

A Transformational Journey: A Framework for Pre-Service Teachers to Learn About Diversity through Service Learning

Jocelyn Glazier*
University of North Carolina, USA

Amy Charpentier
University of North Carolina, USA

Harriet Boone
University of North Carolina, USA

Abstract

Can service learning be an effective avenue for preparing culturally responsive teachers? Many researchers have identified the need to examine service learning's impact on cross-cultural competence and pre-service teachers' understanding of diversity. This article examines the service learning experiences of participants in a teacher preparation program and considers what impact service learning had on these students' understandings of and beliefs about diversity. We suggest that using a framework provided by Nieto (2000) may be useful for teacher educators and others hoping to create transformational service learning experiences for their students.

*Associate Professor, School of Education, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 27599. Email: jocelyng@email.unc.edu

Introduction

Can service learning be an effective avenue for the preparation of culturally responsive teachers who recognize multiple ways of thinking and support a wide range of cultural perspectives and practices (Oakes & Lipton, 2003)? Many researchers (e.g. The Service Learning in Teacher Education International Research Affinity Group, 2006; Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007; Akiba, 2011) have identified the need to examine service learning's impact on cross-cultural competence and pre-service teachers' understanding of diversity. This article examines the service learning experiences of participants in a Masters of Arts for Teaching program and considers what impact service learning had on these students' understandings of and beliefs about diversity. We conclude with a discussion of a framework that might make service learning a particularly powerful pedagogy for transformation in teacher education and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

As reflected in education programs across the country, our students are primarily white and middle class (Nieto, 2000; Boyle-Baise, 2005; Sleeter, 2000; Picower, 2009). Similar to other pre-service teachers, ours often assume their experiences growing up are everyone else's experiences (Baldwin et al., 2007). They are rarely critical of or reflective about their unearned privilege. Often pre-service teachers advocate a color-blind approach to students, dismissing or diminishing the many different cultural backgrounds from which students come (Cockrell et al, 1999; Lawrence, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Young & Buchanan, 1996; Picower, 2009; O'Conner, 2010; Akiba, 2011). These pre-service teachers also assume that all students have the same needs regardless of background or life experience. Challenging these persistent misconceptions is one of the goals of our work and the work of our teacher education colleagues across the US.

Often the way these preconceived notions are challenged is through involving pre-service teachers in single multicultural education courses. Unfortunately, research has suggested that these experiences often prove minimally effective at best and reifying at worst (see Brown, 2004; Coville-Hall, MacDonald & Smolen, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Wiggins & Follo, 1999; Villegas, 2007). One of the limits of these isolated efforts is that the courses fail to allow students to experience all points on what Nieto (2000) calls a transformative journey. According to Nieto, effective diversity pedagogy must provide students with experiences that prompt them to: "1) face and accept their own identity; 2) become learners of their students' realities; 3) develop strong and meaningful

relationships with their students; 4) become multilingual and multicultural; 5) learn to challenge racism and other biases, and 6) develop a community of critical friends” (Nieto, 2000). As we have begun to incorporate service learning into our teacher education programs, offering education students experience in working directly with students and families identified as different from themselves, we wondered whether this approach would impact pre-service teachers’ dispositions and practices in ways more traditional multicultural education courses might not. Would the incorporation of service learning allow pre-service teachers to move further along in their transformational journey?

Service learning is a form of experiential education that involves the intentional integration of academic work with relevant community service in schools or communities (Howard, 1993; 2002). Service learning also requires critical guided reflection from the students to allow them to consider the connection between their coursework and service fieldwork. Research suggests service learning can provide potentially great benefits for pre-service teachers with regard to their development of dispositions towards diversity (e.g., Dodd & Lilly, 2000; Brown & Howard, 2005; Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007; Conner, 2010; Akiba, 2011). “Service learning has the power to increase the empathy and understanding of pre-service teachers for diverse learners and communities” (Hones, 1997, p. 21). However, there continues to be little research on the extent to which the service learning experience impacts pre-service teacher dispositions towards diverse students and families. Furthermore, there is scarce research about the ways these experiences encourage pre-service teachers to examine their own cultural identities and, in many cases, the privileges that accompany those identities. As Lee notes:

Pre-service teachers need to do more than learn about the other; they need to learn about themselves in relation to the other and understand themselves as an other to others. They need to understand their positioning within a dominant culture and recognize the biases they might hold toward non-dominant groups in society (Lee, 1995 as cited in Desrochers, 2006).

Whiteness, alongside social class, continues to be unexplored and unspoken territory in teacher education courses (Service learningeeter, 2001; Ukpokodu, 2002; Villegas, 2007; Picower, 2007). Our research begins to capture whether and to what extent service learning can open these and other difficult dialogues.

Data and Methods

While we have incorporated service learning in other courses across our School of Education, we have focused in this article on the experience of students in our Masters of Arts for Teaching (MAT) program. Participants in the study included sixteen pre-service teachers in the MAT program. These students are involved in an intense full year of coursework and fieldwork that leads to a Masters degree and certification to teach. In the first summer of their program, students take two courses: one provides an overview of schools and their role in American society while the second introduces students to teaching, broadly speaking. Within these courses, among other things, students learn about multicultural education and diverse learners.

Integrated with their summer coursework during the summer of 2008, all of the pre-service teachers in the study volunteered to participate in an ongoing service learning activity at a Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom School. This particular Freedom School, serving rising third through ninth-graders, developed as part of an initiative to introduce Hip Hop pedagogy into area schools to foster readiness and academic preparedness. The school's mission was to inspire students (called scholars) to read, speak and transform the world around them through the CDF Integrated Reading Curriculum and the Hip Hop program's arts and leadership curriculum. MAT students worked with scholars during "Drop Everything and Read" (DEAR) time and the Integrated Reading Curriculum, and helped coordinate the Finale showcase where the scholars, their teachers and the MAT students all did performances that they had developed through the summer program. The MAT students sometimes worked one-on-one with students and sometimes with small groups of students. Throughout their involvement, they served multiple roles: informal mentors – chatting with students about their lives, their music interests, their families, etc. – and teachers (helping students make sense of texts they were reading and writing, for example).

Sixteen MAT students were involved in the study: three identified as African American, one as Black and twelve as Caucasian. All participants were between ages 21 and 35. The pre-service teachers performed at least 30 hours of service learning over five weeks at the Freedom School where all 50 students identified as either African American or Latino and were from a lower to middle SES.

Data was gathered to begin to gauge pre-service teachers' dispositions toward and understanding of diversity before, during and after the service learning experience at the Freedom School. Surveys assessing students' dispositions toward diversity were administered to all students at the beginning and end of the summer session. Students' service learning reflections and logs were collected, Blackboard entries were gathered and focus group interviews were conducted with all participants at the end of the semester. In addition, field notes were taken during some classes at the university and at the Freedom school.

Thematic analysis was conducted first on the focus group transcripts. Using a constant comparative method, themes identified in focus group data were compared/contrasted with themes identified through analysis of written data (service learning reflections, logs and Blackboard discussion entries) and field notes. While initially we began with an open coding scheme, using an inductive approach to identify themes and categories, what became apparent was the way our findings reflected Nieto's (2000) stops on the transformational journey. Therefore, we came to use these a priori themes to make sense of our data. Finally, we compared findings from this case to findings from our previous research on the impact of service learning on pre-service teachers in other teacher education courses at the university.

Analysis and Results

The service experience, coupled with the coursework in which students engaged, allowed many participants to begin to experience the sort of transformation Nieto (2000) writes about. The complex and comprehensive opportunities provided through the service work and reflection led to new understandings for some of our pre-service teachers. Below, we briefly describe here some of our findings.

Facing and accepting their own reality: We coded instances that reflected pre-service teachers' ability to 1) recognize their own culture/race/social class, etc. — essentially, their positionality—and 2) critique that as evidence of participants' facing and accepting their own reality. Data analysis revealed the way the service experience—the action and accompanying reflection—prompted pre-service teachers to begin to examine their own cultural identities.

Of particular interest was the way students were able to engage in the oft-unspeakable topic of race (Morrison, 1989; Pollack, 2004), particularly their own, in conversation with one another. During the focus group, for example, two white male participants referred a number of times to their self-named “white, privileged perspective,” recognizing the ways their own more privileged schooling experiences differed from those of the students at the Freedom School. Another student wrote in her final reflection, “As I ...began my service learning experience...I was preoccupied with worries about being rejected by the students...because I was white and had likely grown up with more financial and social stability.” This finding was particularly critical for us given that our previous research suggested an absence of discussion of race among other participants in service learning (Authors, 2007).

Also reflected in data related to this theme was pre-service teachers’ recognition of gaps in their own cultural knowledge. For example, one participant, George, reflected during the focus group conversation on his learning about hip hop as a result of engaging with the students at the Freedom School: “I think it, really for my disappointment, how much growing up in terms of music, we put it all on the backs of rich white old guys from Europe and America, that they're the ones that create all the good music, the sophisticated music. It really throws into perspective what is sophisticated music.” Notice how George comes to recognize the limitations of his own cultural learning and understanding, specifically about music in this case.

Becoming learners of the students’ realities: We coded instances where participants recognized the lived experiences of their students, noting the ways students’ experiences may be similar to or different from their own, as examples of the pre-service teachers becoming learners of the students’ realities. This theme also referred to instances that indicated participants’ willingness to actively learn about their students. Whereas the pre-service teachers identified in initial written course documents that they perceived their role to be helping the students, they came to recognize that they learned as much, if not more, from the Freedom School scholars. One student, Lisa, completed a video project with the Freedom School scholars as part of the finale project. She sought to learn *from them* how *they* defined good teachers, recognizing the ways the students’ opinions on the matter could influence her and her colleagues’ future teaching.

In addition, the pre-service teachers came to recognize the ways the lives and experiences of the Freedom school scholars differed from their own. For

example, while many of the pre-service teachers identified growing up in families with a mother and/or father, they recognized that that was not necessarily the case for the scholars. Gennie explains: “I wouldn’t send a letter home to my students and say ‘have your mom or dad sign this,’ because not every kid has a mom or dad at home...Some kids live with their grandmothers.” These examples of learning from the scholars was evident across the data.

Developing strong and meaningful relationships with students: We identified those instances where participants referred to their strong relationships with Freedom School students or offered examples of meaningful interactions with students as evidence of their developing strong and meaningful relationships with students. While the pre-service teachers only spent 30 hours over the course of five weeks with the Freedom School students, some of the teachers were able to begin to develop relationships with their students. One pre-service teacher wrote in a final reflection: “I got a hug from a very disruptive...student on the last day... It made me feel as though I really did connect with students.” Admittedly, this was one area for which our data was fairly limited, leading us to a few of the conclusions we identify later in the paper.

Becoming multilingual and multicultural: We coded instances of pre-service teachers becoming multilingual and multicultural when the data suggested an ability on the part of pre-service teachers to recognize and use multiple Discourses/discourses (Gee, 1992) – multiple ways of being and ways of speaking. This theme refers to participants’ recognition of multiple cultures and languages as well as their use of various cultural references and artifacts. Analysis revealed ways the pre-service teachers began to try on the language and knowledge of the Freedom School students with whom they worked. For example, a number of the MAT students were not familiar with hip hop music. When they began to realize this cultural gap, the MAT students took it upon themselves to find and listen to music the Freedom School students talked about so they could share that knowledge. One example of this is suggested in one student’s Blackboard posting: “Hip hop is more than just a musical genre. It is a culture that influences our language, art, fashion and modern life. I’m a white female who listens to folk rock and NPR while eating tofu, yet I am aware of hip hop inspired ideas and trends.”

The pre-service teachers recognized too that becoming multicultural was important to their future teaching. Vicky, commented during the focus group interview:

When you are explaining issues or new concepts to children...it's easier for me as a white woman to say, or Italian, 'oh, I love spaghetti and meatballs. Isn't it great?' But to bring in other cultural references...Like, for sushi...give that as an example. Or give R & B as an example if you're talking about music versus country music.

Here, Vicky recognizes the need to incorporate culturally appropriate examples into her teaching repertoire.

Learning to challenge racism and other biases: For this theme, we coded instances when participants appeared to recognize their own racism and/or bias and critique that and/or when they recognized and challenged the racism/biases of others. Examples included the following:

Ellen: Even though I'm African American, they are too. I just still thought, 'so they're African American. They're probably really disadvantaged, so they can't read.' It was really bad. I think ...it was subconscious 'cause I just automatically said...we just need to give them an easier word...It's just opened my eyes to how smart the kids are...(FG)

Lisa: Sometimes when I feel like I'm dealing with kids from disadvantaged backgrounds, I automatically assume their family is not involved...It's really not true. We had lots of families that were extremely involved (FG)

These examples suggest in particular the way the pre-service teachers were beginning to engage in self-critique as a result of participation on this experience.

Developing a community of critical friends: Most of the pre-service teachers carpooled to and from the Freedom School. In addition, the pre-service teachers spent every day together for five weeks. The carpooling and informal conversations gave these students ample opportunity to discuss and reflect on their daily experiences in the Freedom School. As a result, participants were willing to "debate, critique and challenge one another" (Nieto, 2000, p. 185), something evident in Blackboard discussions and focus group data in particular as the pre-service teachers invited each other into the conversation (e.g. "What do you think, Gina?") and asked one another critical questions (e.g. "Why did you think that?").

Data suggested that four of the six themes in Nieto's framework were regularly evident in the data. On the positive front, pre-service teachers: recognized their own experiences and, in many cases, how they differed from students' experiences; recognized more about their students' lives and the complexity of their lives; learned to recognize their own biases and challenged these; and developed a community of critical friends as they traveled back and forth to the Freedom School, met each other in class and participated in regular conversations on BB.

On a more critical note, however, we noted in the data that while students did come to recognize some of their own privilege, they did not move to critique that privileged status. Further, they didn't look beyond their own experience to the larger societal structures that may perpetuate the existence of privilege.

What the pre-service teachers identified learning about their students' realities often focused on the scholars' negative experiences rather than the positive ones, thus perpetuating some of the deficit notions (Delpit, 1995; Akiba, 2011) that the pre-service teachers had brought with them to their service experience. Narratives that the pre-service teachers shared about the scholars with whom they worked overwhelmingly contained such stories as students' whose relatives were incarcerated and who spoke about bad home situations. In some ways these challenging narratives enabled the pre-service teachers to begin to question their own pre-existing beliefs. This was illustrated in the case of Gennie who when she learned one scholar's uncle was in jail, had to confront her notion of "those in jail". She explains: "I mean you grow up thinking bad guys are in jail. So to me, it was like – [if he's in jail, he's a] bad guy. But he's your uncle." The "but" in Gennie's comment illustrates the conflict that Gennie now has to contend with and consider. Despite this potentially positive glimpse, the lack of positive stories to balance the negative ones may have left the pre-service teachers feeling more confident about the stereotypes with which they entered the setting. While they no doubt learned about positive aspects of the scholars' lives, the fact that the negative experiences remained foremost in their minds – and in written and verbal conversation – may leave an unbalanced image, one that continues to privilege the 'positive' experiences of the pre-service teachers' own lives and the deficit notions of race and class with which they may have entered graduate school.

While the pre-service teachers developed some relationships with the Freedom School scholars, they did not have the opportunity to develop in-depth

meaningful relationships due to a few different factors, including unclear roles at the school, lack of relationships with the classroom teachers and, simply, a lack of time to spend with the scholars. This development of meaningful relationships is a crucial part of the journey as Nieto describes it.

The pre-service teachers began to “talk the multicultural talk”, to an extent. But they did not become culturally or linguistically fluent as a result of this service learning experience. While the pre-service teachers recognized their own biases, and challenged those, they did not know how to challenge the -isms of others. One example helps to illustrate this. One of the activities the pre-service teachers observed and participated in at the school was the scholars’ learning hip-hop. One pre-service participant explained: “K’s [a scholar’s] rapping was amazing...However, he did incorporate the phrase ‘no homo’ into one of his raps, and I wasn’t sure how to handle that. As a class, we decided that the phrase violated the positive communication clause of the class contract.” While the pre-service teacher could stand behind the class’ response to the student, the fact that she did not challenge the student herself in the moment is cause for question.

Discussion

We would have loved to end this article with strong outcomes, suggesting that all of the pre-service teachers were transformed as a result of their participation in this service experience. However, that is far from the case. In reflecting on our work, we are reminded of the findings of the research conducted by Desrochers (2006) on service learning experiences within her teacher education program:

On the whole, students found engaging with these communities an exciting, almost exotic experience in their teacher education program, a kind of interesting side-trip to explore how children from other cultural and social backgrounds experience school. While their reflective papers suggested that the experience opened their eyes to the challenges these children faced, I am not at all sure the field experience...succeeded in doing more than scratching the surface of well-anchored child-deficit assumptions of which Delpit (1995) speaks” (p. xx).

While we know many of the students experienced some of the stops along the transformational path, they did not all experience them equally. Furthermore, as we look at individual cases of participants, it's clear that while some students may have "become multilingual and multicultural," those same students may not have "faced their own realities." While the data suggests that the pre-service teachers' participation in the service learning experience was meaningful and valued, it may not have been transformational. These findings lead us to some important considerations as we continue to further our work in this area.

Before we set out to do this work, we knew that "simply putting pre-service teachers in contact with children in culturally diverse settings through service is not enough to ensure that learning about diversity will take place" (Desrochers, 2006). We had been struggling to identify a way to conceive of meaningful service learning work that would lead to transformative ends. While there are many effective models of service learning, and equally effective models of diversity training, in our review of the research at the time, we couldn't find a framework that brought these literatures together in a concrete way. We wanted to know the specific practices and experiences that might make a service learning experience influential in challenging pre-service teachers' ideas and understandings about culture. While Nieto's (2000) framework serves as a model for the preparation of teachers across a teacher education program, we felt this model could be applied within a service learning experience. In fact, as we stated earlier, it was in reviewing our data initially that we recognized some echoes of Nieto's framework. Taking the framework and then applying it to the data enabled us to determine what "stops" our students actually got to, and which they passed by.

Our task as we move forward with this framework is to consciously place it, as Nieto mentions in her title, front and center. While she's speaking of placing the framework front and center in the larger teacher education context, we suggested placing it front and center within our structuring of future service experiences. We need to examine how to better structure service experiences so that they enable pre-service teachers—and others—to make all stops along the transformational journey—stops they visit and revisit throughout their teacher education program.

How might we do this? First of all, we need to link service experiences *across* our programs, be they teacher preparation programs or programs in other

areas, so that our students 1) have an opportunity to really develop meaningful relationships with those they work; 2) have opportunities to recognize the full lived experiences of the students with whom they work (and not simply the negative ones) and 3) have a chance to become multilingual and multicultural. One semester – even one year – is not enough. In addition, we need to share with our students evidence of their own deficit view thinking and speaking through their program. While we had the privilege of looking in from the outside, imagine how powerful it would be for participants to reflect from the inside out by examining their language use, for example. What if they read transcripts of their conversations and recognized in their own voices their characterizations of the students with whom they worked or the way they privileged their own experiences over those of their students? And what if they heard a cacophony of these voices, enough to bring them to consider how entrenched these ideas are? This may enable them to, among other things, begin to recognize – and ultimately challenge--the institutional nature of such things as privilege.

Finally, we need to help our students capitalize on their status as critical friends for one another. It is through these collaborations that perhaps the pre-service teachers can address larger issues of racism, sexism, homophobia and the like and stand up when students like K. include “no homo” in their raps and everyday conversation. In today’s schools, teachers continue to work in isolation (Grossman, Wineberg & Woolworth, 2001). Breaking that cycle at the pre-service level may lead to more productive, meaningful and socially just classroom experiences for all. We look forward to continuing to examine the impact of service learning on pre-service teachers’ dispositions and practices as we continue to modify how we incorporate service learning into teacher education.

References

- Akiba, M. (2011). Identifying program characteristics for preparing pre-service teachers for diversity. *Teachers College Record*, 113(3), 658-697.
- Anderson, J. (1998). *Service learning and teacher education*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education. [ED421481]
- Baldwin, S. C., Buchanan, A. M., & Rudisill, M. E. (2007). What teacher candidates learned about diversity, social justice, and themselves from service learning experiences. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58 (4), 315.
- Boyle -Baise, M. (2005). Preparing community- oriented teachers: reflections from a multicultural service- learning project. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(13), 446- 463.
- Brown, E.L. & Howard, B. (2005). Becoming culturally responsive teachers through service-learning: A case study of five novice classroom teachers. *Multicultural Education*, 12(4), 2-8.
- Brown, E. (2004). What precipitates change in cultural diversity awareness during a multicultural course: the message or the method? *Journal of Teacher Education* 55 (4), 325-340.
- Buchanan, A., Baldwin, S., & Rudisill, M. (2002). Service learning's scholarship in teacher education. *Educational Researcher*, 28-34.
- Cockrell, K. S., Placier, P. L., Cockrell, D. H., & Middleton, J. N. (1999). Coming to terms with "diversity" and "multiculturalism" in teacher education: Learning about our students, changing our practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 15, 351-366.
- Conner, J. (2010). Learning to unlearn: How a service learning project can help teacher candidates to reframe urban students. *Teaching and Teacher Education* (26)5, 1170-1177.
- Coville-Hall, S., MacDonald, S., & Smolen, L. (1995). Preparing pre-service teachers for diversity in learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(4), 295-303.

- Desrochers, C. (2006). Educating pre-service teachers for diversity: Perspectives on the possibilities and limitations of service learning. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 40(3), p. 263-80.
- Dodd, E. and Lilly, D. (2000). Learning within communities: An investigation of community service learning in teacher education. *Action in Teacher Education*, 22(3), 77-85.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. London: Routledge.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S. and S. Woolworth. (2001). Toward a theory of teacher community, *Teachers College Record* 103 (6), 942-1012.
- Howard, J. (1993). Praxis I. *A faculty casebook on community service learning*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Office of Community Service Press.
- Latham, A. (1999). The teacher-student mismatch. *Educational Leadership*, 56(7), 84-85.
- Lawrence, S. (1997). Beyond race awareness: White racial identity and multicultural teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 48(2), 108-118.
- McIntyre, A. (1997). *Making meaning of Whiteness: Exploring racial identity with White teachers*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Morrison, T. (1989). Unspeakable things unspoken: The Afro-American presence in American literature. *Michigan Quarterly Review*. 1-34.
- Nieto, S (2000). Placing equity front and center. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 180-187.
- Oakes, J. & Lipton, M. (2003). *Teaching to change the world*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Picower, B. (2009). The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: How White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 12(2), 197-215.
- Pollack, M. *Colormute*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sleeter, C.E. (2000). Multicultural education, social positionality, and whiteness. In E. Duarte & S. Smith (Eds.), *Foundational perspectives in multiple education* (pp.118-143). New York: Longman.

Villegas, A. M. (2007). Dispositions in teacher education: a look at social justice. *Journal of Teacher Education* 58 (5), 370–380.

Wiggins, R. & Follo, E. (1999). Development of knowledge, attitudes, and commitment to teach diverse student populations. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 50(2), p. 94.

About the Authors:

Jocelyn Glazier is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Harriet Boone is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Amy Charpentier is a doctoral student in the Culture, Curriculum and Change program in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Email: jocelyng@email.unc.edu