- 95% of parents were interested in language-learning take-home activities
- 75% of parents were interested in a workshop on child language

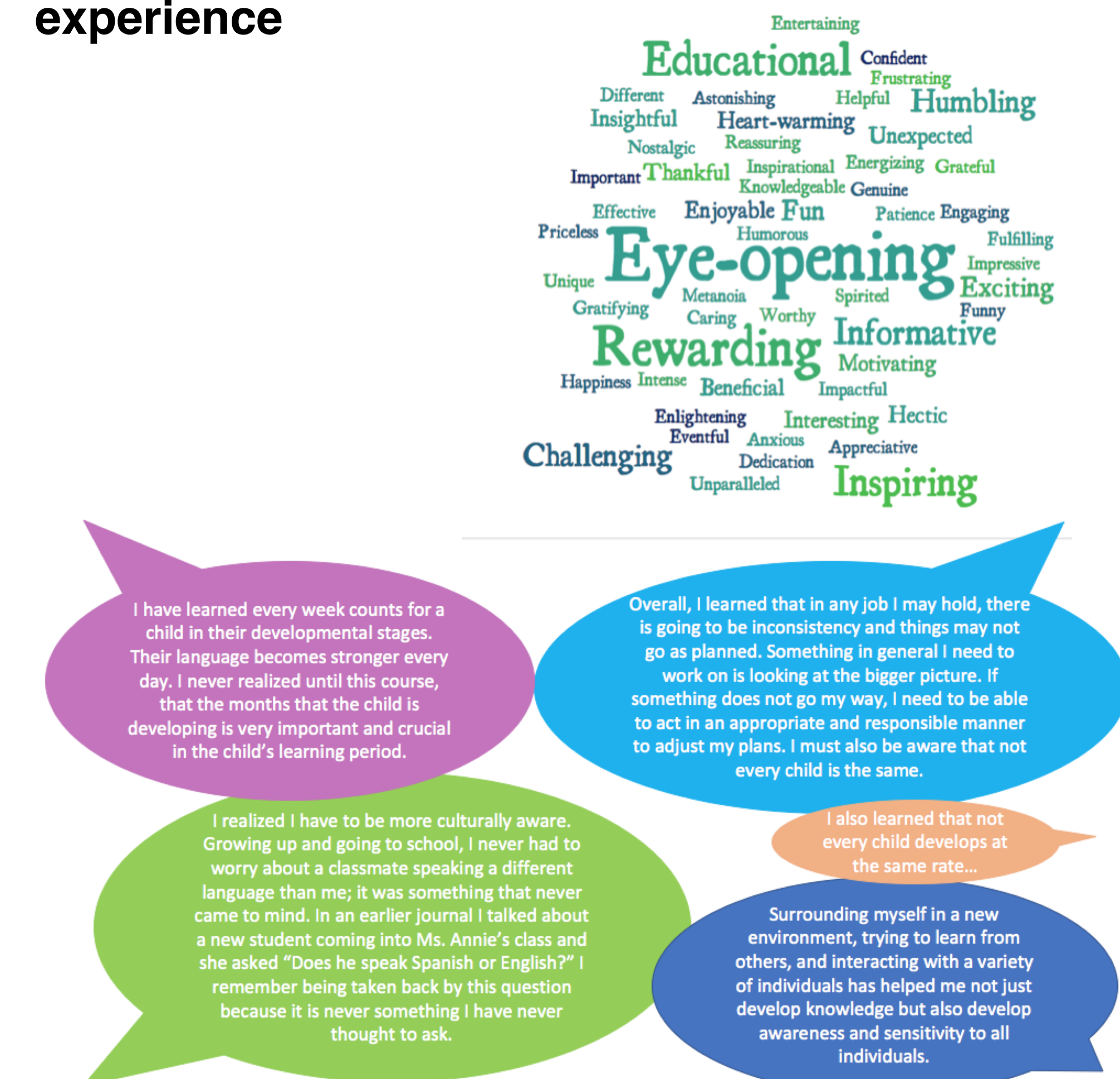


### Qualitative Results

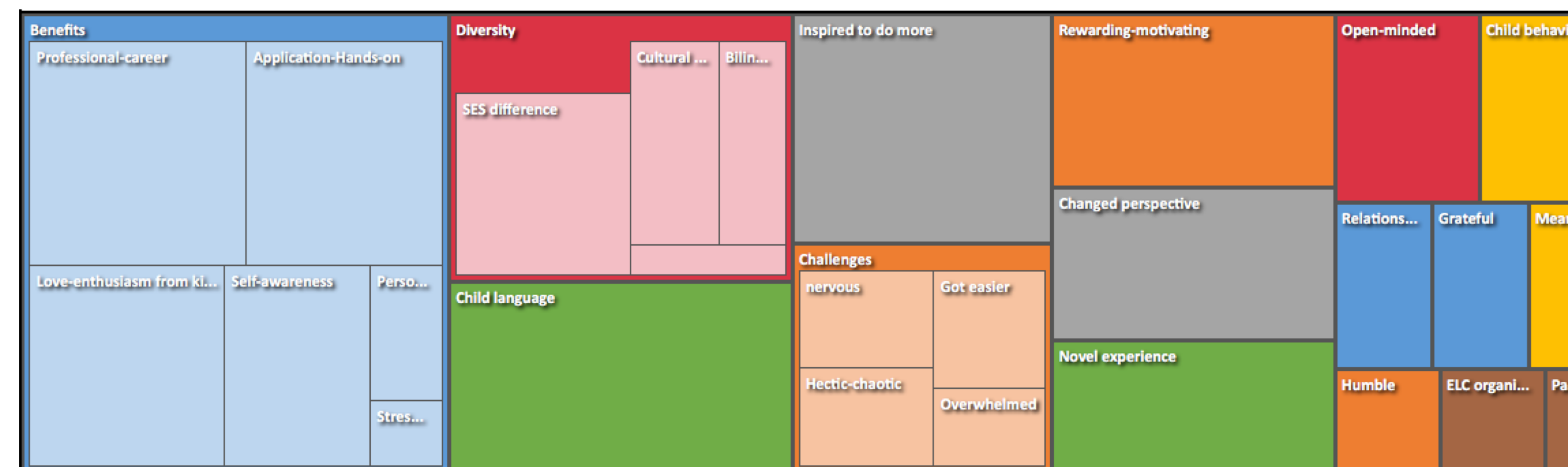
#### Reflection Week 6: How has your definition of service changed?



#### Final Reflection: Three words to describe your experience



#### Qualitative Analysis: Emerging Code Hierarchy



## Discussion and Implications

- Students and staff agreed that SLP students were helpful at the ELC.
- Students felt they provided more support for behavior and classroom structure, while the staff felt that students supported social interaction and language skills.
- Students valued learning about child behavior as much as child language.
- Regarding perceptions of diversity, students were more likely to identify SES than cultural or linguistic factors.
- When asked to describe the service learning experience, most students used the words “eye-opening,” “rewarding,” and “educational,” in spite of challenges. Overall, students expressed learning beyond the course objectives.
- Based on parent interest, development of workshops or take-home resources would be well-received. Expanding on these opportunities could involve other SLP courses and students.

- Students recommended partnering with other sites, working directly with SLPs, and adding more structure to the program.
- Strong relationships and communication between the university and community partners are essential.
- Faculty interested in implementing service learning should explore opportunities and support from their university’s volunteer programs/service learning office.
- For the faculty, balancing student support (structure, guidance) and challenge (flexibility, tolerance to ambiguity) is key to a successful service learning experience.

## References

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