

The Promise of a Community-Based, Participatory Approach to Service-Learning in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article reports on how one teacher education program utilized a Learn and Serve America grant to embed service-learning experiences into its practices. Included are narrative reflections on how the program faculty developed a community-based, participatory approach to service-learning in order to act as a responsive partner to the needs of the local community. The experience of the team illuminates opportunities and challenges in how a community-based, participatory service-learning approach—which attends to the needs of community partners—can strengthen relationships between teacher education programs and the communities in which these programs are situated. The findings suggest that this type of approach can be a useful way to develop transformational service-learning relationships that support teacher education students in developing cultural competence related to inequities associated with poverty, race, and English language acquisition.

Introduction

The movement to involve college students in creating change in their communities continues to grow within academia (Jacoby, 2009). This movement includes a range of activities, some cocurricular, such as volunteer work or community service (Farrell, 2006), and some directly linked to the academic curriculum, such as community-based research and service-learning (Peterson, 2009). Academic service-learning experiences are designed to directly support the attainment of academic objectives (Butin, 2006). In fact, significant attention has been focused on the value of service-learning as an effective way to engage students in learning in higher education (Kuh, 2008) while benefiting local communities.

Service-learning is also gaining ground in teacher education specifically as a way to promote civic engagement for preservice teachers (Anderson, 2000; Daniels, Patterson, & Dunston, 2010) and to support the development of cultural competency (Boyle-Baise,

2002; Tilley-Lubbs, 2011). Research has shown that poverty is the single greatest challenge we face as a nation in improving student achievement (Berliner, 2006). With this awareness comes the recognition that it is crucial for preservice teachers to become culturally competent in terms of understanding the role that poverty, layered together with other facets of identity such as race or language, may play in student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Service-learning experiences in teacher education can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to learn first hand about the diversity of backgrounds within the communities in which they teach (Wade, 2000). In other words, adopting the practice of service-learning in teacher education programs offers tangible benefits to preservice teachers as they develop their knowledge and understanding within complex community landscapes.

Though a significant amount of research has been conducted on the impact of service-learning experiences on preservice teachers (Billig & Freeman, 2010; Root, Callahan, & Billig, 2005; Root & Furco, 2001), less attention has been paid to the role that service-learning can play in strengthening relationships between teacher education programs and the communities in which their preservice teachers learn to teach (Wade, 1997). Research that attends to the community perspective in service-learning is limited (Boyle-Baise, 2002), and even less research addresses community perspectives within the field of service-learning in teacher education. The lack of such research may be in part attributable to differing definitions of community among teacher educators (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). Some teacher education programs define the community as the K-12 schools with which they work, but others include the community that encompasses the K-12 school system as well (Clemons, Coffey, & Ewell, 2011). Defining the community narrowly does not take into account the broader community that may, in fact, feel alienated from the K-12 school system. Since the community engagement approach used by teacher education programs is crucial in establishing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships, we sought to use a community-based, participatory approach to develop a broad-based service-learning initiative as a way to improve our teacher education program.

Using narrative inquiry, this article reports our story as a collaborative grant team who used a community-based, participatory approach to develop service-learning opportunities for our teacher education students while seeking to address community needs and to build capacity. This article will (1) provide a conceptual framework for the community-based, participatory approach to

service-learning; (2) present background information on the evolution of the grant work; (3) outline the narrative inquiry approach and the specific methods employed; (4) present the findings and limitations; and (5) offer a conclusion with implications for teacher education.

Conceptualizing a Community-Based, Participatory Approach to Service-Learning

The service-learning movement has its theoretical foundations in the philosophy of experience articulated by John Dewey (1938). Dewey asserted that “all genuine education comes about through experience” (p. 25). He further noted that not all experiences are equal in supporting growth, which means that the characteristics of the experience are crucial. With service-learning, the preparatory groundwork for the experience is integral in supporting learning gains (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). In the literature, this preparation has tended to focus on the preparation of students rather than on the preparatory work conducted with community organizations to develop and sustain service relationships that provide benefits to the community (Noel, 2011). Since our grant team sought to create opportunities for our preservice teachers that both supported the development of cultural competency and benefited the community, we used Andrew Furco’s (2000) description of service-learning as a way to frame our work. Furco stated:

Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring. (p. 12)

This definition is central to our conceptualization of a community-based, participatory approach as it highlights the value of reciprocity in developing and maintaining service-learning relationships.

Also central to the development of our work was the realization that a service-learning relationship does not automatically benefit all parties. As noted by Blouin and Perry (2009), “Service-learning takes many forms” (p. 133). In other words, not all service-learning is equally beneficial, and in many instances the “relationship” is not reciprocal. Since this pedagogical approach is becoming more prevalent across the country, it becomes all the more important to firmly establish those practices that make service-learning

meaningful for students as well as beneficial for community stakeholders. Toward that end, our conceptualization of a community-based, participatory approach to service-learning also draws from the field of participatory research (*Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Stringer, 2007*), which has its roots in the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970). Freire's work required an examination of power and oppression and the role that structures (such as higher education) play in maintaining oppressive systems. It is only through a participatory approach that the needs of communities are fully considered.

One of the principles of effective service-learning practice identified by the *Wingspread Special Report (Honnet & Poulson, 1996)* is that an "effective program matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances" (p. 2). In order to identify community needs and to be responsive to changing circumstances, it is critical to establish open dialogue. According to Freire (1970), dialogue can lead to trust as well as an equalizing of the status of participants in the relationship. Our grant group sought to establish patterns of dialogue that empowered community organizations rather than imposing a hierarchy based on our role in higher education. Establishing best practices by way of collaborative dialogue is a vital aspect of a community-based, participatory approach given the current expansion of service-learning.

Advocating for a service-learning approach that is dialogic in nature aligns with the work done by Randy Stoecker, a theorist who has made important contributions to the understanding of what makes effective collaborative relationships, particularly from the community partner's perspective. Stoecker and Tryon (2009), when exploring the inequities of service-learning relationships, found that there is often a "bias in focus toward student outcomes" (p. 4). They argued for a process that "empowers[s] community members and build[s] capacity in community organizations" (p. 4). They also observed that if a service-learning project is "driven and steered from the academic side" (p. 189), the project fails. To thwart the "academic bias," it is crucial to involve a range of stakeholders to more fully understand the local ethos of the community in order to advance goals that benefit the community.

Effective service-learning relationships, in other words, should be transformational rather than transactional. According to Enos and Morton (2003), transactional relationships tend to be short-term, focus on the completion of one project, and lead to limited change for community partners, whereas transformational rela-

tionships are long-term, ongoing, interdependent partnerships that rely on dialogue and reflection to create significant change for both sides of the partnership. This transformational aspect aligns with Freire's (1970) notion of praxis. Freire wrote, "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Since the knowledge gained by praxis at the local level can be translated from one community to the next, this study seeks to add to the literature on formulating transformational service-learning relationships as a way to improve teacher education.

Origins of the Community-Based, Participatory Approach

The impetus for this project arose out of a request for proposals from Learn and Serve America in spring 2010 with a focus on integrating service-learning into teacher education. Developed through a team approach, our grant proposal sought to embed service-learning experiences with English Language Learners (ELLs), primarily refugees, into our teacher education program in order to improve the program.

As our grant team formulated our initial plan, one guiding principle was to be a responsive partner to the community since we wanted to initiate a collaborative approach whereby the community became an integral part of planning and implementing the initiative. Toward that end, we decided to devote much of our initial efforts to a participatory planning process that would include (a) preliminary one-on-one meetings with potential community partners and agencies that work with immigrants and refugees in our community, (b) the development of a community partner advisory committee, (c) ongoing communication with community partners, and (d) in-depth interviews with partners likely to support service experiences with our preservice teachers. We carried out this formal planning process during the 2010–2011 academic year.

On our campus, the university's faculty senate had previously approved a service-learning course designation process that uses Furco's (2000) definition of a balanced approach between service and learning. Additionally, the university's Office of Community University Partnerships and Service-Learning offers professional development to faculty who would like to adopt service-learning pedagogy in their courses. By offering such professional development on campus, the office ensures that faculty use high impact

service-learning practices in their courses, which follow best practices as delineated by the National Society for Experiential Education in the *Wingspread Special Report (Honnet & Poulson, 1996)*.

As part of our conceptualization of a community-based, participatory approach to service-learning, we shared Furco's (2000) definition of service-learning with community partners during a community partner advisory committee meeting in order to work from a common understanding when designing service-learning projects. By discussing the conventions around service-learning projects, including preconceived notions, we worked with our community partners to establish a common lexicon. Such commonalities facilitate holding the discussions with local stakeholders that are an important aspect of determining practices that will impact the community (Barnes et al., 2009). This dialogic process sought to ensure that stakeholders would be able to fully articulate their needs and that the teacher education program would be positioned to identify requisite learning goals and objectives.

During subsequent years of the initiative, we have continued to use a participatory approach to modify and to adapt our service-learning relationships, particularly as faculty have worked to incorporate service-learning into the professional sequence of courses. At this juncture in the secondary education program, because of the effectiveness of pilot experiences, all students complete three service-learning courses. Students who enroll in the social studies sequence complete a fourth service-learning experience since their content methods course now includes a service-learning project. Across the other programs in the Department of Education, changes are under way to include additional service-learning courses. In fact, all teacher education students now complete a first-year course that features service-learning.

Methodology and Data Sources

To study this approach, we used naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which posits that the "focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences" (Denzin, 2001, p. 1). Specifically, we utilized a narrative inquiry approach that serves as both "phenomena under study and method of study" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4). In other words, we sought to analyze the stories within our data and to create stories that represented the data. In order to make meaning of our experiences and ensure the

credibility and quality of our findings, we examined multiple forms of data.

A key type of data came from four face-to-face, semistructured interviews (Patton, 2002) with members of four community organizations that we identified as having the capacity and inclination to develop ongoing service-learning projects. Two of these organizations were community centers that offer a variety of programs that serve the refugee community and two were local K-12 schools that have a significant population of refugee students. These interviews posed questions to fully explore each organization's perspectives about the refugee and immigrant communities the organization works with so that we could have a view into the organization's approach to their work with the community. In addition to asking questions about the strengths and capacities of the organization, we asked interviewees to conceptualize how preservice teachers might support the organizations in their work. These interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A second data source includes notes and reflections on nine introductory, one-on-one meetings with representatives of potential community partners. These entities include a range of service organizations, advocacy organizations, educational organizations, and K-12 schools. Many of these organizations were identified through their participation in a network of service providers organized by the state refugee coordinator to try to unify efforts between agencies serving the refugee community. Other organizations were identified during these one-on-one meetings as potential partners for our work. In these meetings, we discussed the service-learning initiative, obtained information about the community organization, brainstormed possibilities for service-learning partnerships, and invited the organization to participate in the community partner advisory committee meetings.

Detailed meeting minutes and participant observation notes from two community partner advisory committee meetings (fall 2010 and spring 2011) made up the third source of data. The meeting participants included representatives from community organizations that are primarily service or educational organizations as well as refugee advocacy organizations. Though some of the advocacy organizations were unable to support long-term service-learning experiences for our preservice teachers, we included their voices in this process since many of the leaders of these advocacy organizations were members of the refugee community. The first community partner advisory committee meeting served to introduce the goals of the Learn and Serve America grant and to seek

open dialogue about these goals as well as general input about the refugee community. During the second meeting, we shared Furco's (2000) definition of service-learning and asked each participant to share ideas about how the needs of their organization might align with academic objectives for a teacher education course. Through this dialogue, we made a clear distinction between community service and service-learning. An e-mail list was created to facilitate communication with the community partner advisory committee. E-mail correspondence with the mailing list and additional one-on-one e-mails with partners were also included in our data analysis.

All of these data sources made up the field texts that were used in our analysis. Data were coded using a narrative analytic approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Coding categories were identified using an inductive approach and themes were developed from storied codes that emerged across the data set. Since we are examining what we learned from this participatory approach, the authors' perspectives are an important piece of the story, and we did not seek to distance ourselves from the data. According to Denzin (2001), "The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied" (p. 3). Therefore, the findings presented here are those that the authors identified as the most important learning gains in our story.

Findings: Developing a Community-Based, Participatory Approach to Service-Learning in Teacher Education

As noted earlier, our participatory approach sought to invite the involvement of our partners in guiding the development of our teacher education program's service-learning activities that not only helped our students learn to be more effective teachers but also addressed the needs of our community partners. In our narrative analysis, we uncovered three key themes that were important to developing a strong reciprocal relationship with our community partners: (1) developing a process that honors the perspectives, capacities, and concerns of the community; (2) reflecting on and acknowledging the tensions within the community; and (3) strategically honoring a need for action. All of these themes, which we expand on below, are critical to consider when engaging with community organizations that serve vulnerable populations.

The Importance of Process

One significant finding was that process matters for all the stakeholders, particularly when the process intentionally advances reciprocity. Through careful attention to a participatory process, community needs are addressed (the service side of service-learning) while preservice teachers are supported in developing their teaching skills (the learning side of service-learning). Though attention to process was not new to the grant team, it became a more clearly defined goal because of its clear impact on the efficacy of the service-learning initiative.

Laying the foundation for a reciprocal process. In the invitation to the inaugural community partner advisory committee meeting, the grant team wrote, “Through dialogue, we hope to develop a better understanding of organizational needs in order to align community needs with course-based service-learning opportunities.” The emphasis was on making space for rich and meaningful dialogue. We made a point of holding this meeting at a community partner’s site rather than at the university to demonstrate our commitment to the community in a very physical sense. Since not all the stakeholders were familiar with the community center, we took a tour of the facility at the end of the meeting.

Through sharing, this foundational community meeting offered direction for the initiative in terms of both service-learning opportunities and process. During this meeting, one of our partners addressed the importance of working from a strengths-based approach. This partner wanted us to consistently encourage our students to recognize the strengths of the young people they worked with rather than focusing on their deficits. Another community partner addressed the need to make sure that our students were prepared to be culturally competent so that interactions with them would be positive experiences for community youth. Though our committee was already committed to a strengths-based approach and the importance of developing cultural competency, the community partners’ concerns highlighted these areas for us so that we were very conscious of these approaches as we developed our course curriculum. This is an example of the interests of community partners and teacher educators intersecting. Community partners advocated for a strengths-based approach and cultural competency because of the potential impact on community youth, and we strongly believe in preparing teachers who have the skills to support the needs of all learners. This process of sharing allowed us to identify common goals.

Another important aspect of the community partner advisory committee meetings was fostering an understanding of the difference between service-learning and other forms of experiential learning including community service, internships, and other field-based experiences. Since teacher education programs include many different field components, we wanted to be very clear with our community partners and with our students about the distinction between service-learning and other traditional teacher education field placements. By cultivating a definition of service-learning that included commitment to mutually beneficial outcomes, we were able to advance one of our primary objectives, which was to construct service-learning opportunities that benefited our students as well as the community. These meetings offered community partners an opportunity to provide programmatic overviews, allowing all community participants an opportunity to learn more about the work of each community organization. After the second community meeting, the director of the community center that hosted the meeting wrote in an e-mail (personal communication, February 7, 2011), “Thank you for organizing the grant partner advisory committee meeting that was held here a couple of weeks ago. We are glad to have been able to attend and grateful for the opportunity to introduce folks to . . . our programs.” For many of the participants at the meeting, it was their first time at the community center.

Attending to the specifics of process. Our community partners benefited from this foundational process, as our partners were active participants in a dialogue that encouraged community understanding. The goal was, through dialogue, to engender trust in working with the university. During one of the community partner interviews, the participant described a past experience in which university students appeared without warning to complete their service-learning project. The community partner had not received any communication from the professor and was unaware that a service-learning partnership even existed. Clearly, this incident shows the harmful effects of the “academic bias,” as articulated by Stoecker and Tryon (2009).

To recover from such bias requires awareness, and this awareness made the grant team all the more careful in their work around collaboration. After developing and carrying out a service-learning partnership as part of this initiative during spring 2011, the same community partner recognized the benefits of a partnership developed through dialogue. The partner described the current service-learning relationship as “win-win” and expressed

a desire to have additional service-learning partnerships like this one with an ongoing commitment of resources and a consistent feedback process. A description of this service-learning relationship was included as part of an exposé written by the university's communications office affirming the importance of the participatory approach, which the community partner described as "always thinking of us and the community perspective" (personal communication, October 20, 2011).

In addition to aligning the philosophical attitudes (or ethos) of a reciprocal relationship, we found that logistical matters can also impact the relationship. In other words, a promising idea for a project that benefits both parties is subject to a myriad of logistical constraints that may hamper implementation. A collaborative process that delves into understanding constraints provides an opening to address impediments so that mutually beneficial opportunities can be developed. At one of our high school partner sites, for instance, we found that because of complicated scheduling concerns (since the school employs an intricate block schedule), it became more viable to support English Language Learners as part of their after-school homework club. This scheduling transition has improved the experience for our preservice teachers and directly benefits the youth who participate in the homework club.

Our awareness of and attention to process also positioned us to be mindful of the capacity of our community partners when seeking to grow programs. Though capacity issues are often a consideration for teacher educators when developing field placements in K-12 schools, teacher educators who have limited experience with community organizations may not recognize the same capacity considerations in community placements. The second community partner advisory committee meeting was held at a community center that up until that point had had a very limited relationship with our university. A subsequent interview with the coordinator of the community center led to the development of a new service-learning partnership. The coordinator had been considering a more academic focus for the Teen Center, which had been primarily social. By shifting to an academic focus, the coordinator was seeking to make the center "more teen led" in order to "empower the teens who attend to take more leadership, have more of a sense of ownership of the teen center." The first author worked with the coordinator to develop a service-learning partnership so that students in his literacy course would tutor youth through the Teen Center program. In advance of the first semester of the partnership, the coordinator wrote (personal communication, August

24, 2011), "I am excited and appreciative that tutoring will be a bigger part of the TC [Teen Center] program this year. Looking forward to making it happen."

After successfully piloting an evening tutoring session with the Teen Center through that course, we utilized this foundation to develop another relationship in which the center's middle-level after-school program engages with a professional education course focused on adolescent development. Two teacher education classes are now working with two different programs at this center. Our attention to process while developing the first partnership afforded us a chance to smoothly implement the second service-learning relationship. Our attention to process also afforded a chance to expand while attending to concerns around capacity, as capacity (and staffing) issues are endemic to many organizations. Growing the initiative at a rate that makes sense for the community partner is an important consideration in a reciprocal partnership, a partnership that offers tangible benefits to community partners as well as to the teacher education program.

Unanticipated outcomes. Honoring open communication has led to other "spillover" opportunities. For instance, since the first author now works closely with four community partners, when students approach him asking about opportunities to work with the community, he is able to connect students with community partners. One community partner reported on two such students, writing (personal communication, October 20, 2011), "Thanks for sending those two wonderful students!" Even though the students are not working within a designated service-learning course, attention to an ongoing process of communication offers an opportunity for the university partners to advocate for the community partners when students are looking for additional community experiences. These expanded relationships also allow students to pursue opportunities outside K-12 schools, thus offering a release valve for schools dealing with the pressures of placing preservice teachers.

Another valuable unanticipated outcome was that community partners made connections with each other. During community partner advisory committee meetings, community partners made contacts with leaders or members of other organizations and began conversations about how they could work together. The first author regularly met with representatives of different organizations to help facilitate these relationships. One of these relationships has been particularly fruitful: a partnership between the community center that hosts the Teen Center and a local high school that works with

many of the students who attend the Teen Center. When the first author was looking to create a service-learning experience that would lead to a more academic focus at the Teen Center, an ELL teacher at the high school, who had university students working with students in his classes, expressed interest in collaborating with the community center. In an e-mail dated August 28, 2011, the first author wrote the community partner, "I visited with [the high school ELL teacher], and he's excited about what is happening, and he's glad that you've got some tutoring scheduled for the teen center. He's also looking for ways to involve more parents, so we may be trying to coordinate a meeting between the three of us."

At the high school, the student government association holds monthly meetings in the school's auditorium for all the high school students. The meetings are hosted and organized by the student government association, and during one meeting, the first author along with the director of the local community center announced the tutoring initiative at the Teen Center. By announcing the program during the school assembly, the community center was able to disseminate information about its services to a wide audience. Information about the tutoring initiative was also disseminated through a community newsletter. These announcements reinforced the earlier one made by our school partner, the high school ELL teacher. The relationship between the high school teacher and community center has continued to evolve through the ongoing work of the first author. The community center now regularly updates the ELL teacher about tutoring sessions conducted with his students. The ELL teacher has also created tutoring guides to assist the university students by offering strategies for effectively tutoring ELLs.

Working collaboratively with a range of community partners has created a cross-fertilization that allows initiatives to coevolve. Not surprisingly, this cross-fertilization has increased the impact of multiple initiatives. As stated by one of the community partners during an interview, "I think the collaboration between [the university] and the community provides all of us with an opportunity to share experiences, make professional connections, and improve the services we offer our students." In essence, the participatory process has opened up lines of dialogue between the various participants, allowing all parties to be acutely aware of program delivery and improvement. Not only do these dialogues offer an opportunity to implement productive service-learning relationships, they also allow the partners an opportunity to more clearly understand the missions and goals of each party. Not surprisingly, there is overlap, and this overlap allows for effective and emerging collaborations.

This transparency of mission also allows for meaningful conversations around an issue we encountered during some of our initial community meetings, namely tension within the community.

Tension Within the Community

Our second finding relates to the complicated dynamics of the grant team's decision to focus on ELLs and how this relates to community needs. During the first community partner advisory committee meeting, one of our partners raised the question of why we decided to focus on ELLs. The grant team made the decision to focus on ELLs for several reasons, including the desire for our preservice teachers to be better prepared to work with ELLs in their future classrooms, the availability of a significant ELL population in the community, and a desire to narrow the focus of the grant so that it would more likely be funded. We were aware that there was tension between the K-12 schools in the area and several community advocacy organizations around the academic achievement of students of color. What we were unaware of was the perception held by families in poverty in the region (many dealing with generational poverty) that refugees are given an abundance of resources. This provides an example of how teacher educators potentially limit their knowledge of the community when they partner only with K-12 schools. The community partner who raised the issue wanted us to be aware of this tension as we moved forward with the initiative. This issue forced us to recognize that though we were working to develop a participatory approach in planning the initiative, we did not utilize a participatory approach when writing the grant application.

The grant team held in-depth discussions of this issue during a number of meetings. For one of these meetings, a special focus group meeting, we invited other university faculty and staff who were not members of the grant team. Though we decided to maintain a focus on ELLs, we also acknowledged the need to convey to the community our willingness to work with all members of the community. Most of the organizations on the community partner advisory committee serve a variety of constituents; by partnering with these agencies, our students have the opportunity to work with other members of the community as well as ELLs.

For one of the interviews, the second author interviewed the director of diversity from one of the local school districts. The interview highlighted the school district's close attention to cultural competency, specifically that it was trying to identify a "baseline"

in order to discern the impact of various programs. The interviewee affirmed the importance of maintaining a strengths-based approach, noting that there is “a charity perspective and a justice one,” and he advocated for an approach committed to social justice. Part of the process, from the director of diversity’s perspective, is to allow open and thoughtful conversations around issues of cultural competency. This issue in particular resonated when he attended a university-hosted conference, *Serving and Learning From Our Neighbors in a Multicultural Environment*. During the conference, he found himself thinking about ways he could see “us teaming together as our district creates a project that is based on service-learning, how we might prepare students to become more culturally aware and sensitive and ready to enter a diverse classroom.” By addressing this tension around preparation of professionals to support an increasingly diverse student population, the director of diversity recognizes the importance of preservice professional development to fully prepare preservice educators for their future in America’s increasingly diverse classrooms.

Given that the systems are complex, the community partner advisory committee meetings offered an opportunity and a space to articulate tensions and concerns. The terminology of tension can have a negative connotation; however, as Dumlao and Janke (2012) pointed out, when working from a relational dialectics perspective, “Experiencing tensions is typical and inherent in any relationship, not necessarily negative” (p. 154). When thinking about working with ELLs (narrowly) or working to enrich educational opportunities (broadly), the systems in place are complex and thus need to be examined and explored as honestly as possible to ensure that the voices of the stakeholders, all stakeholders, resonate through participation. As mentioned by one of the teachers interviewed, the ELLs are not a homogenous group. A recent report compiled by the State Refugee Coordinator indicates that of the more than 6,000 refugees to settle in the area, there have been three predominant trends since the late 1980s. From 1989 through 2000, refugees primarily came from Bosnia and Vietnam. From 2000 to 2008, the majority came from Congo and Somalia. Except for 2008, when the largest single nation of origin was Iraq, most of the refugees have subsequently come from Burma and Bhutan. Even with these discernible concentrations of national origins, refugees to the area since 1989 have come from 27 countries, or more if one accounts for refugees from the former USSR. Given this demographic complexity, our conversations include representatives from a number of refugee advocacy groups.

The Need for Action

Though general conversation and dialogue can provide information for a collective knowledge base, our inquiry highlighted the importance of action. Throughout the first year of the grant cycle, the grant team worked to develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs of each organization so that we could identify and develop service projects to meet those needs. We recognize that if we cannot respond at least partially to those needs, our community partners will lose confidence in the relationship. Because the service-learning initiative is comprehensive, there is greater potential to respond to community needs within a range of courses and programs. An example of this relates to a partner who joined the community partner advisory committee relatively recently. This community agency was looking specifically for someone to provide statistical analysis of a data set. We were able to facilitate a partnership with a faculty member in the educational leadership graduate program who was looking for a real data set to use in his statistics courses. Though this professor is not within our department, the participatory planning process allowed for unexpected (and emerging) linkages to occur. By expanding our definition of service-learning beyond K-12 classrooms, we have been able to conceptualize and facilitate other emerging learning opportunities that can benefit preservice teachers, K-12 students, school leaders, and community organizations.

Emerging relationships, as they develop over time, also allow for action to be taken in unexpected ways. As mentioned previously, one relationship led to advancing an academic element within a teen center that had focused its activities around athletic and social events. Since the youth attending the evening activities were primarily male (90% according to an interview with the director), the Teen Center wanted to find ways to draw in females. The addition of an academic component has led more females to participate in Teen Center activities. In fact, in a subsequent e-mail (personal communication, March 5, 2012), the director wrote that the academic tutoring has “been driving more diversity at the TC. There are a handful of girls who show up specifically for homework help.”

A teacher’s comments during an interview explaining the complex familial needs of his ELLs make the significance of this participation at the community center clearer. He stated, “Most ELL students find it difficult or impossible to do schoolwork at home because of the needs of their families (childcare, cooking, cleaning, shopping). Many students have a second job when they

go home, which involves babysitting their siblings or preparing meals for other family members.” Having an academic focus at the Teen Center offers students the opportunity to advance their academic work and given the complex academic literacies involved in each content area, having access to support allows differentiated assistance to those students who participate in the homework club. For our preservice teachers, working with these students in a community-based setting allows them better access to knowledge of these complex familial relationships.

The aforementioned teacher also identified the reciprocal nature of the service-learning relationship between his students and their university mentors: “Placing middle school students with university students deepens instructional relationships and offers both groups insights into the other’s needs and dreams.” He also affirmed the importance of “a nurturing atmosphere,” which he strives to create in his classroom. By recognizing reciprocal needs, the teacher highlighted the collaborative, needs-based decision-making practice of a participatory approach. Clearly, not only are community needs being addressed, the needs of preservice teachers are being met by their participation in developing nurturing atmospheres in both school and community settings. During an interview, the director of diversity for one of our school district partners mentioned the importance of college role models within the school environment: “Just the exposure, having college students within a high school environment or a middle school environment . . . you know, planting the seed that like ‘Someday I want to be like so and so.’” This nurturing and mentoring aligns with the dialogic process that activates the common mission, the mission of enrichment, of all the community partners.

As mentioned in the process section, an interesting coevolution of initiatives developed synchronously around efforts to enhance academic engagement. As the programs develop, there is a cohesive understanding of shared values. One shared value, for instance, is college and career preparedness. Toward that end, 8th grade youth from the two communities of this study were invited to a university-hosted youth summit on May 7, 2012. Over the course of the day long fair, students had an opportunity to participate in a number of activities, including a scavenger hunt geared toward showcasing some interesting and innovative university programs in robotics and sustainability. In addition to hands-on events around programs, students were also involved in conversations around a host of “college-literacy practices” that are essential to empower first-generation college students. The goal was to help

students understand the intricacies of an increasingly complex process, particularly given the rising costs of higher education. For the fair, the university used our collaborative partnerships to identify which students to invite. In fact, the invitation included information about the community partners as well, to make sure that the invitees recognized the fabric of support that is available as students advance on their journey to college. Along those lines, one student who was active at one of our partner community centers and who had recently graduated from university provided the keynote address.

Part of our participatory approach afforded an opportunity to have open conversations about the community needs that our teacher education programs are not able to address. One of these, for instance, is the need for translators/interpreters. The reality is that our teacher education programs do not have the language resources to provide assistance to the African, Asian, and Middle Eastern refugees in our community. Moreover, our community partners have identified additional needs that are outside the purview of teacher education. However, since the grant team includes the director of the campus service-learning office, we have a resource for community partners to make linkages across campus, and we are willing to help make those links.

Limitations

Given that this is a narrative inquiry, we do not claim that the findings are generalizable (*Clandinin & Connelly, 2000*). Rather, this article represents one interpretation of a relationship between a teacher education program and community organizations that continues to evolve. These findings are thus still preliminary. The community-based, participatory approach to service-learning in teacher education that we represent is nascent. Further research is needed to examine this relationship as it continues to progress. In addition, further research is needed to explore this type of approach in multiple settings and contexts.

Implications: The Promise of Sustained Relationships in Teacher Education

Our story provides insight into one teacher education program's efforts to use a community-based, participatory approach to develop service-learning relationships. Though these findings are not generalizable, our experience offers evidence of ways programs can improve teacher education through the use of a community-

based, participatory approach. Forming effective relationships with a broad range of community organizations (including both school and nonschool partners) required developing ongoing strategies attentive to fostering trust, acknowledging and addressing conflict, and strengthening the collaborative partnerships.

Establishing and reestablishing trust was crucial. In previous service-learning experiences with the university, these community organizations were not seen as partners and were not even notified of a service-learning relationship until students arrived. Reestablishing trust with community partners was a time-intensive process, but it was worth the time. The reestablished relationship with one community partner has led to dialogue about creating additional opportunities for youth at the center during the summer. The first author is currently in conversation with the Teen Futures coordinator about creating a summer academic boot camp to prepare youth for the return to school. The university course that would be paired with this boot camp is a summer adolescent development course that is part of the Master of Arts in Teaching program in the secondary education program. The course instructor was looking for a field opportunity for her students so that they could make real-life connections between the theories they learn about in the course and actual learning and development of adolescents. This reestablished relationship has also benefited the university in other ways. For example, the Teen Futures coordinator recently participated in a conference hosted at the university that explored preparing and supporting first-generation college students. He discussed strategies for mentoring youth for college readiness.

Acknowledging tensions was also crucial to our relationship-building and allowed us to then address and identify the needs within the community. As we developed the grant, we were very aware of ongoing tension between marginalized populations within the community and the K-12 schools. These tensions became public during school board meetings and protests held at one of the schools. We intentionally committed to developing service-learning partnerships with K-12 schools as well as community organizations in order to try to bridge this divide. To that end, we included refugee advocacy groups in our conversations in order to create a forum for multiple perspectives. We created a process that facilitated relationships between schools and community agencies and also increased our understanding of the complex dynamics within our community.

Our experience may prompt teacher education programs to define community broadly when developing service-learning partnerships. If teacher education programs focus solely on service-learning partnerships with K-12 schools, preservice teachers will have limited exposure to exploring and understanding their students' sociocultural contexts. In order to become culturally competent teachers, preservice teachers need to understand the community in which schools are situated. Too often, K-12 schools are seen as indifferent and even hostile to marginalized students and their families. Teacher education programs that act strategically in developing opportunities for preservice teachers to work outside the confines of K-12 schools may help to broker relationships between K-12 schools and communities.

This brokering of relationships led to an opportunity for the first author to become involved in an initiative that partnered the two school districts that are part of the teacher education program's service-learning initiative. These two school districts partnered with each other to apply for a substantial grant from a foundation in the northeast that was subsequently funded. One of the goals of the partnership was to establish positive relationships between the schools and parents and the broader community. Because of the relationships established through his work on the Learn and Serve grant, the first author was asked to be part of the hiring process for a director to lead the grant work. When the search was not successful, the first author was asked to become the interim codirector of the grant for the first year. During this year, the first author has used the relationships he has established between K-12 schools and community organizations to bring different stakeholders to the table and to establish a foundation for ongoing collaboration. This provides an example of how teacher educators might become bridges between schools and communities.

Teacher education programs may opt to partner with K-12 schools rather than community organizations because of their preexisting infrastructure for placing preservice teachers, particularly since creating the infrastructure to support ongoing service-learning placements can be time-intensive. However, since teacher education programs need to assist preservice teachers in developing cultural competency in order to be effective with students from diverse backgrounds, the time spent on developing community-based service-learning reaps important outcomes. In addition to concerns about infrastructure, partnering with community organizations often requires teacher education programs to forgo some control. Our story provides an example of

how service-learning partnerships in teacher education can (and should) be participatory. In many service-learning relationships, the university has most of the control in conceptualizing projects. However, in order to develop relationships that are transformational, the university has to be willing to forgo some control, and this participatory approach needs to be initiated from the outset. The way in which this initiative was carried out allowed for this, though as stated in the findings, we now recognize the need to be participatory in the conception of the grant as well.

At the same time, our collaborative approach allowed for the voices of the community to inform teacher education and create opportunities for preservice teachers to have quality service-learning experiences integrated into their programs. This integration offers an opportunity for collaborative coevolution. Service-learning that attends to process and takes into consideration tensions thus affords an opportunity for action. This commitment to action is important, though the action may come in different forms. At the beginning of our work, we conceptualized action as establishing service-learning relationships in which students provided service to community partners. However, as our work continues to progress, we have begun to recognize that creating space for dialogue and brokering relationships are forms of action that can be just as important for some organizations as providing manpower.

The integrity of this collaborative approach also offers important insights into ways to improve teacher education by effectively embedding service-learning in the curriculum. Deepening a future teacher's understanding of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of their students related to inequities associated with poverty, race, and English language acquisition is important work because, as Freire (1998) notes, "The person who is open to the world or to others inaugurates thus a dialogical relationship with which restlessness, curiosity, and unfinishedness are confirmed as key moments within the ongoing current of history" (p. 121). Our current inequitable educational system, which is becoming increasingly more diverse, requires that teacher education programs effectively develop the cultural competence of future teachers. This approach requires civic courage in developing community partnerships in order to affirm that change is possible while creating greater educational opportunities for all students. Our story shows how a community-based, participatory approach to service-learning is one promising practice for improving a teacher

education program's ability to effectively teach its students about the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

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