In the Service of Learning and Activism:
Service Learning, Critical Pedagogy, and the Problem Solution Project

By Vera L Stenhouse & Olga S. Jarrett

Prevailing policies and practices in teaching suppress teachers' autonomy in the classroom, leaving students subjected to scripted programs, standardized curricula, and passive rote learning (Leistyna, Lavandez, & Nelson, 2004; Sleeter, 2005). Such forms of teaching often run counter to those that support critical thinking, joy, and equity-oriented learning (Christensen, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter, 2005). In contrast to traditional pedagogy, scholars suggest that student-centered, democratic, participatory, and activist forms of pedagogy provide meaningful learning experiences that are libratory and empowering (Duncan Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Fisher, 2007; Freire, 1998; Shor, 1980/1987). Shor (1992) states:

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The difference between empowering and traditional pedagogy has to do with the positive or negative feelings students can develop for the learning process…Their consequent negative feelings interfere with learning and lead to strong anti-intellectualism in countless students as well as to alienation from civic life. (p.23)

To counteract disempowerment frequently experienced in education, in 2001 the authors initiated a *Problem Solution Project* (PSP) in the second year a

two-year urban certification and Master's program. The PSP, designed to promote empowerment of first-year urban teachers and their students, involves both service learning (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001; Claus & Ogden, 1999; EPA, 2002; Hart, 1997; Werner, Voce, Openshaw, & Simons, 2002) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1998; Shor, 1992). The intention was to involve teachers and students in service, not as charity (King, 2004) but as a vehicle for social change (Claus & Ogden, 1999; Freire, 1998). Jarrett and Stenhouse (in press) discuss the first six years of the second year PSP.

In 2004, the authors began implementing a PSP in the program's first year, to enable preservice teachers to experience civically engaged learning using a student-centered, participatory approach. The purposes were to: (a) encourage preservice teachers' own active practice and participation in identifying problems and forging solutions and (b) model how they might conduct a PSP in their own classrooms the following year. This article describes five years of implementing first-year problem solution projects.

Service Learning

Service learning combines service with community connections and academic applications, enhancing students' academic growth as well as encouraging community awareness and social action skill development (Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). Among the various models of service learning, Eyler and Giles (1999) recommend balanced programs with meaningful service coupled with learning goals and reflection. Their research found that links to coursework, diversity, reflection, and community input aid student learning. Student learning and community benefit should be simultaneous. Geleta and Gilliam (2003) state "a well-planned service-learning project allows students to learn and develop through active participation in a carefully planned service that is specifically developed to meet and address real community needs" (p. 10).

As part of teacher preparation, various programs include service learning as a means of challenging or enhancing preservice teachers' abilities to work in various school settings and a small body of research indicates the effectiveness of such programs (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Brown, 2005). Through field experiences and service learning opportunities, preservice teachers are encouraged to interact across racial, cultural, geographic, or socioeconomic settings to enhance their knowledge and examine their dispositions regarding various populations (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Brown, 2005; Brown & Howard II, 2004).

Typically, course instructors select the service learning opportunity or provide choices for students such as working with P-12 students in a neighborhood school and locating community organizations as sites to engage people who are culturally/linguistically diverse, homeless, and hungry/food insecure (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001). In the PSP, however, preservice teachers select the service opportunity

and the instructor helps facilitate implementation. In this way, the PSP is a service learning project influenced by critical pedagogy.

Critical Theory/Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, grown from the seeds of critical theory (see Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2008; DuBois, 1903/1970; Freire, 1970, 1998; Giroux, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Wink, 2000), is defined in various ways; however, one of its important tenets places the site of critique and transformative initiatives within schools and other educational spaces. A critical approach centers on challenging the status quo and critiquing how various dimensions of power are wielded in society and within one's own context (Kincheloe, 2005).

Shor (1992) offers a critical pedagogy approach that guides teachers and students through a problem posing framework that challenges repressive forms of education. The intent and purpose of the PSP is guided by Shor's (1992) "agenda of values" (p.17) which involves cultivating empowering educational experiences for students and teachers that are participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, and activist. Though presented as a discrete list of items, in practice these characteristics overlap (see Table 1).

Shor (1992, p. 55) presents three ways to engender an empowering pedagogy in the classroom: (a) topically, (b) academically or (c) generatively. A generative approach, which is at the core of the PSP, entails seeking topics for learning from students. Consequently:

> [I]n the context of true learning, the learners will be engaged in a continuous transformation through which they become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught, side by side with the teacher, who is equally subject to the same process. (Freire, 1998, p. 33)

Independently, service learning and critical pedagogy offer substantive considerations for engaging learners across levels and disciplines. Conjointly, service learning and aspects of critical pedagogy have the potential to be catalysts for a formidable emancipatory educative process yielding a pedagogy of possibility towards the transformation of human experience.

Service Learning and Critical Pedagogy

Bridging empowering education and service learning, Claus and Ogden (1999) connect the effect of service to a wider contextual purpose and vision, stating that service learning

> should be centered, from the outset, around the pursuit of constructive change. Questioning, dialogue, planning, reflection, and action should all be framed by the purpose of achieving meaningful reform. (p. 73)

Merging service learning with critical pedagogy, as in a PSP, holds the promise of providing authentic learning, knowledge, and skills that enable students and teachers to contribute actively in the (trans)formation of their worlds. The PSP counters an education done *to* students by providing an education in concert *with* students. Combined aspects of service and critical pedagogy advance the notion of service

Table 1
Shor's Characteristics of an Empowering Education

Participatory	To reclaim active participation in the learning process, students must be given opportunities to participate in their own learning rather than being passive recipients of the experiences around them.
Affective	A healthy relationship between student and subject matter requires nurturing affirming and hopeful sentiments within the teaching and learning process.
Problem-posing	Learners identify problems, issues and concerns through questioning their context(s). This process is intended to democraticize the learning environment and confront power dynamics within the learning setting and society as a whole.
Situated	Learning is grounded in the experiences of the learner.
Multicultural	Situating learning cultivates discourse that reflects the cultural diversity of the students and increases students' ownership of their education.
Dialogic	The learning environment is built on a process that is a student-centered, teacher-directed, reflective space that balances student and teacher voice, teacher directives and democratic exchanges.
Desocializing	An acknowledgement of students' educational and social conditioning that can lead to deepening a conceptual understanding of acceptable norms and behaviors through examining the daily, familiar, and habitual aspects of life informed by personal and systemic circumstances.
Democratic	The process in education that allows for maximum student participation rather than limits their participation by rigid structured learning disconnected from their lives, language(s), and interests.
Researching	Teachers and students are invited to investigate, analyze, critique, rethink, contemplate, and communicate on the subjects or topics of their learning.
Interdisciplinary	An approach that draws upon multiple academic disciplines, bodies of knowledge, and multimodal resources to build understanding.
Activist	Insists that students take an active role in their learning. Students should also learn about action and take action to address problems posed in the classroom or the larger society.

learning beyond socially isolated projects into a zone of empowerment in the lives of students, in this instance, aspiring teachers.

Purpose of Study

Using multiple data sources, this qualitative study describes the implementation of the PSP and addresses the following questions:

What aspects of Shor's (1992) empowering pedagogy were experienced by the preservice teachers and instructor during the process of implementing a PSP? and

How did participating in a PSP uncover the challenges and tensions of implementing service learning with critical pedagogy?

Methodology

Participants

Five cohorts of preservice teachers (N=99) participated in projects between 2004 and 2009. Most of the preservice teachers were female. Approximately 66% of the preservice teachers identified themselves as White. The racial and/or ethnic self-identifications of the additional preservice teachers were as follows (from most to least numbers): Black, African American or African (Ethiopian, Ghanaian, and Liberian), Latina, Indian American, Indian, Asian (Cambodian heritage, Korean American), Native American-White, and Bi-multi-racial.

The Project and Context

The first year PSP is an assignment in which participants as a group identify, and attempt to solve, a problem of their choosing. Implemented in a program preparing preservice teachers to work in elementary schools with a majority of racially and linguistically marginalized students, the PSP was situated in a course on culture, education, and community. The course involved 15 sessions, 2.5 hours each, across the Fall and Spring Semesters of the program's first year. While taking coursework, all participants interned four or five days a week in PK-5th grade classrooms.

The purpose of the course was to examine the sociopolitical context of schooling within the United States, the role of community as an educative resource, and the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions for enacting culturally responsive pedagogy across all subjects. The first author, who taught the course, provided opportunities for introspection as well as critical examination of factors affecting teaching and learning such as identity, curriculum content, privilege, and systemic discrimination. The course fostered a learning environment that engendered a range of emotions and perspectives. Course assignments required preservice teachers to examine their own, peers', and students' culture, ethnicity, race, class, religion,

sexual identity, language, and other facets of diversity. Such examinations were intended for presevice teachers to apply to their understandings to their implications for their practice.

Incorporating the PSP into the course was meant to provide preservice teachers an opportunity to exercise their autonomy and work as a collective to make a difference in their spheres of influence. Using Shor's (1992) generative approach, preservice teachers: (a) brainstormed problems, concerns, and issues regarding their cohort/program, school, community, nation, or world; (b) selected one problem from their brainstormed list; (c) implemented a solution to the chosen problem; and (d) wrote reflections on the overall process and selected cohort project.

Data Sources

Data sources included the following: (a) electronic mail exchanges among cohort members and with the instructor; (b) class members' Webblog postings; (c) instructor notes on the brainstorming sessions, decision making process and class discussions; (d) instructor reflections on the process of implementing the assignment; and (e) cohort members' end-of-course reflections. In particular, 82 participants submitted end-of-course reflections that entailed responses to prompts about their thoughts, feelings, and ideas regarding the PSP process, the chosen project, what went well, and challenges experienced. All data sources were used to chronicle the process, timeline, and outcomes of the PSP for each cohort.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a four-fold recursive process. To describe the experiences of each cohort and to answer both research questions, the first author initially perused all the data sources to craft a descriptive narrative of the process and implementation for each cohort. All data were used to establish the sequence of events and the process engaged in by each cohort including the brainstormed topics, decision-making process, and project outcomes. The results of this analysis are represented in the vignettes below about each cohort.

Second, beyond informing the descriptive narrative, an additional analysis of the preservice teacher end-of-course reflections was woven into the vignettes. Each reflection was analyzed for main points regarding the process, choice, and feedback on what went well or challenges experienced throughout the PSP. Specifically, the first author iteratively analyzed reflections within and across cohorts until themes became evident (Miles & Huberman, 1994) creating a matrix of first level codes. As a reliability check, the authors independently read the data matrix for similarities and differences among cohorts and noted themes. Codes were subsequently clustered into broader categories reflecting participants' common impressions and unique commentaries. The first author used data sources such as Weblogs and electronic mail exchanges, to corroborate or disconfirm the results of the analysis of reflections.

During this second phase of analysis, six themes became apparent that involved issues related to: (a) time; (b) decision-making; (c) group dynamics; (d) the effect of the PSP as an assignment; (e) the effect of the chosen problem/project; and (f) the affective outcomes during the process. As discussed further in the results, although these themes were distinct in the data, they were also interconnected. For example, issues related to time, such as how long it took to arrive at a decision on a focus problem affected group dynamics.

Third, to answer the research question regarding what aspects of Shor's (1992) empowering pedagogy experienced by the preservice teachers and instructor during implementation of the PSP, the preceding analyses were further subject to an examination of if, how, and when Shor's (1992) 11 characteristics of an empowering education were evident (see Table 1). At the outset, the PSP was designed to include the *participatory*, *problem posing*, and *democratic* choice-making aspects of Shor's empowering pedagogy. An *a priori* analysis using Shor's empowering pedagogy characteristics was conducted by the first author on the preservice teachers' end-of-course reflections and instructor reflections. Again, the additional data sources were used to corroborate or disconfirm the results of the analysis of reflections.

The research question focused on the challenges and tensions experienced by the preservice teachers and the instructor led to a fourth analysis within and across cohorts. Analysis of preservice teachers' reflections, instructor reflections, and the results from overlaying Shor's empowering pedagogy characteristics were reviewed comparatively and open-coded for patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994) related to the intersections of service learning and critical pedagogy. This analysis yielded lessons learned regarding the challenges and tensions of implementing service learning from a critical pedagogical stance.

Results

Vignettes on Each Cohort's Experience

Cohort I (2004-2005). Cohort I brainstormed a list of 22 problems. As was customary for all cohorts, problems were read aloud and everyone had an opportunity to clarify or add ideas. The instructor typed the list and distributed it to the cohort for review. Using an instructor initiated decision-making process, each cohort member voted for three problems. The instructor tallied all the identified selections and shared the results with the cohort.

Cohort I initially decided to collect classroom resources (i.e., materials and money for materials) that could be used by cohort members during their internship. Soon thereafter, they extended their focus to include things they could use during their first year of teaching. The cohort determined the following areas in need of attention: where and how to raise money for resources, how to obtain donations from businesses, where to store collected materials, and what types of resources

would be obtained (e.g., books, supplies, other classroom materials). Early in Spring Semester, the cohort reviewed and reconsidered its intentions, which had expanded to establishing a library or resource room for themselves and program graduates. As the preservice teachers suggested ideas and reported information from their research areas, they determined that their initial ideas could not be implemented in the remaining amount of course time.

Three classes prior to the end of the Spring Semester, one candidate raised the point that perhaps the cohort should consider gathering materials not for "themselves," but for the schools in which they were interning. The final decision was made at the penultimate class.

Cohort I members decided to use their own money to purchase either one hardcover or one soft cover multicultural book as thank you gifts for the schools in which they were interning. They purchased books requested by the librarian (media specialist) at their respective schools or based on their own knowledge of multicultural books from their coursework. Cohort members brought their books to the last class, shrink-wrapped them, and included a written note of thanks to the students and teachers of each school. The five schools in which the preservice teachers were clustered received four books each for their respective libraries. As one candidate wrote, "Seemed like it was a really good choice given our teaching placements…I liked the idea of giving back in a situation where we were given opportunities" (2005).

Overwhelmingly, the process, choice, and challenges revolved around time as represented by the following series of quotations: "[The PSP was] difficult with our schedules and time constraints. I feel like we changed our scope a few times as we really realized our constraints;" "I think it is a great project even though we did not have much time to do it;" and "The biggest challenge was TIME!"

Despite the time challenges of the process, the preservice teachers' reflections were predominantly favorable:

> It is a great learning experience conducting a problem solution project…It demonstrates the organization, roles, and research that must be implemented to successful[ly] accomplish any project/task in the school. (2005)

> The process is NOT EASY. In order for a problem solution project to work all the participants must be active. Also making decisions and everyone being on the same page makes the project a lengthy process. However, once everyone is together the problem solution project is very powerful. (2005)

Cohort I researched, dialoged, initiated, and implemented a solution they felt viable and meaningful while working together as a group. The preservice teachers' reflections expressed predominantly positive sentiments tempered by the issue of time and the persistent renegotiation of the ultimate solution to their identified problem.

Cohort II (2005-2006). Cohort II proposed 18 problems and narrowed them to three through the process described for Cohort I. After discussion, Cohort II voted

to secure monetary resources to support financially challenged cohort members as needed and identified the following considerations: the exact purpose of the funds; how financial need would be determined and by whom; who would receive the funds; what were the tax implications; what were the short and long term consequences of securing funds; how would the funds be allocated; who would manage the funds; and how would this process and project honor the cohort's chosen name.

The resulting contentious process reflected strong support, resistance, and confusion. Tensions were catalyzed by two factors: (a) preservice teachers' disparate perceptions of the actual need, value, and reach of the project and (b) a contested decision-making process exacerbated by the instructor, who requested a final vote by electronic mail that garnered only six voters out of the expected twenty one. These results led to concerns of whether or not the low number of votes truly constituted a popular decision, while others contended that not voting when given the opportunity should not impede progress. Three preservice teachers shared the following: "I think it was a sound project but it never had 'group' support and eventually became associated with negativity" (2006); "I was hesitant at first because it felt selfish…" (2006); and "With all the issues facing education, why would we pick something like this?" (2006).

After two class sessions, as with Cohort I, the instructor proposed the idea of an administration team to facilitate the ongoing process by leading class discussions and decision-making. Four cohort members volunteered to be on the team. Given persistent cohort challenges, the team created an open-ended questionnaire to determine classmates' impressions, suggestions, and concerns regarding the PSP. Two team members reported the questionnaire results during class along with recommendations for moving forward; however, a third member publicly disagreed with the proposed direction. One of the two reporting team members stated: "I found my attempts to give voice to all members of the group were heavily criticized to the point that I felt no desire to participate in the project at all …our group was significantly divided" (2006). This event led to the voluntary dismantling of the team. The fourth original team member remained and three were replaced with new volunteers.

Under the new administration team, the project continued to morph from securing funds needed within the cohort to a more expansive notion of soliciting funds available to both current and future cohorts. The final outcome was a letter from the Cohort in support of a grant that the program director was seeking from a federal funding agency. The grant, which was not funded, would have included stipends for program participants during their first year of the program.

Characteristic of this cohort's views of the process, challenges, and choice were disparate perceptions of the choice of problem, the profound influence of cohort members' interactions, and the degeneration of a "great idea" that simultaneously created animosity. The preservice teachers' 2006 comments below show the diversity of viewpoints:

I do not agree with the choice—I was against it in the beginning and I still am.

I think the project is worthwhile and am looking forward to working on it.

I don't think the group ever really agreed to a project. I'm still not sure what is going on.
[We] encountered severe resistance within the group in all aspects of the project.

Way too much time was spent arguing over voting…There are many strong personalities in the group.

It was a nice idea but it caused too much animosity amongst us.

Cohort II's main issues were challenges with the decision-making process and the perception of helping self versus others. They said very little about what went well or what they liked about the process. Group dynamics proved to be a significant factor in the overall negative feelings towards the project. However, amidst the tensions, various models of leadership emerged, insights into the role of participation in decision-making were evident, and notions of what enables a successful democracy were expressed.

Cohort III (2006-2007). Cohort III brainstormed 21 problems. Unlike the open-ended brainstorming of the previous two cohorts, the second author suggested categories to begin the brainstorming process: cohort/program, school, community, nation, and global. Also, in slight contrast to previous cohorts, the instructor facilitated a more open-ended cohort leadership process. Rather than crafting specific teams to move the process forward, the instructor simply allowed more wait time to provide an opportunity for cohort members to volunteer for themselves how they wanted to orchestrate the process. Through a mostly dialogic process, Cohort III chose to try to improve the quality of mentor teachers in the program. Those who were having difficulty with their mentor teachers were a catalyst for choosing this problem. Although most cohort members had positive experiences with their mentor teachers, affecting how mentor teachers were selected and assessed seemed a collectively worthwhile endeavor.

Cohort III spent considerable time learning the history of the program and procedures for selecting mentor teachers. Unique to this cohort was the decision to solicit input from program faculty and staff. At the cohort's request, the instructor invited the program director, a faculty member, and an internship supervisor to class to respond to questions regarding program history, methods of selecting mentors and matching them with preservice teachers, length of time required for program changes, and identifying decision makers who can advance change. One cohort member surmised that, "Generating a list of questions to ask staff members went well as well as the discussion that the questions helped facilitate" (2007).

Because of the in-class exchange, the program director instituted several changes in the mentor process before the cohort submitted its final proposal to the program. Changes included (a) inviting the preservice teachers to the initial

mentor orientation, (b) revising the mentor teacher recruitment brochure, and (c) continuing encouragement of the preservice teachers to recommend teachers they thought would make good mentor teachers.

Cohort III decided to develop a form to provide weekly quantitative and qualitative feedback to program personnel about their experience with their mentor teacher. Although the preservice teachers were given an end-of-the-semester opportunity to evaluate their mentor teachers, this cohort decided weekly feedback would provide a more accurate and substantive record of a mentor teacher's adherence to the program's goals. These forms were to be filled out by cohort members, given to their supervisors, and then placed in the preservice teachers' program folders for future use by program personnel. A sample prompt from the form was, "How 'constructivist' in nature do you perceive your mentor teacher to be (scale of 10-1)?" Open-ended questions, included:

(a) Do you think this mentor teacher reflects a culturally responsive approach to teaching?

(b) Do you think this person is an ideal mentor for an aspiring teacher? Why/Why not?

With respect to choice, Cohort III's preservice teachers repeatedly mentioned the value and validity of the project even if it were not what they might have preferred. As these two cohort members shared,

….it was extremely difficult to get everyone to agree as everyone has their own perspectives and experiences. However, I felt it was a good experience for us to work on solving a problem as a cohort. (2007)

I wish we had chosen a problem outside of our group to help us look beyond ourselves to those in more need. However, I feel that anything that can be done to the betterment of this program is valuable as well. (2007)

Although group tensions existed within the cohort, they did not reach comparable heights as Cohort II, and this was reflected in their overall satisfaction with the project. From their perspective:

…our group faced some issues due to the tensions that had come to exist….Some of us seemed to have different visions of what the project was. However, we did have some good discussions, ideas, and I think we truly attempted to bring about positive change. (2007)

Similar to Cohort II, Cohort III focused its energies on supporting a current and long term program need. This cohort spent most of its time determining the history and context of the problem by inviting program and staff members to participate. Although having a problematic mentor was a concern for only a few, the cohort pursued a concern that affected the success of the program by developing a questionnaire designed to improve mentor teacher selection.

Cohort IV (2007-2008). Cohort IV brainstormed 56 problems. From the outset, Cohort IV eliminated problems addressing national and global concerns, reasoning that these were neither realistic nor tangible enough to be pursued successfully. Similar to previous cohorts, choosing a problem was time consuming. In the latter part of Fall Semester, the cohort decided to support a book drive for a school in which two preservice teachers were teaching.

The cohort members interning at the school provided information regarding their school's initiative to collect 300 books for all grade levels, given the lack of books available for students. The cohort verbally agreed to contribute to the book drive by orchestrating various opportunities to collect books, including preparation of a book donation box for the department, Internet postings, Website searches for book sales, and requests to local grocery stores to carry collection boxes. Individuals who did not actively secure books volunteered to be "place holders" where books could be stored or delivered. Further in the process, one candidate asked for funds from the cohort to purchase books at a sale. A majority of cohort members gave personal funds to a pool of money for their peer to spend at the sale.

A month before the last two class sessions, preservice teachers brought in all the books they collected; one cohort member brought a collection of flat boxes; and another brought labels she had printed identifying the books as a gift from the cohort. The instructor constructed boxes while the cohort members formed an assembly line of their own design. Some preservice teachers sorted books by grade level and pasted the labels in the books. Book carriers with (instructor supplied) carts collected the sorted books and wheeled them to another group who boxed, sealed, and labeled the box with the appropriate grade level. In total, Cohort IV secured, sorted, labeled, and boxed over 800 children's books that were delivered by interns at the school.

Similar to Cohort I, the last day of collective work preparing the books was a highlight of Cohort IV's process. Despite feeling the process was "tough" and "long and tiring," they felt that the end result was "great" and "worthwhile." Succinctly captured by one participant's statement:

> I think having a lot of adults agree on one topic was difficult. I also think getting everyone involved was difficult too. I think the actual day we sorted the books and distributed them went very well. (2008)

Satisfaction with the end results was tempered by some cohort members' observations of group apathy and perceived lack of leadership:

> The biggest problem I saw/felt was the overall apathy of the group…Because there was no 'leader' it was more difficult. (2008)

However, one cohort member felt that

> the frustration and disagreement actually led us to growth. Life is about working out differences so it was good for us. (2008)

Cohort IV members mentioned frustration with time, each other, and the instructor's role yet reported satisfaction with the end results. As with previous cohorts, arriving at a decision was a challenge, the interactions among cohort members affected the process and the project morphed over time.

Cohort V (2008-2009). Cohort V posed 117 problems. This time the instructor asked the cohort what type of decision-making mechanism(s) it wanted to adopt. During the second session of class, a "keep-scratch" method suggested and facilitated by cohort members was used to narrow down the topics to 50 choices. They drew lines through "scratched" items while "keep" items remained on the list. Eventually, three ideas remained, each focused on supporting the cohort: developing a student advisory council to interface with the program faculty, creating a teacher resource Website, or a combination of both. Several class sessions in the Fall were dominated by discussion and problem solving on how to select the final problem. The cohort ultimately decided to vote on a "new" problem (a formerly scratched issue): hunger.

The decision to address hunger was made on the final day of class before the winter break. Unique with this cohort, the instructor developed the remainder of the course content based on the cohort's selection. For instance, in the first Spring Semester class, the instructor invited a guest from the local community food bank who discussed the political, social, and economic systems that influence hunger, myths and facts regarding hunger, and a variety of ways (including contributing to a food bank) to address the issue of hunger.

An initial idea was to conduct a food drive. Eventually, the cohort participated in one of two options they devised. One was to develop a resource list for schools detailing local resources and organizations to support P-5 students and families experiencing food insecurity and hunger. The list was distributed for use by counselors, teachers, and other school personnel. The second was to volunteer for three hours at a local community food bank—an opportunity organized by one of the cohort members. Volunteering at the food bank entailed sorting and packing food for distribution to organizations and agencies serving those in need of food. As reported in the reflections, their sorting and packing efforts involved 4,547 pounds of food that would go to approximately 3,031 families. For Cohort V, decision-making and arriving at a cohesive action plan were most time consuming and prompting some to disengage. Like Cohorts I and IV, they rated the culminating group activity positively. One member of Cohort V expressed that:

 With most issues that need attention, time is always one of the greatest challenges obstructing progress. With this particular project our cohort spent a significant amount of time working to choose a project. Yet because this process of choosing became so long, I think people began to disengage. (2009)

Another Cohort V member shared:

When we completed the project, I felt really good about myself. I could see that

my fellow cohort members were feeling the same way. I enjoyed seeing that our cohort was able to work together as a group to get a common task or project accomplished. (2009)

Vignette Results Synthesis

In all, the five cohorts participated in identifying and discussing problems across six categories: (a) 30 self-help (cohort/program focused); (b) 49 school site; (c) 41 local community; (d) 39 national; (e) 33 global; and (f) 6 "other." Table 2

Table 2
Select Examples of Brainstormed Categories across Cohorts

Project Type	Examples across cohorts
Self-help/Cohort	Securing financial support, addressing personal and program stress, and improving mentor teacher screening
School Site	Curriculum modifications, school services, student food and nutrition, and student's lack of recess
Community	Hunger, homelessness, beautification, and civic participation
Nation	Investigating evacuation plans, various social inequities (based on race, gender, or sexual orientation), gentrification, the No Child Left Behind policy, Iraq war, healthcare, social justice and human rights.
World	War, poverty, immigration, human rights, climate and pollution
Other	Outreach to animals, environmental issues

Table 3
Choices of Problem Solution Projects

Year	2004-2005 Cohort I	2005-2006 Cohort II	2006-2007 Cohort III	2007-2008 Cohort IV	2008-2009 Cohort V
Issue/ Problem	Multicultural resources & materials for cohort	Financial resources for cohort	Mentor teacher selection	Securing books for elementary students	Hunger
Project	Multicultural books given as gifts to school placements for their libraries	Letter in support of grant funds on behalf of the program	Developed form for preservice teachers' ongoing assessment of program mentor teachers	Children's book collection for one school	Developed resource list; volunteered at a community food bank

summarizes brainstormed topics and Table 3 represents the initial issues/problems and final implemented cohort projects. The final project was not always the project initially chosen by the cohort; nevertheless, the preservice teachers noted satisfaction in having concrete results either for their schools or community.

To varying degrees, all the cohorts felt challenged by time and the decision-making process. Lack of time was mentioned by most in some cohorts and at least some in each cohort. For Cohort I, the overwhelming challenge was time. In subsequent cohorts, decision-making was most challenging, as was navigating the group dynamic around the perceived need, viability, time frame, and project scope. Whether brainstorming 18 or 117 problems, cohort members, in their view, started with lofty ideas and ended up with more limited, less time consuming, and more "do-able" plans. Most cohorts were satisfied with the final choice, though some members were disappointed that the project was scaled down and less far reaching than initially intended.

Instances of group accord bolstered preservice teachers' feelings of what went well, while group dissention often yielded negative sentiments toward the overall process or project. The stress of decision-making appeared to either divide the group or make the group more cohesive. Cohort II had the most negative experience as it struggled with the decision-making and implementation processes. In contrast, Cohort I expressed the most favorable sentiments.

The Problem Solution Project and Shor's Empowering Education

To varying degrees, all aspects of Shor's (1992) empowering pedagogy were experienced by the preservice teachers and instructor during the process of implementing a PSP. The process of brainstorming, problem selection, and problem solution afforded opportunities to engage *problem posing, participatory, dialogic,* and *democratic* processes. Selecting a problem and generating solutions fostered *dialogic* and *democratic* processes exercised throughout the *decision-making*. The preservice teachers most often mentioned the brainstorming aspect as a constructive part of the process. Subsequent discussions and choice making proved the most visceral, as they struggled to engage each other, ideas, and their voices. Decision-making took various forms meant to stimulate full active democratic participation and civic responsibility. Selecting one's top PSP choices led to attempts at consensus decision-making interspersed with majority rule voting, particularly at the height of a stalemate among ideas. Voting occurred more than once during the process often leading to more discussion rather than a decision.

All projects were *situated* in the preservice teachers' personal or professional realities, whether self-help, school, or community based. The selected problems were drawn from cohort members' needs and concerns. Participation in solving them was situated in their personal and professional knowledge, skills, and experiences (e.g., grant writing or Internet networking).

In all cohorts, members were involved in *research* which served their project

outcomes in three ways: establishing context, determining the feasibility of an idea, and soliciting feedback or input to further streamline proposed actions. For example, research on the history of the program provided context for the mentor teacher selection project. Asking the principal about hosting a school fundraiser helped determine its feasibility as an idea; and soliciting input from school personnel on specific needs such as books or issues of student hunger informed proposed actions. The instructor also provided articles, personal experience, or invited knowledgeable guest speakers to contribute information and resources on an issue.

Less explicitly evident in the PSP process were *multicultural* and *interdisciplinary* characteristics. Developing multicultural understanding among all cohort members was a major aspect of the course itself. On occasion, a cohort's topic explicitly addressed multicultural matters, as in the purchase of multicultural books. Also, the topics they selected were interdisciplinary addressing social studies, mathematics, physiology, economics, multicultural education, and literacy.

A purpose of the PSP was for preservice teachers to experience active participation in their learning and make a difference on an issue they deemed important. With respect to *activist* notions, the preservice teachers consistently exercised their capacities to engage, resist, or advance the process in ways that made a difference to themselves and to others.

As a result of their efforts and the instructor's facilitation, the PSP fostered *affective* responses from the preservice teachers. Affective responses were catalyzed by three factors identified by three or more cohorts: time, decision-making, and group dynamics. Although cohort feelings towards their respective projects were predominantly positive, lack of time to execute the full scope or extend the reach of an intended project was a consistent issue. Time was also linked to feelings about the decision-making process as labored and protracted.

A decision-making issue involved the perception of self-help projects as "self-ish" or "self-serving" as opposed to "helping others." All cohorts struggled with the intent of a project to serve cohort members' needs rather than the needs of others, affecting their feelings about the project and one another. Yet, during decision-making, cohorts sometimes eliminated national and global problems clearly involving "helping others" as "unrealistic" to address effectively.

Group dynamics, the third source of affective experiences among members and towards the project, were periodically noted in preservice teachers' reflections; however, most of its effect was witnessed by the instructor who corroborated preservice teachers' sentiments about their cohort members' behaviors. Reflections on group dynamics included preservice teachers' commentary and assessment regarding the "group" (e.g., "strong group personalities," "irritation of the group," "resistance within the group," "working as a group," "group apathy"). Group dynamics heavily shaped project choice, decision-making, and implementation. From the instructor's vantage point, relational qualities exhibited among group members were encouraging and disturbing.

Cohort I spoke most favorably about the interactions within the cohort. Sentiments of "feeling good" were shared in Cohort IV and V, particularly about the culminating group activity. In contrast, Cohort II noted strong unfavorable group interactions. Most respondents' shared little or nothing about what went well with the project. Cohorts III through V experienced a mixture of sentiments; however, along with Cohort II, interactions among cohort members elicited angst regarding the PSP process. Reflections about colleagues included "too many opinions," "animosity," "arguments," and "too many leaders not enough servants." Cohort members also described their peers as being apathetic and at times described themselves as disengaged from the process, as indicated by the comment: "I was thoroughly detached from the experience" (2008).

Cohort members expressed several reasons for their limited participation and enthusiasm. The reasons included other program demands on their time, the protracted PSP decision-making/problem-solving process, and behaviors of their peers they viewed as not productive.

In addition to time, the decision-making process and group interactions, a desocializing education also elicited affective responses. Shor's *desocializing* aspect of an empowering pedagogy challenges the dominance of teacher-talk, unilateral authority, and the onus of knowledge and power residing exclusively with the teacher. Instrumental to modeling the PSP was the instructor's ability to not be at the center during key stages. Preservice teachers' feelings about the role of the instructor in attempting to foster an empowering environment were disparate: some appreciated the student-centered nature; others found it unhelpful or unexpected.

> I liked how you guided us through the process. You gave us guidelines and then you let us develop the problem, giving us feedback as we went.

> I think you should have taken more control.

> I was shocked that Ms. Vera could sit there quietly and be patient with us all along—it would have been so easy for her to step in and moderate. I guess we aren't used to all of this autonomy…

The freedom to exercise autonomy was often stressful, if not simply unfamiliar to some. The instructor offered minimal scaffolding and strategic deflection as the preservice teachers drove the projects with a level of autonomy not likely experienced in their schooling.

A challenge to desocialization was the cohort's expectation that the instructor be the primary leader in the process. As the instructor, the first author tried to shift the locus of control to the preservice teachers by functioning as a facilitator, recorder, mirror, and resource. Facilitation took the form of sponsoring opportunities for preservice teachers to lead, guide, and direct conversations and decision-making. Being a recorder entailed taking notes and using them to recap aspects of the group process. As a mirror, the instructor provided summations of discussions and encouraged pre-

service teachers to specify next steps. Lastly, as a resource, the instructor supplied information as part of coursework, allotted in-class time to discuss and implement the PSP, sent electronic mail correspondence to preservice teachers between sessions, and offered university resources by making copies, inquiries, or contacts.

Preservice teachers' reflections did not specifically note issues regarding leadership among cohort members; however, from the instructor's point of view, they took on leadership roles that included being facilitators, mirrors, resources, problem solvers, problem generators, idea initiators, action planners, persistent questioners, doers, and advocates for their particular desired project. Each cohort had a different relationship with leadership. The first cohort demonstrated more shared leadership. No one voice or perspective dominated, but members spoke up and listened. The second cohort illuminated unpleasant aspects of leadership; whereby as cohort members might take charge, they also become targets for negative criticism and ridicule. Cohorts III through V exhibited a mixture of the extreme experiences between Cohort I and II. The cohorts' experiences with a critical pedagogy approach revealed the ways in which they had heretofore been socialized in their educational history. Leading and exercising autonomy within the process prompted discomfort, tension, and opportunity.

Shor's (1992) 11 empowering pedagogy characteristics consistently addressed during the PSP were: problem posing, participatory, situated, decision-making, dialogic, democratic, researching, affective, and desocializing, with multicultural and interdisciplinary addressed to a lesser degree. Cohort member and instructor reflections further showed fundamental effects of group dynamics and leadership expectations.

Lessons Learned

Each cohort experience illuminated challenges and tensions regarding implementation of service learning with critical pedagogy. We reflect on lessons learned for our own benefit and to assist others who seek to empower and resist oppressive presentations of teaching, service, and learning. A macro view of the PSP process within and across cohorts revealed the significant presence of power: the power to make decisions, the power to lead, the power of group dynamics, the power of a socializing education, and the illusion of shared power within the context of critical pedagogy.

The Power to Make Decisions

In typical forms of service learning, participants have choices presented by the professor or by service organizations. While service learning can yield benefits no matter who makes the decisions, the PSP extends the decision-making process. Preservice teachers' perceptions of their scope of influence and the decision-making process strongly influenced project outcomes.

During decision-making, preservice teachers imposed their own limitations on their options. As they narrowed and refined choices, they considered what constituted a realistic or feasible project, considering time and overall program demands. These considerations affected the effort they felt they could contribute to the project and influenced the extent of the project. Rather than view the decision-making as part of the work, reflections confirmed that selecting a definitive tangible outcome was seen as the point where the work could begin.

The decision-making process was initially approached energetically for each cohort. A hybrid between democratic practices (taking a vote) and striving for consensus ensued. As time progressed and arriving at a collective decision became more and more difficult, preservice teachers adopted different techniques to engage or disengage from the process. As witnessed by the instructor, recurring difficulty with committing to a method of making a decision and seeing it all the way through added to the challenges. Consequently, the groups often experienced inadequate decision-making (Bradford, Stock, & Horowitz, 1953). Eliciting more explicit discussion of different forms of decision-making (e.g., Roberts Rules of Order, consensus, majority rule, rock-paper-scissors, coin flipping) might have proved beneficial for the instructor to pursue. At the same time, developing patience and offering adequate time for decision-making processes such as building consensus must also be considered in light of the course and program structure.

The Power to Lead

Facilitating the PSP meant ensuring preservice teachers' authority over the process was not undermined by the instructor being too authoritarian or too quick to intervene or solve a problem during silent or verbally tense moments. The instructor was conscious of the likelihood that maintaining a primary role while facilitating would sustain the dominance of the instructor's voice and potentially dampen uninterrupted cohort member dialog. Efforts to extend leadership of the process to the cohorts were welcomed and resisted within and across cohorts.

Preparing teachers to exercise leadership skills is important for developing their ability to be advocates for their students (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Cohort members did exercise leadership in multiple ways. Some volunteered to lead and assume responsibilities during the various PSP stages. Consistently, they noted that brainstorming problems (which they often facilitated) was the most enjoyable aspect of the PSP. The early stages of decision-making were also met with enthusiasm. For three cohorts, the final activities orchestrated by preservice teachers with little or no input from the instructor yielded favorable feelings. Leadership was exercised more easily when group members perceived they were in accord. Sustaining leadership during the contentious moments either encouraged growth or promoted dysfunction.

The Power of Group Dynamics

Regarding groups, Wheelan (1990, p. 13) states, "Groups mobilize powerful forces affecting individuals. A group is not simply a collection of individuals working in concert…the behavior of individuals in groups is regulated as much by the group's norms, needs, and fears as by the individuals' internal motivators." Preservice teachers reported being motivated or disengaged by internal and external forces and determined their level of (non)participation based on relationships among members. Initial feelings of excitement regarding conducting a PSP were consistently strained by the necessity to be a collective body in deciding on a universally satisfying topic and by the manner in which topics should be addressed. As reported by various cohort members during class discussions, group members' personalities were a factor in how they dealt with each other as was their minimal comfort level with conflict. From the instructor's point of view, it was the group dynamic that appeared to create the most conflict and learning.

Bradford, Stock, and Horowitz (1953) posit that group conflict often entails impatience, disagreement, or complaints that a group is too large to be in agreement, all sentiments expressed by various cohort members. Conflict among participants and ideas was readily viewed as negative or something to be avoided, rather than opportunity for growth. Conflict led Cohort I to shift from gathering multicultural resources for themselves and future cohorts to giving books to students in their internship schools. Conflict led Cohort II to develop a questionnaire. Conflict between ideas led Cohort V to hunger. Creative use of conflict is a valuable skill for aspiring change agents.

Lastly, the group experienced out-of-class interactions and expectations that affected class dynamics. Although the instructor was not privy to all the out-of-class exchanges among cohort members, it was evident in class that amicable relationships outside the course benefited group cohesion and discussion and that out-of-class clashes had a negative effect. Furthermore, the preservice teachers noted feeling stressed and fatigued as they endeavored to meet programmatic expectations.

The Power of a Socializing Education

The socializing effects of education should not be ignored in the practice of implementing critical pedagogy. Schools are major sites for conditioning students into social, political, economic, and cultural conventions and transmitters of societal norms and expectations. Common in the schooling experiences of many preservice teachers are emphases on *the* right answer versus multiple perspectives/interpretations; the individual versus the collective; majority rule versus consensus; outcomes (i.e., grades) versus process; certainty versus ambiguity; complicity versus conflict; unilateral versus multidirectional power. According to Shor (1992, p. 24), "the participatory class can …provoke anxiety and defensiveness in some students because it is an unfamiliar program for collaborative learning …"

Written and verbal comments as well as direct observation by the instructor

suggest that implementing the PSP was an "unfamiliar program for learning." An empowering education was not the norm, as evidenced by preservice teachers' anxiety over the PSP process, demands for more directives from the instructor, impatience with decision-making, frustration with individual cohort members, in addition to self-disclosed apathy and silence as a response to the aforementioned challenges. Shor (1992, p. 139) suggests that students learn "habits of resistance" that subsequently infiltrate a democratic/critical classroom. Such habits can undermine the work of educators seeking to invite students to participate in an empowered learning environment.

The instructor intended to model an invitation to empowerment. A successful PSP meant preservice teachers had to participate in their own learning in often unfamiliar ways, resulting in dialog, collective engagement, ambiguity, conflict, and shared responsibility for teaching and learning which consciously and unconsciously destabilized the preservice teachers. Some, but not all of them appreciated the exercise in autonomy, despite its challenging moments.

Exercising autonomy is not traditionally a facet of a socializing education, yet it is a characteristic of an empowering environment (Coble, 2010; Short, 1994). Therefore, if the goal of a teacher preparation program is to develop change agents, advocates and star teachers (Haberman, 1995), or dreamkeepers (Ladson-Billings, 2009), preservice teachers need opportunities to exercise their autonomy and examine how they have been socialized.

Critical Pedagogy and the Illusion of Shared Power

Although designed to share power, facets of the PSP process still structurally maintained a dynamic of power grounded in the status of the instructor. Ellsworth's (1998) question, "why doesn't this feel empowering?" frames a critique of critical pedagogy's repressive qualities. According to Ellsworth (1998, p. 306), "strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact." As discussed below, this illusion is evident in the PSP.

The instructor sought to recast the mold of the classroom; however, doing so did not negate the structural expectations already embedded in academia. An illusion of shared power was highlighted by the facts that the PSP was a required assignment in a required course for which the preservice teachers earned points towards their overall grade. Class discussions and reflections rarely included these facts but they undoubtedly affected how some cohort members perceived their process and calibrated the timeline of the project. For instance, a self-assessment from one preservice teacher claimed: "I started working towards a grade, not a solution."

Assertions by the instructor that the project be collectively implemented created an illusion of shared power. During topic selection, some preservice teachers asked the instructor if they could implement multiple projects. This question typically arose during moments of debate between ideas and reflected the difficulty in

deciding on one project that everyone could support. The instructor acknowledged they proposed a solution to their decision-making problem but that the intention was to come to a collective decision. Requiring them to work towards a group decision was a core aspect of the PSP. However, this requirement raises the following questions: When the instructor rejects a posed solution, what are the implications? Is challenging a democratic process by instituting a unilateral decision in line with critical pedagogy?

Shor (1992) contends that, "a democratic process means that students cannot do what they want whenever they want. The structure is democratic, not permissive" (p. 160). However, the power to negate student voice still requires recognition. The person sharing power ultimately retains power particularly if the person is in a pre-established position of authority. The authors were prompted to examine how the instructor could invoke tenets of critical pedagogy while presenting an illusion of shared power and mutual authority in the classroom.

The PSP yielded complex and disparate experiences and uncovered ways in which power affected decision-making, leadership, group dynamics, educational socialization, and an understanding of critical pedagogy. Power affected sentiments of empowerment and disempowerment. Though it might appear counterintuitive to discuss the role of power and its disempowering possibilities in the context of empowerment, the preservice teachers' reactions to the unfamiliarity of being "given" power may foster a cognitive shift in the normative ways they conceptualize education.

The lessons learned above yielded other possible considerations for examination. In conjunction with participating in a PSP, the effects of other program features (i.e., mentor teachers, other coursework) on the preservice teachers could be assessed for their sense of preparedness, perceptions of themselves as change agents, and as practitioners of critical pedagogy. Such information would be useful for expanding programmatic knowledge and implementation of teacher preparation.

Implications and Considerations for Teacher Education

Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges in sharing power and learning to function effectively as a group, the PSP appears to have value as a course assignment. A worthy goal for teacher preparation is to prepare teachers to be change agents for the benefit of students' educational outcomes. Incorporating a PSP in the first year of the program grew from the authors' concerns that preparing teachers to be change agents should include opportunities to actually effect change. The PSP helped participants learn about decision-making, group dynamics, community needs, and how to help solve an issue of concern to them. This should strengthen their ability to function in a school faculty as well as encourage them to look towards each other rather than just to authority figures in initiating change. They also learned about setting goals and about the effort it takes on their part to make something happen.

The PSP is intended to model a way in which service learning can be coupled with critical pedagogy, fostering preservice teachers' empowerment to create an opportunity for learning and social change. Letting them decide the project direction and scope was overwhelming regardless of whether the process was embraced or resisted. In contrast to their own schooling background, the PSP gave them the experience to navigate group dynamics, lead, choose, participate, and feel.

Furthermore, structural issues within the context of carrying out a PSP should be acknowledged. The length of the course in which the PSP is implemented, where the PSP fits pedagogically in the overall program of study, and the skill set of the instructor to teach from a critical pedagogy approach should be considered.

Engaging in the PSP was intended to prepare teachers to implement similar projects with their students, requiring them to shift from a teacher dominance model to a collaborative model in which the students and teacher work together. Based on a preliminary analysis of reflections of cohorts experiencing the project in their first year and subsequently implementing it with their students in the second year of the program, it appears that participation had an effect on the way they implemented the project, including anticipating the time commitment for the project, managing the amount of freedom they allotted to their students in decision-making, and feeling prepared for potential conflicts. Implementing the PSP may affect their teaching methods, allowing students to follow their interests and to do school work in meaningful ways.

Lastly, the affective responses throughout the PSP strongly indicate the need for continued attention to the role of feelings in the classroom. More often, reports on the teaching and learning process emphasize cognitive elements; however, the preservice teachers clearly expressed the ways their sentiments had an effect on their learning, whether positive or negative.

In the Service of Learning and Activism

Service learning by definition is an educational experience with service and academic pursuits linked in various ways. Engaging in service, even when combined with readings and reflection typical of service learning, can leave participants with deficit perspectives or feelings of helplessness. Merging service learning with critical pedagogy challenges paternalistic or deficit perspectives and offers a concrete way to engage students with critical pedagogy. A PSP invites critical elements of service, learning, and activism towards crafting an empowering education. Service learning and critical pedagogy already share features (Claus & Ogden, 1999); however, critiques of service learning posit a need for more critical, counter-hegemonic, multicultural education focused applications that tackle issues of power (Cipolle, 2004; Ethridge, 2006; King, 2004; O'Grady, 2000). The PSP was designed to challenge limitations within service learning while implementing a critical pedagogy often viewed as too abstract and "theoretical" to put into practice.

The problem solution project appears to possess a *pedagogy of possibility* that shifts service to advocacy by engaging students in the individual and collective work of addressing an issue of their choosing. The *possibility* involves envisioning a better society, school, or program and taking action toward that end. The empowerment and experience developed through the PSP can give teachers courage and skills to counter unjust and ineffective educational practices. Potentially, a body of teachers prepared as effective change agents can transform the disempowering educational practices so prevalent in education today.

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