

Requisite Community Engagement for Teacher Education: A Different Take on Service Learning

*By Deborah Biss Keller**

This article examines pre-service teachers' responses to their experiences with community engagement as a service learning project as part of an introductory Education course at a large, midwestern urban university in the United States. It is typical for students in pre-service Education courses to participate in service learning in schools or community centers, but it is less common for Education courses to require service learning projects in which the focus is for students to engage with adult community members. I argue that it is imperative for students to become familiar with communities in which they teach and learn from residents' "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). A service learning project with a community center, the focus of which is empowerment of local residents, is described. Located in an urban neighborhood in which most of the residents are of a racial minority different from most of the pre-service students themselves, the center provided the space for the class to learn from adult community residents about issues surrounding empowerment and community engagement. Drawing upon Freire's (2003) notion of praxis I present findings of a qualitative analysis of students' response papers in the context of a curriculum that focuses on critical social justice and the development of culturally competent teachers.

Keywords: Agency, Community engagement, Critical social justice, Pre-service teacher education, Service learning

Introduction

Service learning for teacher education has become part of the curriculum in many pre-service teacher programs. While Education course work often includes students participating in asset based studies of school children's/youths' communities, service learning typically takes the form of students working with children/youth in schools or community centers and reflecting about the experience with regard to one's own biases, pedagogical techniques, and cultural competency among other elements. What is not as common, however, is service learning that engages students working with adults in the community in order to learn more about the community and residents in general and the residents' funds of knowledge, defined by Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti (2005) as encompassing the idea that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (preface, pp. ix-x). According to them, this concept undergirds the depiction of communities with regard to their resources and how to utilize them in the classroom. Their aim is to provide a lens in which households in "working-class or poor communities" (preface, p. x) are seen

*Clinical Associate Professor, Indiana University-Purdue University, USA.

predominantly through their strengths and their assets, which can inform pedagogical practice. Similarly, Buck & Sylvester (2005), in a project with Masters students in Elementary Education at the University of Pennsylvania, described the basic goal of having their students do research on urban neighborhood communities as viewing "urban families and communities as resources of talent, knowledge, and possibility" (p. 214). They noted that such research and curriculum can facilitate an environment for social change and student agency. This is in direct contrast to deficit theories, which hold that minority, low-income children do poorly in school because their backgrounds are "linguistically or cognitively" lacking (Collins, 1988, p. 300), or that they are culturally deficient (Payne, 2005, as cited in Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 82). This fails to acknowledge systemic and structural forces at work (Collins, 1988; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), including inequities in education and "basic human rights" (Gorski, 2008). Dewey (1932/1990) contended that school and community should be directly connected, and he called for collaborative work among students and asserted that the "helping" of another, "instead of being a form of charity which impoverishes the recipient, is simply an aid in setting free the powers...of the one helped" (p. 16). According to Freire (1998), a teacher should "discuss with students the concrete reality of their lives" (p. 36), and he questions why one should not create an "'intimate' connection" between general curriculum and "knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals" (p. 36). Ladson-Billings (2006) wrote that "we lack of complex understandings of how individual, family, community, school, and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students" (p. 106). In questioning a group of teachers regarding whether their school staff had attended events in the community in which they taught, she found that none of them had done so. She noted how many preservice teachers do not see themselves as having a culture due to their belonging to the dominant culture, which has become normalized. She stressed the need for students to become familiar with the culture of communities where they will teach and examine how their own culture informs their beliefs and practices. In doing so, she maintained, "they may become more open to the power of culture to shape the learning and experiences" (p. 109) of their future students. In their work with Native American students, McCarty and Lee (2014) found striking a balance between "academic, linguist, and cultural interests" necessitates "direct accountability to Indigenous communities" (p. 119). Accountability to communities for the education of their children is paramount for effective, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and drawing upon communities' funds of knowledge is integral to this endeavor.

Here I describe a service learning project in which students in an introductory education class at a large, midwestern urban university in the United States did community work and engaged in dialogue with adult residents from urban neighborhoods in an effort to help students understand the importance of funds of knowledge that children and youth bring with them from their communities into the classroom. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the examination of student responses, I looked for overall themes that emerged from their responses. Therefore, the broad questions I wanted to address were: 1. How did engagement

with adult residents from an urban community affect students' learning and attitudes about the importance of spending time getting to know the community in which one teaches? 2. How did engagement with adult residents from an urban community influence students' perceptions of the importance to them as prospective teachers of PK-12 students' and their families' "funds of knowledge"?

Participants and Context

The 23 participants were students enrolled in a Themed Learning Community (TLC) that included my class, an introductory Education class; a History class; a Writing class; and a First Year Seminar class. Students attended all of these classes together. The theme revolved around social justice, and the First Year Seminar was part of a summer program so therefore did not meet every week during the regular semester. The time slots for the First Year Seminar and my class were back-to-back, allowing us to combine the two class times for the students and myself to go to the service learning site and participate as a group. The other instructors of the TLC participated as they were able. The service learning project was with a local urban community center that focuses on empowerment of youth and other community residents and is located in a primarily African American neighborhood. Each service learning session was two hours, and the initial plan was to have two sessions that involved group dialogue and two sessions that involved gathering soil samples in city neighborhoods to be tested for lead. My students would just do the collecting of samples, not the testing. This was part of a larger project funded with grant money for a scientist who was using the grant to work with the community center. Due to a logistical issue, with those involved in granting permission to proceed with the collection of soil samples, we were unfortunately unable to collect the samples, as the permission was not granted during our service learning time spent there. When we began the sessions it was not known that we would not be able to do the collecting; therefore, the first two hours consisted of a dialogue and information session in which the scientist involved with the project talked about the adverse effects of lead poisoning on children. He involved my students in discussing possible solutions and their own roles as prospective teachers in working with educational interventions with students who are affected by lead poisoning. Students learned about environmental racism and its ramifications, how some people are affected more than others due to their race because of lack of soil testing and clean-up where they reside.

By the second session permission to collect soil samples had still not been granted, so the class raked leaves at a cemetery near the center, and the leaves would be used as compost for the center's urban garden. Prior to going to the cemetery students learned from the leaders of the center about the importance of social networking and social capital and how these can provide opportunities for residents to engage in entrepreneurship. The leaders explained how the raking would provide a service both to the cemetery and to the center, and consequently to the neighborhood residents.

The third session involved a dialogue with adult community members about

the history of racism and how racism still plays out in schools and what my students as prospective teachers, most of whom were white, could do to become more culturally competent and more effectively work with students of color. Students were able to listen to voices of those directly affected by racism past and present. During this discussion topics such as lack of cultural competence among white teachers in an integrated school, lack of voice from People of Color about integration, lack of protection of youth of color in integrated settings, the importance of listening to People of Color, the importance of knowing one's own culture before trying to understand others', the importance of keeping a check on one's own assumptions, the importance of compassion, and the necessity of increasing resources in urban spaces were addressed, among others.

By the time of the last session we still had not been given permission to collect soil samples, so we went to the center's aquaponics garden and learned about how it works and serves the community. This was followed by a gathering at the center to view a video about a well-known activist.

When initially working with the community center to seek an opportunity for my students to become involved in the community to challenge deficit mindsets and appreciate residents' funds of knowledge, I left it up to the directors of the agency to determine what we would do, though I did request a dialogue with community members. I wanted my students to hear the voices that often get left out of curriculum and to examine their (my students') assumptions and beliefs about those from groups different than their own. This self-reflection aligns with our School of Education's and our particular TLC's focus on critical social justice and anti-oppression pedagogy. Typically I have sent students to urban schools or community centers to work with pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade students, or a local program that works with students aged 18-21 who have disabilities. This work has involved tutoring and/or working in some other capacity with children/youth. That is what most if not all of the students expected for this service learning project. Therefore, there was some resistance to taking part in a project such as the one in which we were going to engage. I heard through another instructor in the TLC and from students' written reflections of the frustration of some students that they were not going to work with children/youth. I had anticipated this and constructed reflection prompts accordingly, asking students to specifically link what we were doing to their future roles as teachers. These reflective writings provide the data for this project.

Theoretical Framework

I employed the concept of Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) as described above and Freire's (2003) notion of *praxis* – "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79) to inform my selection of the service learning project, the reflection prompts, and the analysis of the reflections. Freire contrasted the "banking approach" of education, in which "the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 72), with the "problem-posing" approach, in which students and teacher construct and

negotiate knowledge together through dialogue. In the latter approach the roles of the teacher and students take on a reciprocity; each becomes the teacher *and* the student – the learning involves "teacher-student with students-teachers" (p. 80). For Freire, this was crucial for emancipatory pedagogy, that which he referred to as *engaged pedagogy*; the teacher engages with the students in a quest to uncover reality as it exists in lived experience. Freire asserted that "education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—...denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people" (p. 81). It was in this spirit that I chose to have my students focus on learning about the community through engagement with a center the aim of which is to empower neighborhood residents for leadership and sustainability. Students did not just learn about the neighborhood's funds of knowledge; they also learned from community members themselves of the challenges past and present that People of Color face due to systemic racism. Although my class addressed oppression in its many forms and how it impacts the lives of children and youth, coming from urban community residents as opposed to coming from their White instructor provides a more authentic, credible voice. This of course assumes that the students will listen to these voices and see them as valid. The hope is that with curriculum that focuses on critical social justice prior to, during, and following the service learning sessions, including reflective writing that requires that the students at least consider the purpose of this engagement, they will begin to develop critical consciousness.

Data Collection and Methodology

Data consisted of students' answers to prompts that I gave them for each session. While all 23 students participated, two students did not complete the written assignments for the third and fourth sessions but attended both; one student did not complete the written assignment for the fourth session but attended; and one student did not complete the written assignment for the first session but attended and did not attend the third and fourth sessions. Each written assignment was to be 800 words. Students' answers to the prompts were qualitatively examined for general emergent themes. Responses to some question sets overlapped with those of other sets. Therefore, I looked for overall themes from the reflective writings. When a response fit under more than one theme I selected a thematic category for the sake of analysis; an exception is the category of *Themes from Students* – due to the students' listing themes from their service learning, some of those themes overlapped with general overall themes that emerged in the study, and they are included in both categories. To insure credibility in the qualitative analysis I present students' words verbatim in excerpts from the reflection responses. While I necessarily selected particular excerpts to include here, I note the frequency of responses, as relayed in numbers of students who gave similar or like responses. In addition, if it was not clear that a student's response fit in a category I did not include it. For example, if a student mentioned "funds of knowledge" in a response but it was not elaborated upon or it was clear

that the student did not understand the significance of the term, then I did not include it.

The first question set asked students to consider how the discussion on lead poisoning enlightened them as future teachers and how it relates to oppression, awareness, and critical social justice. They were also asked to relate the discussion to agency/empowerment and explain why this is important. The second question set prompted students to think about why it is important to learn about residents of the community before going to work in the schools, and what that has to do with children's/youth's and their families' funds of knowledge and working toward hearing their voices, and why this understanding is crucial. Students were asked how this affects their attitudes about those who are from groups different than their own. And, due to the change of service work, they were asked how raking and bagging leaves plays a part in the role of social capital in the projects at the center. The third question set asked students what they learned that they might not have learned in a school environment. They also were asked to explain what they learned about Whiteness, desegregation, assumptions, and student engagement, and they were asked how they can prepare themselves to teach in an urban school. The final question set prompted the students to draw upon our course curriculum, including service learning and other TLC curriculum as appropriate, to consider how aquaponics and the activist about whom they viewed a documentary interconnect and to relate it to their responsibilities as future teachers. In addition, they were asked to think of some general themes they learned through their service learning sessions that will help them become effective teachers, and how their sessions will influence them in this endeavor.

Findings

Main themes that emerged involved ideas around awareness, community, failure to see relevance to the curriculum, empowerment versus savior mentality, social capital, funds of knowledge, things learned that students believed would not have been learned in a school setting, discrimination and Whiteness. I also include a section on overall themes from the students' perspectives.

Importance of Awareness

Awareness was a recurring theme throughout the course, both self-awareness and awareness of how oppression manifests itself at the macro and micro levels. The service learning experience provided students with authentic perspectives that underscored what we were addressing in class. Eighteen students (78.3%) wrote about awareness at the personal level or as it related to the topics addressed in service learning.

One student, speaking of being a teacher in the future and in relation to lead poisoning and other issues that impact education, said:

I wish to actively bring these ideas up in class, or maybe hold discussions outside of class. These discussions could involve students and parents alike; bringing awareness to issues like this is crucial to make progress.

This student expressed the importance of taking the awareness into the classroom and to parents, indicating that broader awareness is necessary to make "progress." This aligns with the center's emphasis on empowerment.

Another student said:

These issues are important because without this knowledge I would have never known that lead poisoning had long-term effects on the environment, children, and the community. Becoming educated on these issues can make or break the communities safety, and the safety of young children.

A student, referring to a lack of action at the structural level to address lead poisoning in a lower-income, minority neighborhood said:

This is an example of environmental racism which was the lack of awareness people made about a specific area because of the minorities that lived there.

Here the student is naming a form of oppression as it relates to the environment.

One student wrote about self-awareness of assumptions:

One thing I really learned from [the center] today was to go into urban schools with no prior assumptions. I think this is something a lot of people don't think about. I have a lot of assumptions about urban schools that I never realized really existed in my mind until I started taking this class.

Additionally, a couple of students addressed *lack of* awareness of one's own oppressive behavior. One student, pointing to the fact that lead poisoning isn't addressed or prevented due to its affecting low-income communities of People of Color, said:

This falls under what we talk about a lot in class and how discrimination happens and maybe people don't even realize it.

Here the student is referring to how oftentimes people with power are not always aware that they are discriminating. Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017) noted that most discrimination is not in our conscious awareness; we are socialized to believe certain ways and internalize these beliefs and assumptions about others. They also asserted, however, that those who reap the benefits of discrimination might not be interested in understanding the effects of it on others. My students were challenged throughout the course to examine their own biases and assumptions and to consider where they come from. One student said:

We think that just because we don't have an issue, that the [sic] everyone around us don't [sic] have an issue.

Community

Twenty students (87%) related the experience in the community to their roles as future teachers.

One student revealed an understanding that children/youth are significantly influenced by experiences outside of school:

This experience allowed me to understand that the more I understand my community and my students, the better I will be able to teach. I also now understand that my students are and can be heavily affected by their previous surroundings outside of the classroom.

Another student exhibited a deeper level of critical thought:

This is the most crucial component of community: working together for the common good. We live in a hierarchical society, but we must come to realize through our work as educators, citizen scientists, and members of the community, that we are one. We live in an interconnected society, and the actions either taken or untaken by one, affect us all.

Similarly, another said:

Teaching is a community-oriented job....that is why it is going to be crucial for me to know the community I am in before I even begin teaching there....Students do not live in the classroom, and what goes on before, after, and on days off from school is just as important to their learning and development as what occurs in the classroom.

Another student suggested that "having roots" in the community helps develop trust with parents:

If the teacher has roots in the community I think it makes the parents more at ease when handing their children over to you. They will know you better and trust you and your judgement if you have had a good influence on the community.

This is parallel with what Freire (2003) had to say about the significance of dialogue to trust. He maintained that in order to secure trust one's actions must match one's words.

One student included their role in the context of both the community and of an educator, saying:

We as a community will need to see to the change, and as a future educator, it is important that I continue to teach this material to more than just those enrolled in classes.

Freire's (2003) notion of reciprocity is reflected in another student's comment:

Educating myself and learning just as much from the students as they do from me is key.

Failure to See Relevance to the Curriculum

As noted above, some students did not expect to dialogue with adults or rake leaves. They expected that they would be working with children/youth. While some students indicated that they initially did not see the relevance in what they were doing for service learning but that they eventually did understand the purpose, a few asserted their frustration at what they perceived to be irrelevant to the curriculum.

One student said:

The first session didn't really relate to the material we are learning because we just talked about soil sampling and the effects that lead poisoning has on a person. Hopefully the next sessions will relate to what were [sic] are learning more than the first.

Another said:

During this service trip we went to a cemetery and raked [sic] leaves. We put the leaves in a trash bag so they could use them to compost. I don't know how this relates to education or has anything to do with it...I could see if we took our students out to help clean up the city but that is different than what we did. I think we should be doing other things to help us as future educators.

It is clear that these students did not make the connections between teaching and the importance of working *with* the communities where they teach to empower the residents, some of whom could be their future students' families. This lack of connections made is despite the fact that links were made clear to the students by the people involved at the center. It is difficult to ascertain whether the students genuinely did not understand or they did not wish to understand. Teaching social justice typically brings resistance, albeit with some classes and students more than others.

Empowerment versus Savior Mentality

Nine students (39.1%) demonstrated an understanding of the dangers of a

savior mentality.

One student said:

This service learning project allows for a community to collectively promote change, rather than an outsider like [the scientist] to be the "savior" and "help" the neighborhood.

This comment reflects the student's connecting the lead testing project to collaborative efforts.

Another student noted a self-check on language used:

When I first typed the second main point I typed "that it is important to help" but I decided to change to "get involved" because, as we talked about in class, then there is less likely to have the savior mentality.

Another student applied the idea of agency to children/youth:

If a child is struggling, we should ask them what they need or are going through, instead of insisting our [sic] own solution. We want to encourage the students to seek out their own change, be it in their education, groups they are a part of, or even at home.

One student wrote about using White privilege to help empower others:

If you have a false view of "good neighborhoods" and "bad neighborhoods" is [sic] is easy to fall prey to the savior mindset...Through the societal and institutional power I hold as a white person, I am responsible for listening to their desires and aiding them in being heard. The power I hold in society is undeniable. Though it is unjustly granted, it can be used to aid in empowering those whose voices are chosen not to be heard by those in the institutions.

These reflections align with what Freire (2003) had to say regarding attempts to liberate those who are oppressed. He maintained such attempts must only be made with the oppressed's "reflective participation in the act of liberation" (p. 65), for to do otherwise "is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building...it is to transform them into masses which can be manipulated" (p. 65). Similarly, in his call for problem-posing education, he stated, "The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them" (p. 77). When engaging in critical pedagogy, teachers must work *with* the students and they and the teacher in turn must work *with* the community. For Freire, dialogue is crucial for transformation; one cannot speak for another in a way that denies the other their voice.

Social Capital and Funds of Knowledge

While students seemed to overall demonstrate an understanding of social capital, only just over half (52.2%) exhibited a clear understanding of "funds of knowledge."

A student described the relationship the center has with other entities in the community:

In exchange for our work, [the center] got to keep leaves for composting.... [The center has] formed a relationship where the restaurant relies on them weekly to pick up their scraps.

Another student connected funds of knowledge with social capital by placing "us" in the role of facilitating collaboration among communities, though it is not clear what the student meant by "because we know that these are people who will continue to work collaboratively *within* [emphasis added] the community":

When we encourage agency within a community, we are bringing new people in. These people have their own individual funds of knowledge to contribute to the community. By sharing these connections with people across many communities, we foster a strong foundation of social capital, because we know that these are people who will continue to work collaboratively within the community.

The following excerpt illustrates a degree of understanding of the importance of funds of knowledge; however, it is unclear what the student was suggesting when referring to "developing the students' and families' funds of knowledge." Perhaps by "developing" the student meant "utilizing," as the student went on to describe the importance of incorporating funds of knowledge into the curriculum.

Building that relationship with my students and their families and then bringing their culture into the classroom and digging into their prior knowledge is going to be crucial in developing the students' and families' funds of knowledge. What I learn about my students and then how I incorporate that into meaningful, culturally correct and positive lessons in the classroom is possibly the most important future tool I will need.

Things learned that Students Believed would not have been learned in a School Setting

Eleven students (47.8%) wrote about specific things they learned from the service learning project that they felt they would not have necessarily learned in a school setting. This was in response to a question prompt intended to have them reflect what is learned in service learning such as what they had versus working with PK-12 students. Some of the responses involved what they learned that they

believed they would not learn as classroom students themselves. Nevertheless, what they had to say about the value of hearing personal narratives is significant to the learning process overall.

One student said:

It made it more personal because these people were here telling their stories...One of them talked about discrimination at [a parochial school in one of the surrounding areas], and I live close by there, and have had countless friends go there. It really caught my attention to realize even very religious people discriminated against African Americans because they were different.

Another said:

I think it was good for us to hear how to prepare for urban schools from people who have a lot of experience in urban communities and school systems. It really shocked me to hear how badly some students are treated in schools today based on their color.

...much of what I learned could not be taught or absorbed in a regular school setting because it involved real-life people and their personal stories and experiences...

One student's reflection conveyed how the experience complemented course curriculum:

During this session at [the center], I have been exposed to lives of real people, real moments, and how their journey has had an impact on historical contexts like we learn in class.

Discrimination and Whiteness

Sixteen students (69.6%) demonstrated at least some understanding of the role of discrimination in White privilege. Some comments include:

Since I am white I will never be able to understand what African Americans...go through on a daily basis...I shouldn't act like I know how they feel because I don't and never will, but instead I just need to listen and be a supporter.

The thing about whiteness is, sometimes you do not learn something new but you are retold or reminded of something you have already heard, but chose to very simply ignore. Even if you mean no harm by it, which many of us do not, whiteness is a very real privilege.

My whiteness was never something I thought about previous to our third session at [the center]...Thanks to our Themed Learning Community, as well

as the service learning trips, I now know why; my life has never been challenged because of the fact that I am white....Whiteness in general grants those people the safety and success that people of color have to work so hard for...

I learned that is [sic] very easy for me to forget how privileged I am as a white person. As I was listening to all of the stories people from the community provided I felt upset because I have never taken the time to think about these real life issues that people around me are experiencing.

...as white people, we can choose to flee an uncomfortable situation and we don't have to engage in conversations that are uneasy for us. People of color don't have this privilege.

Before learning about my whiteness I only saw things through my white lense [sic] of perception. When we do not look at all sides and reeducate ourselves it ignores the contributions of POC [People of Color]...POC are not here to help me work with my whiteness...Something that was prevalent in my school was color blindness. "I do not see color." This five word sentence is so oppressive. It denies culture and most importantly it denies oppression.

These comments demonstrate a significant degree of self-reflection. During the course of the semester we discussed race many times in class, and the dialogue with community residents and listening to their stories made it "real" to my students.

The following excerpt addresses the danger of using the bad/good binary when referring to neighborhoods:

...what may be "bad" to us, another student could live with every day. For instance, when referencing neighborhoods that seem different than the one that whites may have been privileged enough to live in, we want to avoid saying it is bad because that could be one of your student's neighborhoods.

Themes from Students

In the final question set students were asked what some of the main themes were that they learned through their service learning that will help them become effective teachers. Fifteen students (65.2%) specifically addressed themes. Their answers varied, but most conveyed a sense of new knowledge and the importance of involvement. Seven students wrote of community involvement; four wrote of the importance of community in general; three wrote of discrimination or oppression; three wrote of building relationships. Other less-often mentioned themes were social justice in general, education/learning, kindness, supporting others, public awareness, debunking stereotypes, importance of social capital, empowerment, inclusivity, culture, diversity, respect, and listening. It is important

to note that some of the themes overlap. For example, public awareness can involve community involvement and supporting others, and kindness can involve respect and listening, and social justice can potentially relate to all of the themes, etc.

One student expressed disappointment at not being able to do more service but noted things learned through the experiences at the center:

At [the center], the most important lesson that has carried me through the sessions is to get involved. Don't just expect change to happen, but actually do something about it. It is disappointing...that only service [sic] we were able to do was rake leaves. I wish we could have really gotten into a community, and see what it's like to make a change and be involved. Another lesson is the theme of all our classes, of social justice. I learned how deprived some people are of resources, and how unfair it is. Social justice really spoke to me, when I was at [the center] and all the different people from the community came to tell their story[ies]...

Interestingly, this student conveyed a wish that service learning had involved getting "into a community" to experience making a change but also noted how social justice "spoke" to her when the community residents shared their narratives. The student seemingly did not view raking leaves for the center's composting efforts for the community garden as involvement.

Another student wrote about learning about social justice from different perspectives:

I've really enjoyed getting different perspectives about social justice and what that means to different people. I think [the center] especially helps me get to see these different views because I come from a small town and I not [sic] used to big cities and diversity. I think [the center] has helped me experience some of this and really get a good idea of what social justice is and what I can do to help the community as a teacher of the future generations.

Another student wrote about feeling more confident to teach and supporting others in their work for others' rights:

After working with [the center], I feel more motivated in [sic] confident in my ability to reach out and want to be a part of something bigger. I also feel a lot more confident in my ability as a teacher to motivate and inform others on the importance of standing up for what they believe in, as well as supporting those who are standing up for the rights of others.

One student wrote about seeing beyond stereotypes and recognizing the role of systemic issues in people's lived experiences:

I used to think that some of these stereotypes were real until I went out into the community. I saw that people in these conditions really want to see change. There are people out there working two jobs and still can't get out of their situation. It is like this because the system is messed up. That is why it is up to people in the dominant group to see that there is a problem and we need to use our voice to help them in a way that they need us too [sic].

Another student wrote about learning of the importance of becoming involved:

I would have never thought, or at least thought about in great depth how important it is to be involved... [The center] has taught me that teaching is far beyond the classroom.

One student expressed how the service learning experience highlighted the importance of being aware of her Whiteness:

During this service learning experience, I noticed that it was very easy for me to forget about my white privilege before I started getting involved with the urban community. As a white person I don't have to think about the majority of the things I do throughout my daily life. I also don't need to think about the other cultures that surround me because I am in the majority. However, after this experience I realized how important it is to be aware of my whiteness.

A student wrote about how service learning inspired her as a Person of Color to share her own experiences with her future students:

The main theme I learned from [the center] is that building relationships is really important to education. Racism is always going to be there. I'm [a Person of Color] and I will be teaching a variety of students as well, so telling them from personal experience and being that person they can always go to is what I learned from [the center].

Another student expressed the importance of learning how to listen:

Before I can be the voice for others, I have to first learn how to listen. Listen to the community *and* listen to what is needed from me without telling them what they need.

Discussion

Most students demonstrated the need for teachers to be involved in the community in which they teach so they would be more culturally competent and effective teachers. This aligns with Paris' (2012) call for a *culturally sustaining pedagogy* in which students are supported "in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to

dominant cultural competence" (p. 95). Many students also expressed the need to listen to residents to hear what they needed, versus going in with a savior mentality, and work with the residents of a community to bring about needed changes. This is parallel with Freire's (2003) notion of *praxis*, "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). There was evidence in students' written responses that overall they understood the significance of projects such as testing soil for lead and its direct link to teaching children/youth who are affected by lead poisoning. This information provided students with an opportunity to better understand environmental racism and its effects. Students overwhelmingly expressed the value of hearing residents' narratives about racism and its manifestations in educational spaces. This again speaks to the importance of communities' "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). While some did not view raking leaves as relevant to the curriculum, many saw the relevance of the overall service learning project and wrote about it in terms of working with the community and the importance of this as it relates to their future students.

Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions

While the project did not go as initially planned, this in itself afforded the students a learning opportunity for understanding the need to be flexible and for drawing connections to education in ways they might not otherwise have considered. The experience proved to be valuable on numerous levels. Students were able to hear the voices of the disenfranchised and see the possibilities for empowering their own students and their families. The experience provided students with a "big picture" approach to learning about lived experiences of others: they were able to reflect upon the inequitable allocation of resources and how this directly influences children's/youth's opportunities for education; they were forced to consider the importance of social networking and agency; they saw how a community center works with residents for empowerment, sustainability, and leadership, and they took part in a small service project that was part of a chain of events that contribute to this endeavor; and White students were forced to grapple with their privilege in a different space, an experience that reinforced our course work. The project proved to be a very different one than the students expected going into the course but one that gave them a wealth of knowledge so imperative to being effective teachers.

Suggestions for future endeavors to provide students with opportunities to learn the importance of knowing the community in which one teaches and its funds of knowledge include the following:

1. Partnering with a community organization for more sessions so that more service can be done, although this can be difficult due to time; class sessions are often not long enough to allow for students and faculty to travel off campus, spend time at the community center, and travel back to campus in time for students' next classes. In addition, finding an extended

time when all students can go at the same time for multiple times outside of class can obviously be difficult or impossible.

2. Have an alternative collaboratively planned in advance with the partnering entity in the case when outside work is part of or all of the service. While things were worked out with our situation such that students ended up having valuable learning opportunities, it might not always be the case that partnering hosts would always be able to accommodate unforeseen changes to planned activities.

This study has significant implications for service learning for students who are planning to be teachers. Working with adult residents in the surrounding community lends itself to teachers' becoming more adept in cultural understanding and acquiring an asset-based mindset as opposed to a deficit one. This involves understanding students' funds of knowledge and embracing their cultural backgrounds and building relationships with parents and community leaders. This is crucial if school children/youth are to be treated equitably and afforded the opportunity to maximize their potentials in a caring, trusting environment.

Implications for further research would include a longitudinal study to follow up with students who stay in a program to examine how what they learn from adult community residents influences their behavior in the field as they move through their Education courses and after they become employed as teachers. Additionally, it would be valuable to the discipline to create and execute a study that places introductory Education students with a community center for a longer period of time per semester and one that is able to plan ahead for unforeseen changes to schedules, weather, etc. Ideally, it would be advantageous to both the community and the students if the partnership could be sustained over more than one semester. Generalizability to other disciplines is possible with areas that involve working closely with children/youth in other community entities.

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