Using Service-Learning to Increase Pre-Service Teachers' Sense of Self-Efficacy Regarding Parent Involvement

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More than ever before, there is a discrepancy between today's new teachers and the students that they teach. According to The Condition of Education 2010, a report on today's schools produced by the U.S. Department of Education, 83% of classroom teachers are White, while only 55% of classroom students are White (Aud, Hussar, Planty, Snyder, Bianco, Fox, Frohlich, Kemp, & Drake, 2010). Although the face of the American classroom has changed, little has changed regarding the face of the typical American school teacher. In the early 1990s, Zimpher & Ashburn (1992) described the typical pre-service teacher as a female from a small town or suburban community who attends college less than 100 miles from home and intends to return to small-town America to teach middle-income children of average intelligence in traditionally organized schools.

The reality of today's schools is dramatically different than the experiences and expectations of many pre-service teachers. Darling Hammond (2006) explains: In the classrooms most beginning teachers will enter, at least 25% of students live in poverty and many of them lack basic food, shelter, and healthcare; from

ABSTRACT

Pre-service elementary education teachers conducted family nights with children and families considered "high need". The family nights were designed to help build pre-service teachers' sense of self-efficacy regarding parent involvement and working with low-income children and families with limited English proficiency. The project increased pre-service teachers' exposure to the economic, social, family, and ethnic issues of high-need schools; opportunities to work with students and families at high-need schools; and professional development at high-need schools.

The family nights were successful at increasing students' knowledge, understanding of issues related to working with high-need families, confidence, and ability to provide suggestions and engagement for the families. This service-learning experience also helped pre-service teachers identify stereotypes and biases they held. However, more extensive and long-term experiences are needed to make long-term changes in pre-service teachers' attitudes and behaviors.

10% to 20% have identified learning differences, 15% speak a language other than English as their primary language (many more in urban settings); and about 40% are members of racial / ethnic 'minority groups', many of them recent immigrants from countries with different educational systems and cultural traditions (p. 301).

The number of children who are English Language Learners (ELL) in today's classrooms continues to rise. The ELL population has grown almost 105% compared to 12% of the general school population since the 1990-1991 school year. These children are at a distinct disadvantage academically to their English speaking counterparts. There is about a 25 point difference between fourth, eighth and tenth grade students' average reading scores for students who typically speak a language other than English in the home (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Hispanic Americans represent the largest growing ethnic group and are expected to represent 25% of the school population by 2025 (President's Advisory Commission, 2000). When studying perceptions of new teachers regarding their preparation to teach ELL students, O'Neal, Ringler, and Rodriguez (2008) found that although many teachers felt topics related to teaching ELL students were "woven" into their courses, they did not feel what was covered was ample to effectively prepare them to teach ELL students.

In addition to lacking culturally diverse experiences and knowledge, most pre-service teachers have very limited interactions with the families they serve. This lack of interaction often makes pre-service teachers fear the unknown (Casper, 2011). Pre-service teachers often express concerns about the quality of the teacher–family relationship and the role of parents in education (Baum and McMurray- Schwarz, 2004). Language and cultural barriers only intensify pre-service teachers' reservations. Lack of teacher training is one of the most frequently cited barriers practicing teachers cite to parent involvement (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003).

Parent involvement is key to children's success in school. Parent involvement includes a wide variety of actions including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2008). Parent involvement has many benefits. Involved parents have children who earn higher grades, have better school attendance, increased graduation rates, and higher test scores (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Parent involvement in schools and their children's education not only benefits the children, it also benefits teachers and the community. Schools that have effective parent involvement programs enjoy increased parent support, improved teacher moral, and a better reputation in the community (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Parent involvement also results in an increased sense of community for parents and teachers (Belenardo, 2001).

Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between today's pre-service teachers' lives and school experiences and those of their students and families. Service-learning in diverse communities can help pre-service teachers get much needed experience, confront their own biases, learn to view things from other perspectives, provide enlightenment regarding social injustices and discrimination, and encourage cultural appreciation (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omea, 2011). It can also help pre-service teachers gain confidence about teaching children from diverse backgrounds (Bollin, 2007).

Immersing pre-service teachers in diverse and economically disadvantaged settings through well supported service-learning experiences can help dispel many of the myths and misconceptions that pre-service teachers often believe about these populations. Service-learning can also empower pre-service teachers with a knowledge of their ability to be agents of change (Hale, 2008). The more diverse experiences teacher candidates have, the more likely they are to appreciate and show sensitivity to other cultures. These experiences can help

reduce the fear of the unknown or unfamiliar that many preservice teachers face and help teachers see diversity as a resource rather than a problem or obstacle (Kyles & Olafson, 2008).

Present Study

The aim of the present study was to provide multicultural service-learning experiences to pre-service teachers from a small liberal arts college in Illinois in order to see if service-learning experiences could be used to increase pre-service teachers' sense of self-efficacy regarding parent involvement. The project was designed to increase:

- pre-service teachers' exposure to the economic, social, family, and ethnic issues of high-need schools;
- pre-service teachers' opportunities to work with students and families at high-need schools;
- professional development for pre-service teachers at high-need schools;
- pre-service teachers' involvement in encouraging math skills at school and home;
- parents' knowledge of math strategies to use with their young children; and,
- children's mathematical interactions with their parents or primary caregivers.

Method

Participants

Nine sophomore and junior pre-service teachers participated in the study. They were native English speakers. Six of them had taken some Spanish in high school. One had taken French.

Procedure

A series of four math nights were conducted at various elementary schools in a small district located about 20 miles from Chicago. The district serves a population of students and families who have been classified as "high-need" due to the number of low-income students and students with limited English proficiency. Each math night focused on a different grade level serving kindergarten, first, second, and third grade families. The family nights were held once a month over a semester at various schools throughout the district to provide parent training across the district and to expose pre-service teachers to the wide variety of families in the district.

Each family night lasted for 2 hours and began with a light dinner and a brief presentation for parents. After that, pre-service teachers and parents interacted with their children applying what was learned from the presentation at math centers. At the conclusion of each event children and parents were provided with materials and an at-home activity to help reinforce what was learned and to encourage families to continue working together at home.

Pre-service teachers were asked to fill out a 10 question self-efficacy survey based on a 5 point scale before and after their participation in the parent nights. They also kept reflection journals and were interviewed at the end of the semester about their most memorable experiences, their expectations going into the study, how their expectations regarding families compared to reality, and what they learned.

Parents were asked to complete a brief survey about their beliefs regarding education at the beginning of the evening. This information was shared with students after each event to help provide an opportunity for reflection and discussion. Average scores of parents' responses were calculated across all four parent nights for our final debriefing meeting.

Results

The program resulted in an increase in pre-service teachers' comfort level working with high-need and ELL parents, as seen in Table 1. Pre-service teachers indicated a significant increase in their knowledge, understanding of issues related to working with high-need families, confidence, and ability to provide suggestions and engagement for the families.

It is interesting to note that pre-service teachers experienced significant gains in many areas. However, there was a non-significant decline in teachers' comfort level providing parent education and encouraging parent involvement when they begin teaching. This can likely be attributed to a more realistic understanding of the difficulty of attaining and sustaining parent involvement.

Table 1: Pre-Service Teachers' Survey Results Regarding Working with ELL Parents and High-Need Families During the Math Nights **(on a 5 point scale, 5 = Strongly Agree)**

	Initial Response	Post Response
I am comfortable with the thought of working with my students' parents.	3.6	4.4
I know how to teach any parents about their role in their child's education.	2.9	4.0 *
It is my responsibility to help all parents learn how to work with their children.	4.4	5.0
I understand issues related to working with high-need families.	2.9	4.1 *
I feel confident in my ability to communicate with my students' parents.	3.6	3.9
I feel confident in my ability to provide parents suggestions for working with their child.	3.1	4.4 *
I feel confident in my ability to involve parents in their child's education.	3.4	4.0
I am confident in my ability to work with ELL and high-need families.	3.0	4.3 *
I know easy ways to involve parents in their child's education.	3.1	4.6 *
I am comfortable with the idea of providing parent education and encouraging parent involvement for parents when I begin teaching.	4.3	4.1

* Note: $p < .05$

Student Reflections

At the end of each parent night, after the families had left, students shared their thoughts, feelings, questions, and experiences. This provided a time for students to process the experience and learn from the experiences of others. Students were also interviewed at the end of the semester and asked to reflect upon their experiences. Interview responses were analyzed and common themes were identified.

One of the most interesting things that the experience provided was an opportunity for the students to confront their stereotypes of "high-need" families. Addressing stereotypes is essential for pre- and in-service teachers. Teachers who rely on stereotypes risk letting biases work to their disadvantage and the disadvantage of their students and families (Cook-Sather & Reisinger, 2001). Service-learning experiences have been found to be effective in helping pre-service teachers recognize their biases (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011; Cooper, 2007). This can be seen in the reflections of several of the pre-service teachers in the study:

I didn't realize how many parents cared about their children. I just assumed that because they were considered high-needs they wouldn't show up. But there were, as time went on, more parents who came. And, you can tell that they are really dedicated to their student's learning. That was one thing that I learned.

Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

I just didn't think that they would be sitting down with their children. I guess that's a bad stereotype to say. I just thought that they would be just not doing anything with them. I guess I just thought that they were just going to be not really involved in the process at all, just kind of standoffish.

I learned that the parents are willing to do more with their children and that they just don't know how to go about doing certain things like the games. They seemed really engaged with their student and making the craft or what not.

Another student addressed her preconceived notions of the school environment:

I was expecting it to look a little bit different. I was expecting it to be more rundown, more in need of a paint job. You know, it was very well kept. The library had a lot of books which was one of the things I always think of in high-needs schools is that the library needs a lot of help. So, I was expecting a smaller library. I was just expecting it to be different.

Several of the pre-service teachers talked about being afraid or intimidated by working not only in an unfamiliar cultural environment, but also by working with parents because of their limited experience. This is not unusual for pre-service teachers. Baum & McMurray-Schwarz (2004) found when surveying pre-service teachers that they were concerned about the quality of the teacher–family relationship, meeting children's basic needs in school, and the role of parents in education. The pre-service teachers in this study had similar concerns. A common sentiment was shared by this student:

I was apprehensive at first working with parents in general, let alone high-needs parents. But, I realize now that they want to help their children. They just may not know how to go about doing it. There are so many different ways that you as a teacher can help parents and bring parents in. It's very beneficial, not only to you but to the children and the classroom environment. It may take some of your time but it will be well worth it in the end.

Service-learning experiences have the potential to be much more meaningful than traditional field experiences because they provide opportunities often outside of the realm of traditional field experiences (Pappamihiel, 2007). This was often commented upon by students including a student who shared:

Just being more comfortable with parents and children and working with them together helps. Usually, you know, you are just with the children, like in the classroom, so you don't know how to include the parents in the conversation. You get to praise the student in front of their parents. I think that it is important because, you know, parents are encouraged by that. So, just getting to see and figure out how to work with both of them at the same time is helpful. That's a great opportunity most students don't get.

On-site school personnel are invaluable in making service-learning experiences successful. Supportive personnel can help pre-service teachers address inequalities and learn to navigate environments that are often dramatically different than students have previously

experienced (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011). The need for support from others was a common theme:

> *I think my attitude has changed in the sense I am a little more comfortable in it. Before I really didn't know what to expect but now I am realizing that you can fall back on other people to help you. That they want to be there as much as you. It is kind of like a team effort I guess.*
> *I learned how to interact with the parents, you know, especially those who don't speak English. I learned how to use more visuals and talking with the student and the parent together. I also learned how to work with the other teachers or people I was working with to help me communicate with and learn about the parents.*

In addition to identifying the importance of finding supportive school personnel, students learned that building relationships with the families helped ease fears, anxieties, and encouraged success. Through building relationships with families, students were able to develop an appreciation for different cultures and the struggles of others. This result is clearly supported by research. Several studies of pre-service teachers involved in multicultural service-learning found that service-learning experiences can help develop pre-service teachers' appreciation for cultural diversity and result in an interest to work with low-income and diverse students (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Brown, 2004; Conner, 2010). One example of this from our study is a student who shared:

> *There was this one lady who had two children and she was telling me how she was going to school at night after work to learn English. She was telling me how her daughter is also like her teacher because she's teaching her mom how to speak English. So, just how much she's come from. She just started doing it. I think it was this year or the year before that she started taking classes and we were already able to talk to each other and communicate with each other. The gains that she has made in speaking English are amazing. Her daughter was like, 'I want to be a teacher now because, you know, now I am helping my mom so much. I just love doing this'. The little girl was in 2nd grade and it was just unbelievable to me. I was amazed. I admired her for doing that. I was like, 'Wow'. The effort that she put into it. I was thinking, if I was a parent who walked into Mexico and I didn't speak Spanish at all and everybody around there spoke that language, I don't know what I'd do. In order to help my children succeed and be able to be a functional part of that society, I would have to learn how to speak that language. But, I had a hard enough time learning it in high school let alone working, having kids, and going back to school to learn it.*

Although this experience did build students' confidence about working with "high-need" parents and their children, it is only the first step towards true cultural awareness and appreciation. Many experiences with a wide variety of types of families are needed to truly empower pre-service teachers to effectively engage families (Baum & Swick, 2008). As one student explained:

> *I was nervous at the start. I was really apprehensive. I still am to a certain degree, but I think that this experience has helped. I have gained confidence knowing that we are on the same page with a lot of the families. I would have liked to have more experience. So,*

I still am apprehensive. I am going to be honest, but it did help me come out of my shell a little bit since I have never had this experience before. Just to know that they're there and care about their students gave me confidence.

Another student provided insights into the benefits of a variety of experiences:

They're not as scary as I had maybe thought that they were. I think when the parents know you are trying and giving it your best, that makes them feel comfortable. I don't know, I just feel more comfortable. The more parents you are around, the more comfortable you feel. But, you need exposure, especially when there is that language barrier.

Baum and Swick (2008) conclude that students need prolonged, consistent and meaningful interactions with families to help students have an appropriate understanding of family context and an ample time to reflect about the interactions over time. Reflection provides time for the "transformational learning" that is the aim of any service-learning experience (Carrington & Selva, 2010).

Parent Surveys

In order for students to learn more about the parents' beliefs about education, we gave a very brief survey including a 5-point scale asking parents to share their thoughts. Survey results were shared with pre-service teachers at the end of each family night. Average scores of parents' responses were calculated across all four parent nights for our final debriefing meeting (Table 2).

Table 2 Average Scores for ELL Parent Surveys Regarding Feelings about School Involvement (on a 5 point scale, 5 = Strongly Agree)

	ELL Parents' Responses
My child's motivation to do well in school depends on me.	4.6
Working with my child at home each night on schoolwork is important.	4.9
Parents and teachers should work together to help children learn.	4.7
I know how to help my child do well in school.	3.3
I would like to learn more about how to teach my child at home.	4.5

Parents consistently expressed a desire to work with their children and an appreciation for the importance of school. However, Table 2 also shows that parents of children even as young as kindergarten still expressed confusion or uncertainty about how to help.

The information from the parent surveys proved very meaningful for the students. Some of the insights shared regarding the survey data shared after the first parent night include:

The parents really do want to help their student. I didn't really think they would know that school was important. They do. Many of them just don't know what to do.
I didn't think that they would think working with their child is important. They really seem interested in helping.

This again shows the issue of stereotypes that needed to be addressed throughout the study. Although the attitudes of pre-service students were positively influenced over the term of the semester, this study represents only one small step in encouraging cultural awareness and appreciation. Daniel Solorzano (1997) suggests the need for teacher educators to provide multiple examples and experiences within and about communities of color that can help confront and challenge racial stereotypes. Service-learning can be used for such opportunities.

Conclusion

The parent nights were successful in helping pre-service teachers confront their biases and fears. They were an effective way to help *begin* a discussion about working with parents and families who are different from themselves. As students explained:

I think that parents sometimes think that there's this barrier between when the teacher is involved and when the parent is supposed to be involved. Teachers want them to be involved. So, it's a matter of saying to your parents, 'I do want you to be involved'. I think that will help break down that barrier. So, I am going to remember that when I become a teacher because I just want to make sure that I tell them in the beginning, 'I want you to be involved in this process. I want us to be partners.'

I am a lot more open to getting parents involved. I would like to get parents more involved in the classroom because I think they want to get involved, they just don't know how. The biggest thing that I learned with working with ESL and high-need families through the parent night was that I was always under the impression that high-needs families are kind of the families who don't really get involved in their students' education because they work so much or they're just not interested because they had bad experiences with their education. But, what I noticed was that many of them are working hard to try to learn English and taking their kids to activities and working on reading.

Limited interactions with parents over one semester cannot hope to make long lasting changes in students' attitudes and behaviors. Participating in a variety of service-learning opportunities throughout their college experience is needed to make long-term changes in pre-service teachers' attitudes and behaviors that can positively influence pre-service teachers' behaviors and choices in the future. However, this program provided an initial vehicle for discussion and reflection for our students. It was a way for our students to see their students and families as not only learners, but also teachers (Donahue, Bowyer, & Rosenberg, 2003).

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