



Promising partnerships: Developing cultural competence with pre-service teachers through community service- learning experiences

Heather Coffey

Partnerships: A Journal of Service Learning & Civic Engagement.
Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 2011

Abstract

Research in teacher education suggests that field experiences in community settings can offer pre-service teachers a context for understanding the link between theory and practice. This paper documents the experiences of pre-service teachers participating in service-learning partnerships within the community. Pre-service teachers not only volunteered in the community, but they also engaged in critically reflective journal writing and participated in evaluative class discussions. Students praised the benefits of a service experience in both school and community placements and discussed how interactions with the community agencies gave them the insight into how community organizations often play a significant role in the lives of the underserved students they will eventually teach. The author argues that the inclusion of a service-learning component in early pre-service teacher education field experiences has the potential to facilitate the examination of the relationships between community organizations and schools and encourage development of cultural competence among pre-service teachers.

Introduction

The face of the American public school system is changing drastically in the 21st Century. Students enrolled in public schools across the United States represent a myriad of abilities and experiences in addition to a wide variety of nationalities and languages from across the globe

(NCES, 2009). There is a pressing need to prepare culturally responsive teachers who recognize multiple ways of thinking and support a wide range of cultural perspectives, backgrounds, and practices (Oakes & Lipton, 2003). Service-learning may present an opportunity to increase pre-service teachers' (PST) ability to interact with and participate in a wider array of communities to which they may typically have access. In 2006, the Service-Learning in Teacher Education International Research Affinity Group identified a need to address the impact service-learning might have on the development of cultural competence and PSTs' understanding of the diverse experiences students bring with them into the public school classroom.

There still remains a paucity of research on the possibilities of including service-learning experiences in teacher education programs in order to develop cultural competence with PSTs. This paper presents qualitative data gathered in a pre-service teacher education program that requires a community service-learning component in which future teachers participate with community agencies that support underserved student populations. The data gathered during this semester-long course addresses the question of the impact of service-learning on PSTs' understanding and appreciation of cultural, socio-economic, and developmental diversity. Although this article focuses on the experiences of PSTs in one course, I describe how research in the wider area of service-learning and pre-service teacher education suggests that there is a greater development of cultural competence for those PSTs who have participated in such opportunities.

Definition of Terms

Cultural competence, originally developed for the health care field, is defined as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989). In relation to teacher preparation, several key behaviors indicate development of cultural competence: valuing diversity; assessment of personal beliefs and intercultural experiences; self-awareness/self-reflection; educational experience; and dedication to social justice (Garmon, 2004; Valentin, 2006).

Service-learning has been considered a successful teacher education practice, which has been identified as a way to provide students with field experiences in the community and to expose them to diverse settings. The role of service-learning in institutions of higher education has increased exponentially in the past two decades, and teacher education programs have begun using this experiential learning in order to prepare future educators to better understand and empathize with the needs of the communities in which they will be working. In fact, a national survey conducted by Anderson and Erickson (2003) found that over 300 teacher education programs in the United States used service-learning in some capacity as part of their curriculum.

Service-learning in teacher education is both a philosophy of education and an instructional method that fosters the development of social responsibility and prepares students to become more involved citizens (Anderson, 1998). As an instructional method, service-learning blends service activities with the academic curriculum, thus addressing authentic community, while actively engaging students (Anderson, 1998).

Early Field Experiences in Teacher Preparation

Based on national data, the majority of educators in the United States are teaching children who come to their classrooms with cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, social class backgrounds, and ability levels that are different from their own (NCES, 2009). Often, these teachers enter the profession with the assumption that their students will have similar educational experiences to their own (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisell, 2007). A majority of teacher education programs prepare PSTs to work in diverse classrooms by requiring single courses in multicultural education or that have a focus on "diverse learners". Unfortunately, research suggests that these experiences are often only minimally effective (see for example Solomon, 1995; Coville-Hall, MacDonald & Smolen, 1995; Melnick & Zeichner, 1995; York, 1997).

In order to prepare PSTs to provide equitable and democratic education, Sleeter (2008) recommends that teacher education programs should be founded on three pillars, which prepare PSTs for the reality of schooling; engage them in content and theoretical knowledge development; and demonstrate how to participate in conversations with communities in which schools are located. These three components can be used to encourage PSTs to think more broadly about the importance of cultural, socio-economic, developmental, and linguistic backgrounds of their students and to become change agents who advocate for their students. Sleeter (2008) highlights five areas in teacher education in which programs can focus on examination of the relationship between equity and democracy: recruitment and admission, early fieldwork, professional coursework, student teaching, and on-going professional development.

In this paper, I concentrate on how early field experiences in community settings may enhance the experiences of PSTs and facilitate more social awareness for a more equitable and democratic system of public education. I argue that early field experiences situated in community organizations, blended with a service-learning component and course work embedded in critically reflective pedagogy can prepare PSTs to enter diverse classrooms equipped to better understand and advocate for their students. Essentially, I argue that service-learning experiences embedded in teacher preparation programs have the potential to create opportunities for PSTs to learn how to participate in conversations with communities in which schools are located.

Benefits and Drawbacks Associated with Service-Learning

Since the mid-1990s researchers in the field have evaluated the benefits and drawbacks of using service-learning in pre-service education programs. Erickson and Anderson (1997)

suggest that the ultimate goal of service-learning is to develop teachers to be more prepared to enter diverse settings. By becoming involved in communities in which their schools are located, teachers can better understand the cultural, socio-economic, and historical traditions and experiences that students bring with them into their classrooms. Cultural traditions are embedded in the lives of students and are privileged and reinforced in their homes and communities; teachers who become more aware of these traditions and lived experiences can better understand what factors are at play in students' lives outside of school. Furthermore, teacher educators might use service-learning as a pedagogy to socialize PSTs in the crucial ethical and community obligations of teaching, and as an experience to foster a commitment to advocate for social justice (Anderson, Swick, & Yff 2001).

Despite the reported possible benefits of service-learning, there are also disadvantages associated with the misuse of resources and relationships; in fact researchers caution against the ill-informed use of service-learning as a pedagogical practice (Kahn & Westheimer, 1996; Eby, 1998; Butin, 2003, 2005, 2007). Kahn and Westheimer (1996) point out that engaging in service-learning often promotes a variety of ideological, political, and social agendas if participants are not careful in their practice. In order for service-learning to be meaningful, participants must not only provide service, but must also examine the conditions that exist within society that create the need for service organizations. Kahn and Westheimer (1996) offer a scenario of middle school students engaging in a service project on homelessness; they explain that providing services for the homeless should not be the only goal of this type of project-based education. In order for students to develop a deep sense of altruism, they must also critically examine the systemic "causes of homelessness and of the strategies employed to prevent it" (p. 4). Thus, Kahn and Westheimer call for an examination of how systemic problems lead to conditions of humanity that need to be understood prior to being fixed.

Similarly, Eby (1998) contends that the research lacks examples of the perspective of community partners and residents within the service-learning equation and notes that the "voice of community leaders committed to community development and structural change would be particularly helpful" (p. 2). Without examination of the effects service has on communities, community members can "become objects rather than participants or passive recipients rather than actors" (p. 3). When service-learning proceeds without a focus on the needs of the community and instead develops an agenda to satisfy selfish motives of self-promotion, then service-learning can actually do harm to the individuals who are intended to be served. Eby recommends that service-learning can be made stronger by including the viewpoints of all involved stakeholders, making sure the partnerships and activities are authentic, following principles of good practice, requiring a critical examination of social structural issues, engaging in advocacy and development for community partners.

Butin (2007) advises that those interested in developing service-learning partnerships must be wary of the types of programs that engage in "top-down" (p. 179) management and distribute reports for the sake of having a novel pedagogical approach. Like Kahn and Westheimer (1996) and Eby (1998), Butin recommends that university students engaged in

service-learning must also be forced to reconsider the “taken-for granted quality of the structures and practices that, beforehand, seemed all too normal” (p. 179) and understand a need for a more justice-oriented education.

When developing a service-learning course in any content area it is essential that the instructor keep all of the possible benefits and disadvantages in mind. For this reason, I developed several reflective assignments that required PSTs to constantly reflect both on their role in the organization with which they were working and the need for this organization within the community.

Methodology

Service-learning for PSTs

This study was conducted in the fall of 2008 in with the purpose of examining PSTs enrolled in a service-learning course developed cultural competence as a result of volunteering with community organizations in supporting the needs of underserved populations. Over the course of one semester, PSTs at a large southeastern university in the United States volunteered 30 hours with a non-profit community agency or an extra-curricular after-school program in addition to completing course readings on the theory and practice of service-learning. Within this course, PSTs learned about culturally responsive pedagogy, service-learning pedagogy, diverse learners, content area curriculum goals and objectives, lesson planning, and how community agencies play an important role in providing services to underserved populations of school-aged children.

As part of the semester-long service-learning experience, all of the PSTs volunteered with several community organizations and after-school tutorial/mentor programs. The community agencies included a local non-profit organization serving children with life-threatening illnesses through involvement in free social, recreational and physical activities in a medically safe environment; an advocacy group that supports people with developmental disabilities through engagement with activities to develop motor skills; a non-profit group that provides a workspace to connect refurbished bicycles with active community members and seeks to increase the use of bicycles for transportation and recreation; and a college-based interactive theater group that uses scripted and improvisational acting to promote health, wellness, and social justice. Additionally, PSTs volunteered with after-school programs that support underserved populations such as a mentor advocate program that pairs college students with middle school children in order to promote behaviors that will facilitate a path to academic achievement; an after-school tutorial and mentoring program for secondary English Language Learners; an SAT prep course for Spanish speaking teenagers; and a non-school related Christian outreach ministry focused on developing mentoring relationships for high school students.

Twenty-three PSTs were involved in the study: three students were African American and twenty identified as Caucasian. There were fifteen female and eight male participants, all of whom were between 19 and 21 years of age. PSTs were required to perform 30 hours of service over sixteen weeks at eight service-learning sites that supported the needs of underserved student populations.

Several data sources were used to begin to measure PSTs' outlook on the role of community organizations in supporting the needs of specific student populations before, during, and after the service learning experiences. PSTs were asked to complete weekly journals outlining and examining what they experienced during the service period. Reflective journal prompts included the following topics:

1. Who is being served by the community organization?
2. What might be some of the social issues that create a need for your community partner organization?
3. How do underserved populations benefit from your specific organization?
4. How might contact with similar organizations assist with your understanding of underserved populations in that might be members of your future classrooms.

Additionally, PSTs participated in class discussions, in which we examined their role within the community agency and the role the agency played in the lives of those it serves. At the end of the course, PSTs evaluated their initial opinions of how teachers might partner with non-profit community agencies to gain a better understanding of students and developed a plan for partnering with similar organization during their teaching careers. For the purposes of this study, all four prompted reflection assignments were examined for themes that related to developing social awareness, as addressed by Sleeter (2008), and the relationship between school and community.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, which involves coding and then segregating the data into categories for more detailed analysis and description (Glesne, 2005) was used in this analytical study. This type of analysis is particularly useful when analyzing narrative data such as journal entries and class discussion. Data collected over the course of the semester included both open-ended and prompted student reflections, which were read and organized into analytic files. These files were then organized according to emergent themes. By maintaining separate files of data for specific themes that emerged, I was able to organize my own thoughts while working through the interpretation process.

After collecting the data for this paper, I began the process of analytic coding, which involves sorting and defining information into an organizational framework. While reading the data, I

developed major codes that identify a concept or main idea. I used only codes that emerged from the journals and class discussions of the PSTs in the course.

Once I coded for themes and separated the data accordingly, I examined text blocks within journal entries and class discussions using discourse analysis (Gee, 1999). By engaging in a close reading of small blocks of text, I attempted to examine responses so that I could better understand the students' shifting opinions of service-learning and the importance of community-school partnerships based on their personal service experiences.

Prompted Reflections

Using Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (see Figure 1), I developed reflective observation prompts which would engage PSTs in thinking more deeply about their concrete experience with the community partner. These prompted journals and discussions required the PSTs to "observe and reflect on these experiences from many perspectives" (Kolb, 1984, p. 236). The first formal reflection prompted students to think more about the presence of not-for-profit organizations in communities and examine how these agencies existed to meet the needs of specific populations within the community.

Who is served by the community partner/agency?

As explained earlier, PSTs worked with eight different community partners in close proximity to the University setting. When asked to think more about the people these agencies serve, PSTs described the populations as being typically "underserved" in the public school environment—terms such as "marginalized teenagers", "developmentally disabled", "terminally ill", "members of a lower socio-economic group", and "English language learners" were used. During this initial conversation, which followed orientation with community partners, PSTs, all college juniors, began to think more about how these agencies were helping groups of people to which some of the PSTs had never been exposed. Prior to the beginning of the course, PSTs had never heard of the majority of their community partners and admitted to not thinking about the existence of these populations within their immediate community.

All of the PSTs were recipients of academic scholarships, which suggests that their schooling experiences thus far had been positive. Many of the students admitted they had never before considered how difficult it might be for people with developmental disabilities, life-threatening illnesses, language barriers, or extreme poverty to gain admission to college or even operate within a public school setting. Having never experienced these situations, these students had little context for understanding the needs associated with these groups of people prior to the service experience. During orientation sessions with the community partners, PSTs were given fact sheets and personal stories about the issues faced by the people served by the community agencies. PSTs reported that orientation sessions educated them about groups and made them think more about the possibility of having students who represent these groups in the future.

What might be some of the social issues that create a need for your community partner organization? / How do underserved populations benefit from your specific organization?

After learning more about the populations being served by the community partners, each PST enrolled in this service-learning course understood and articulated a recognizable need for the organization with which they were working. PSTs both identified the need for community partner and explained how underserved populations could possibly benefit from the organization within one journal response. The majority of the students assisting with school-related programs identified the need as related to the success of individual and groups of students served by the program. For example, Jillⁱ explained that the role of the after-school tutorial program for Latino scholars was to

...help with the college application process; provide friendship, advocacy, and mentoring for Latino students, while the SAT prep program was created to address that the test caters to first language English speakers. We hope to close the preparation gap.

Similarly, Lori wrote that the mentor program with which she volunteered sought to:

...provide personal attention and encouragement to kids from lower socio-economic backgrounds through service and extracurricular activities, to boost the students' resumes, offer tutoring so the children's grades are high enough to be accepted to college, and develop college as an attainable goal.

Essentially, both of these PSTs identified needs associated with preparing typically marginalized groups of adolescents for a future in higher education.

The PSTs identified several factors in society that likely contributed to the need for these programs—peer pressure, lack of funding and resources, and language and cultural barriers experienced by language and ethnic minority students. Additionally, all but two of the eight PSTs volunteering in school-related programs recognized that the need for the organization had something to do with an economic or social deficit within the communities in which they were living. Furthermore, without these programs, these PSTs suggested that students would lose support, opportunity, and advocacy, which they considered essential to development as successful young adults.

Those PSTs who participated in service-learning opportunities with organizations serving the needs of disabled populations identified that the purpose of their agencies included “activities to improve quality of life and developing social networks and support systems for the participants and their families.”

Three young women volunteered at an organization that serves the needs of citizens with developmental disabilities. Darcy, one of these PSTs, explained:

For the children and young adults that they serve, they provide vocational experiences, health and wellness education, social activities, employment, one-to-one personal support, respite, which is when a care provider comes in to the home to take care of the child so that the parents can have a night or day off, and assistance with budgeting, nutrition and cooking class, social activities, and employment.

All of these services are provided for participants that represent a range of ability and age levels; and the mission of the organization provided support not only for participants, but also included their family members and caregivers. Furthermore, Kelly, another PST volunteering with this site suggested that:

programs are designed to promote independence and community involvement...they seek to remedy the life of confinement through advocating for human rights for persons intellectual and developmental disabilities, while at the same time teaching the important skills of self-advocacy.

The three PSTs cited an overall exclusionary attitude for individuals with disabilities in America. Ellen noted:

The existence of Capitalism and Darwinism encourages people with 'potential' to view non-contributing members in society as 'drains on social resources'...notice the tendency to marginalize these people by placing them in institutions and separate classrooms.

The other two PSTs at this site echoed Ellen's assessment of society's view of those with disabilities and added that able-bodied people have a "set of unearned privileges", which often cause them to discriminate against those who have intellectual, physical, and developmental disabilities. These three service-learning participants suggested that without this organization, these citizens and their families would lose valuable support, vocational and budget training, and opportunities to develop a sense of community with others who have similar life experiences. They all focused on the realization of the societal divide between those who are considered disabled and those who do not struggle with obvious developmental issues.

Similarly, the eight PSTs who volunteered their time at a local organization that served children with chronic life-threatening illnesses indicated that this agency was essential because it provided, "a fun environment, opportunities for social networking, and a space for self-esteem building." After working with these children and their families, the PSTs volunteering with this organization noted that a serious illness could easily take all the joy out of childhood for a young person who is suffering and that this organization, "offers a social and developmental opportunity to a population who could easily miss out on social opportunities which most of us take for granted." Not only does this organization plan recreational activities and family outings, but they have also developed a guidebook for the resources and services provided by local colleges and universities for young adults with life-threatening illnesses.

Cara, a PST working with this organization, observed that the time and money associated with hospital care made living a "normal" life difficult for these families. Cara, a politically active college student explained, "The lack of national healthcare initiatives and the high cost of healthcare is a huge strain on these already stressed families." Without this organization, these families, who come from across the country to area hospitals, would have to spend more time "pursuing and finding recreation activities that meet the special needs associated with this population and therefore would not be able to participate." They might also miss out on an opportunity for support and bonding among people who understand their needs and experience less access to the college resources available to them because of their illnesses.

Without this agency, these children would likely not be able to play organized sports, which would also take away an important context for developing an understanding of the importance of teamwork, communication, responsibility, and physical fitness. These children are often physically limited by their chronic illnesses, thus making it almost impossible for them to have a "normal" childhood.

Those PSTs who conducted their service with community-based organizations identified needs related to development of collaborative efforts conducive to the "enrichment" of the local area. All of the PSTs with the community bike repair and recycling program noted that the majority of recipients of the service were children from lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. Kacey explained that during her first time volunteering, she learned that most bicycles are donated from area families who grow out of their old bikes or who receive newer ones. She also explained how this agency was mutually beneficial for both the community and the citizens in that people can donate time rather than money to earn a bike and learn simple repair skills, while the community benefits from having more of its citizens use bikes as a mode of transportation rather than cars.

Similarly, Gail explained that the goal of the organization is, "to help as many people as possible receive and use their bikes as a primary mode of transportation." Acknowledging the limited parking in the town and the fact that the majority of residents are students or workers commuting to campus, Gail also suggested that the agency hoped to reduce harmful car emissions, relieve the overcrowded bus system, and increase the environmental consciousness of citizens.

Other PSTs volunteering at the bike repair and recycling program also noted the following structures that contributed to a community need: a lack of parking; a community concerned with a collective effort to improve the quality of life for all people; a strong volunteer ethic; community; socio-economic diversity within the town; multiple expensive local bike shops; a "green friendly" community; and a commitment to exercise. Without the community bike program, PSTs hypothesized that there might be fewer resources to allow access to bikes, a lack of healthy recreational opportunities for socio-economically stressed kids; and a shortage of bike mechanics willing to help out for free.

How might contact with similar organizations assist with your understanding of underserved populations in that might be members of your future classrooms?

Overall, PSTs responded positively to this question, suggesting that the service experience gave them plenty to think about in regards to their future careers as teachers. Not only did PSTs think about the actual needs of students, but the experience with community partners also made them consider how resources might be limited in the classroom.

Ellen, who worked with citizens with developmental disabilities, wrote that the service experience “has given me numerous experiences that will be beneficial to my future teaching career. As I have discussed in previous assignments, I have learned how to design activities that can accommodate a variety of learning styles and learning paces.” This PST may not have had the opportunity to develop an understanding of the difficulty involved with planning lessons for diverse learners had she not been exposed to this setting. Through her reflection, Ellen demonstrates that she has begun to think about how the classroom will present challenges, but because of this experience, she feels that she might better be prepared to deal with these issues.

Although I expected Ellen to discuss how working with developmentally disabled students encouraged her to think about diverse learners, I did not anticipate that she would consider the economic limitations of teachers and students. Later, in the same journal entry, Ellen wrote,

I value this experience because when I become a teacher I am going to have to work with a limited number of resources as well. I will have to think of activities that can be completed with the resources available to me and to my students.

In this response, Ellen speaks to an issue that currently plagues our school systems in America—lack of resources and funding. Up to this point, Ellen had not considered how her life as a teacher would be affected by budget shortfalls. Ellen’s new realizations about the experience of becoming a teacher are similar to many PSTs with whom I have worked; they often do not have any prior knowledge concerning the amount of money or lack of resources teachers have when they enter the profession. Many PSTs who are still early into their majors only have an awareness of the classroom as a student. For the most part, I find that most PSTs have not yet considered the financial investment involved with teaching unless they have siblings or parents who are practicing teachers. Ellen’s involvement in her service-learning experience required her to think more about developing classroom activities with a limited budget and resources.

In the same journal response, Ellen also discussed the impact of inadequate resources on her students:

I have heard stories of teachers assigning projects that some students cannot complete due to their limited family resources, and I do not want situations like these to occur.

They can create negative feelings within the student, such as feelings of inadequacy, or lead him or her to be alienated from peers.

Ellen's work with her community partnership also gave her the opportunity to consider how students who may not have resources at home might feel inadequate because of their parents' financial situations. Ellen's parents are married and both work outside of the home, which has afforded her a comfortable lifestyle, and although she understands that some people are not so fortunate, she had not considered the impact financial strain has on students. This community partnership enabled forced Ellen to think more deeply about how she might one day structure assignments to take into account the needs of students from all income levels. In this journal entry, Ellen demonstrates that she has begun to develop cultural competence in the area of diverse socioeconomic situations.

Graham's response to this question indicated that he was truly beginning to develop a sense of cultural competence. He wrote:

My advice to anyone coming into an experience like this is to come in with a clear head thirsting for knowledge and discovery. I knew from the start that these high school students know more about singing and vocal production than I do...

Graham, a white male from a middle class background was working with a choral group comprised mostly of African American teenage females. His response indicates that he was beginning to realize that students do not come to school as vapid spaces to be filled with information. Here, Graham alludes to "funds of knowledge", which are "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez, 2001, p. 133). This recognition that children have their own set of aptitudes suggests that Graham was taking steps to consider that teachers should meet students where their understanding ends and the teacher's begins. Further evidence that Graham was beginning to develop cultural competence is in his admission that this group of young women knew more about the subject than he did.

Another example of a PST who saw the connections between working with members of the community and her future classroom was Jill, the young woman who worked with the SAT Prep class for Latino high school students. In her journal response, Jill discussed how the experience made her aware of information about her students' lives that she may not have otherwise known. Jill explained that visiting her tutees every week gave her "a broader perspective on their lives and has helped me understand them better as people, not just high school students we are serving as an organization." Jill also recognized that students often have to concentrate on other things like "goals and ideas and commitments outside the realm of academics, and remembering this helps me to get to connect and communicate with them better." If carried into her teaching practice, this recognition might enable Jill to make strong connections with her future students. Jill's goal is to teach English language learners at the

secondary level; her service experience not only gave her access to a population of students similar to those she may one day teach, but it has also enabled her to better understand the influences and difficulties her future students may face.

Dan also completed his service with a community partner that served the needs of English language learners. During his after school mentoring sessions, Dan acknowledged that he learned more about immigration and tutoring through his service. He describes his experience with Kandur...

...on a weekly basis, has shown me how difficult but also rewarding an immigration experience can be. Armed with two languages, two cultures, and an eagerness to learn, Kandur constantly uses his own experiences to relate class work to his own experiences...Members of our group have been paired with an amazingly diverse group of students. Some of them are 20 years old with children and husbands, others are only 14 years old and are extremely recent arrivals into the country.

Dan presents a picture of a group of high school students that many PSTs do not have the opportunity to meet so early in their clinical experiences. Although extremely open-minded and appreciative of diversity on all levels (maybe one of the most culturally competent PSTs I have ever taught), Dan admits that he never considered that some of his future students might actually have families of their own. During an in-class discussion following this journal entry, Dan recognized that he would have a whole different opinion of homework and after-school requirements if he knew some of his students had spouses and children. It had never occurred to him that someone his own age (just 20-years-old) would actually have to support a family, which might make doing school work less of a priority. Dan's journal entry and subsequent comment during a class discussion epitomize the possibilities that service-learning partnerships with community organizations might have for the field of pre-service teacher education.

Discussion

Typical early field experiences in teacher preparation programs only require PSTs to observe in classrooms and to occasionally tutor students within their content area. However, participating in pre-service teacher education course that has a service-learning component might present opportunities to better understand the diverse experiences from which students might come. When teachers have a context for understanding the special circumstances surrounding students in their classrooms, they may be able to communicate better with families and suggest resources and support services for the child and the family.

Through the first reflection, PSTs demonstrated that they were able to ask necessary questions and to assess factors within society that may present a specific need for organizations that support the interests of underserved populations. Within the frame provided by Sleeter (2008),

these PSTs showed that they could effectively participate in conversations with community partners in which schools are located in an attempt to learn more about the needs of students and their families. Furthermore, these field experiences encouraged PSTs to think more about the community beyond the walls of the school building and how their future students might have special needs that may not always be so obvious. For example, these PSTs might one day have students whose siblings have developmental disabilities or are suffering from chronic illnesses. Working with these community partners for at least 30 hours over a four month period enabled PSTs to examine how organizations sometimes exist to support populations who may not have their needs met in the school setting.

The actual purpose of service-learning is to provide participants with an experience that reinforces content taught in the academic course. While taking this course, students read about diverse learners and non-traditional school settings; and without this service experience, these PSTs may not have been able to engage in reflection and discussion in such a critical manner. The organizations with which they were volunteering provided PSTs an actual context for not only understanding the theories taught in the course, but to also develop relationships with the very people represented by these theories. Additionally, those PSTs who volunteered their time with school-related programs that served the needs of those students who are typically marginalized by American public school curriculum participated in a valuable experience that will hopefully have positive influences on their teaching practices.

Class discussions that developed out of the prompted reflections revealed that these PSTs would likely take this 30-hour experience into their own classrooms in the future in order to help them better understand the needs of those students who are typically marginalized (i.e. children with life-threatening illnesses, the developmentally disabled, English Language Learners, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, etc.). One of the most pressing needs in American public schools in the 21st Century is preparing language, ethnic, and culture minority students to be successful both in academic settings and in the world beyond the walls of the classroom. Those PSTs who identified the need for these programs existed in the lack of resources and support for students who represent a variety of backgrounds including English language learners, lower socioeconomic families, those who succumb to negative peer pressure, recent immigrants, etc., might be more likely to focus on utilizing community resources to educate themselves about the needs of their own students. This experience gave these PSTs the opportunity to learn about non-profit organizations that exist in communities to help specific populations navigate the sometimes difficult situations that exist for them in society.

Although several other themes emerged out of these prompted reflections, those most closely related to Sleeter's (2008) framework that suggests PSTs who participate in early fieldwork experiences like service-learning might be better equipped to participate in conversations and develop relationships with stakeholders in the communities in which they teach.

As evidenced by the responses to prompted reflections in this particular service-learning course, volunteer experiences have to be carefully and strategically planned. Without a class discussion component, many of these PSTs' misconceptions about culture may have gone unexplained. If service-learning classes lack these types of conversations, the course might have harmful effects on PSTs' perceptions of how community organizations help and advocate for underserved populations by working within the parameters of an inadequate budget and a limited staff.

Implications for Teacher Education

Adding a service-learning component to pre-service education courses is not a novel concept and does not always have positive repercussions for the instructor, students, and community partners. In fact, of the three years I taught the course, the relationship did not develop smoothly until the year this group came together. When planned well, utilizing the needs of the community partners as the impetus for course material, service-learning has the potential to create collaborative engagement from representatives of the university and the greater community. Furthermore, service-learning has the potential to do much more than develop cultural competence with pre-service teachers; it provides a unique opportunity for the instructor and PSTs to develop relationships with community members outside of their own collegiate environment.

As the research suggests, community-based field experiences might offer the opportunity to see how the needs of diverse populations are met in the greater community and how children within a given community interact and hopefully succeed in society. Additionally, by observing and reflecting on how non-profit agencies and after-school programs operate on minimal budgets with the help of volunteers, pre-service educators gain a greater understanding of the need for school-community partnerships for the support of underserved populations.

Participation in service-learning experiences with school-related organizations, such as afterschool tutorials and faith-based programs, can also give PSTs insight into populations of students with whom they may have not been familiar during their own schooling experience. For example, PSTs might experience an entirely different perspective of non-English speaking students in an after-school test preparation program or might get to know the seemingly introverted students who emerge from their shells during group discussion in a small, afterschool setting. These experiences may influence how PSTs interact with future students who may not be those who stand out in the regular classroom.

By crafting assignments in a service-learning course that put PSTs into the community and engaging them in critical reflection about their observations and experiences, the instructor can possibly offer future educators the opportunity to develop the skills to better understand the realities of teaching and fully participate in discussions with community partners. Furthermore, instructors may be able to help PSTs think more critically about how they perceive the community's role in their school and vice versa.

Overall, early service-learning experiences may have the potential to offer PSTs the opportunity not only to examine how community agencies can play a role in serving the unmet needs of underserved populations of students, but also might give PSTs a new, more open-minded lens through which to view future students.

Conclusions

As the Service Learning in Teacher Education International Research Affinity Group (2006) recommends, more research needs to be conducted on the impact service-learning has on participants enrolled in teacher preparation programs. The group suggests that internationally, researchers need to consider how service experiences “impact the development of cross cultural competence and diversity...[and] affect teacher educator’s ability to teach better...” (p. 1). Additionally, the group offers recommendations that research move in the direction of evaluating the institutionalization of service-learning in teacher education, implementation of such courses, and development of theoretical frameworks that might influence the practice of service-learning in teacher preparation programs.

This study tested the waters for demonstrating how teacher educators concerned with developing cultural competence with PSTs might partner with service organizations located within a community in order to meet that goal. Over the course of the semester-long service-learning experience, PSTs enrolled in this course demonstrated that the experience engaged them in critical thought about the role of community organizations in the educational process and pressed PSTs to think more deeply about the backgrounds and experiences of the people with whom they worked. Furthermore, PSTs showed that they were able to examine structures within society that might cause a need for an agency that serves the needs of underserved populations within the classrooms they will soon enter.

This small study of one group of PSTs who participated in a service-learning experience early in their education coursework not only provides a framework for engaging service participants in dialogue about perceptions, but also creates a model for how assignments in future service-learning courses might be developed to prepare teachers for diverse classrooms in the 21st Century.

References

- Anderson, J. (1998). Service learning and teacher education. ERIC Document ID: ED 421481.
- Anderson, J., & Erickson, J. (2003). Service-learning in preservice teacher education. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 7(2), 111–115.
- Anderson, J., Swick, K. & Yff, J. (2001). Service-learning in teacher education: Enhancing the growth of new teachers, their students, and communities. ERIC Document ID: ED451167

- Baldwin, S., Buchanan, A., & Rudisell, M. (2007). What teacher candidates learned about diversity, social justice, and themselves from service-learning experiences. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(4), 315-327.
- Butin, D. W. (2007). Justice learning: Service-learning as justice-oriented education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*. 40(2), 177-183.
- Butin, D. W. (2005). Preface: Disturbing normalizations of service-learning" in D. W. Butin (Ed.) *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Critical Issues and Directions*. Palgrave.
- Butin, D. W. (2003). Of what use is it?: Multiple conceptualizations of service-learning in education. *Teachers College Record*, 105(9), 1674-1692.
- Colville-Hall, S., MacDonald, S., & Smolen, L. (1995). Preparing PSTs for diversity in learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 46, 295-303.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19 (5), 2-14.
- Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., and Isaacs, M. (1989). Toward a culturally competent system of care. Vol. 1 Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University.
- Eby, J. (1998). Why service-learning is bad. Unpublished paper. Retrieved from: http://www.messiah.edu/external_programs/agape/servicelearning/articles/wrongsvcd.pdf
- Erickson, J., & Anderson, J. (1997). Learning with the community: concepts and models for service-learning in teacher education. AAEE's Series on Service Learning in the Disciplines. ERIC Document ID: ED416179.
- Garmon, M.A. (2004). Changing preservice teachers' attitudes/beliefs about diversity: What are the critical factors? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(3), 201-213.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis theory and method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Glesne, C. (2005). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. (3rd Ed.) New York: Longman.
- Kahne, J. & Westheimer, J. (1996). In the service of what? The politics of service learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(9), 592-599.

- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D. and Gonzalez, N. (2001). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, XXXI, 2, 132-141.
- Melnick, S. & Zeichner, K. (1995). *Teacher education for cultural diversity: Enhancing the capacity of teacher education institutions to address diversity issues* (Research Report 954). East Lansing, MI: National Center for Research on Teacher Learning.
- Oakes, J. & Lipton, M. (200). *Teaching to change the world*. (3rd Ed.). New York: McGraw Hill Publishing.
- Service-learning in Teacher Education International Research Affinity Group. (2006). A research agenda for advancing service-learning in teacher education. Retrieved from: <http://www.icrce.umn.edu/teacher/icslte/index.html>
- Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage.
- Sleeter, C. (2008). Equity, democracy, and neoliberal assaults on teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(8), 1947–1957.
- Solomon, R. P. (1995). Beyond prescriptive pedagogy: Teacher inservice education for cultural diversity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(4), 251-258.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. (2009). *Characteristics of Schools, Districts, Teachers, Principals, and School Libraries in the United States, 2008-2009, Schools and Staffing Survey*. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/>
- Valentin, S. (2006). Addressing diversity teacher education programs. *Education*, 127(2), 196-202.
- York, D.E. (1997). Preparing teachers for tomorrow's children: Cross-cultural training for teachers. In J.E. King, E.R. Hollins & W.C. Hayman (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for cultural diversity* (pp. 73-84). New York: Teachers College Press.

ⁱ Names of all participants have been changed to protect their privacy.