"*They* taught *me*": The benefits of early community-based field experiences in teacher education

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Research in teacher education suggests that field experiences in community settings can offer pre-service teachers a context for understanding the link between theory and practice. This paper documents the experiences of pre-service educators participating in a service-learning experience at a Children's Defense Fund Freedom School in the south-eastern United States. Pre-service teachers engaged in critical reflection, online journals, and daily debriefing sessions and praised the benefits of a service experience in an urban context and explained how interactions within the programme gave them the insight into the teaching profession. The author argues that this project successfully bridged the gap between teacher education theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

The face of America and the public school system is changing drastically in the 21st Century. Students enrolled in public schools across the United States represent a myriad of nationalities and languages from across the world. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 14 million households speak a language other than English. In 2006, the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES), a division of the United States Department of Education (ED), reported that although the majority (57.1 percent) of American school-aged children still identify as White, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of ethnically diverse children attending American schools (ED, 2006). According to statistical data, the percent distribution of enrolment in public elementary and secondary schools by race/ethnicity of school-aged children over the past 25 years suggests that this majority status among White students is quickly declining. In fact, between 1995 and 2005, the percentage of minority students who identified as Black increased from 16.8 to 17.2 percent, Asian/Pacific Islander from 3.7 to 4.6 percent, and American Indian/Alaska Native from 1.1 to 1.2 percent. Additionally, Hispanic students are the largest growing ethnic minority in American public schools, and the population of documented Hispanic students enrolled in public schools rose from 13.5 to 19.8 students from 1995 to 2005 (ED, 2006).

Despite the fact that school children in the United States are becoming more ethnically diverse, the National Centre for Education Statistics reveals that the teaching force remains mostly female and mostly white (2006). In fact, over 80 percent of American teachers are white females and are on the average 40-years-old (ED, 2006). Although the information on socio-economic background for teachers is not available, one can surmise that the majority of these teachers come from middle class families based on the fact that over half have at least undergraduate degrees, and on average, 30 percent of these teachers have earned masters degrees (ED, 2006).

Based on the national data, the majority of educators in the United States are teaching children who come to their classrooms with cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds that are different from their own. This information is not provided to suggest that these teachers are unable to identify and communicate with students of diverse backgrounds; however, because the American public school system has become more heterogeneous, there is a need to formally prepare teachers to educate all students, taking their multiple backgrounds into account in order to cultivate trusted relationships, build on students' funds of knowledge, and ensure their academic success.

Teacher education programmes in the United States are being constantly criticised for not adequately preparing pre-service educators to connect with students from diverse backgrounds. In fact, Sleeter (2008) suggests, "Teacher education in the US is undersiege" due in part to the "external assaults" (p. 1947) from the some in the corporate world who criticise and de-professionalise teacher preparation in the US.

In order to prepare pre-service educators to provide equitable and democratic education, Sleeter (2008) recommends teacher

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education programmes be founded on three pillars: "preparation for everyday realities and complexities of schools and classrooms; content knowledge and professional theoretical knowledge that universities can provide; and dialogue with communities in which schools are situated" (p. 1948). Sleeter uses these pillars to think more broadly about how teacher education programmes can produce more "excellent teachers who can guide academic learning on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (p. 1948) and teachers who will be change agents and advocate for their students. Sleeter chooses five areas in teacher education on which to focus in an examination of their relationship to equity and democracy: recruitment and admission, early fieldwork, professional coursework, student teaching, and on-going professional development.

In this article, I concentrate on the second area Sleeter analysed, and I demonstrate how early field experiences can indeed enhance the experiences of pre-service educators and facilitate more social awareness for a more equitable and democratic system of public education. I argue that early field experiences, blended with a service-learning component and coursework embedded in critical pedagogy can prepare pre-service educators to enter diverse classrooms equipped to advocate for their students.

I limit the research cited in this article to teacher preparation programmes in the United States based on the criticism of how unprepared teachers are to work with diverse populations once they enter the profession. Furthermore, based on the specific historic background of the service-learning site described in this article, I use research in the area of pre-service teacher education and service-learning experiences within the United States.

2. Research in teacher education and field experiences

Multiple studies in teacher education in the United States have linked fully prepared and certified teachers with successful classroom practices and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Evertson, Hawley, & Zlotnick, 1985; Greenburg, 1983; Haberman, 1984; Olsen, 1985). Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy (2001) found clinical experiences played an important role in teacher preparation and also asserted that it must be interwoven with coursework to be most effective. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) further supported the claim that extensive clinical experience which complements and supports coursework is a critical component of teacher preparation. Furthermore, field experiences allow teachers to better understand the students' out-of-school experiences in order to effectively address them in their classrooms. The literature suggests that teachers often fail to connect with their students because of misunderstandings about their home lives (Howey, 1999).

Field experiences are also important because pre-service educators enter teacher education programmes with strong beliefs and values about teaching and learning, as they have been students for the majority of their lifetime (Darling-Hammond, 2006). These beliefs are unlikely to change unless students are offered experiences that "challenge their validity" (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987, p. 9). Marx (2004) argues these types of field experiences are important given that, "…the dominant face of the American teacher workforce is female, white and English-speaking…and one child in five was estimated to be the child of an immigrant, and almost 47 million people over the age of five living the U.S. were considered non-native speakers of English" (p. 36).

Participation in multiple field experiences in underserved areas, like urban school districts and community-based programmes, for example, has been regarded as a positive method of teacher preparation in that these placements often allow pre-service teachers the opportunity to disrupt their own biases and to challenge

the deficit paradigm (Sleeter, 2008). Moreover, research suggests that using cross-cultural, community-based field experiences can potentially enhance teacher education programmes because they give pre-service teachers insight into students' lives outside of the school. Sleeter (2008) suggests that pre-service teachers also need training in the context in which they will be teaching.

Pre-service teachers must also be involved in the communities in which they are trained, not only in their individual schools, but also with families and community partners. Pre-service teachers need to be exposed to and understand how to access any person or organisation that is involved with their students. Oakes, Franke, Hunter Quartz, and Rogers (2006) support this claim through their work with Centre X, the urban teacher education programme at UCLA. "We have found that the idea of expert needs to be broadly construed to include not only guiding teachers, colleagues, and university faculty but also parents, community members and students themselves" (Oakes et al., 2006: p. 229). Given the unique characteristics of urban, rural and suburban districts, pre-service educators need training that exposes them and allows time for reflection on the communities in which they work. Oakes et al. (2006) also suggest that pre-service teachers need to understand "local urban cultures, the urban political economy, the bureaucratic structure of urban schools and the community and social service support networks serving urban centres" (p. 229).

3. Service-learning and teacher education

Service-Learning is a successful teacher education practice that has been identified to provide students with field experiences in the community and to expose them to diverse settings. The role of service-learning in institutions of higher education has increased exponentially in the past decade, and teacher education programmes have begun using this experiential learning in order to prepare future educators to better understand and empathise with the needs of the communities in which they will be working. In fact, a national survey conducted by Anderson and Erickson (2003) found that over 300 teacher education programmes in the United States used service-learning in some capacity as part of their curriculum.

Anderson (1998) defines service-learning in teacher education as both a philosophy of education and an instructional method. Within teacher education, service-learning "reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life" (p. 1). As an instructional method, service-learning "involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement" (p. 1).

Since the mid-1990s researchers in the field have evaluated the benefits and drawbacks of using service-learning in pre-service education programmes. Erickson and Anderson (1997) suggest that the ultimate goal of service-learning is to develop teachers to be more prepared to enter diverse settings. By becoming involved in communities in which their schools are located, teachers can better understand the cultural, socio-economic, and historical traditions and experiences that students bring with them into their classrooms. Cultural traditions are embedded in the lives of students and are privileged and reinforced in their homes and communities; teachers who become more aware of these traditions and lived experiences can better understand what factors are at play in students lives outside of school. Furthermore, teacher educators use service-learning as a pedagogy to socialise new teachers in the crucial ethical and community obligations of teaching, and as an experience to foster a commitment to advocate for social justice (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001).

In a study of pre-service educators enrolled in a service-learning experience, Root and Batchelder (1994) also found pre-service

teachers benefited from service-learning experiences. The service-learning experience had a positive influence on the values and attitudes of college students, and they were more prepared to be professional in the classroom setting. Similarly, Siegel's (1994) research indicates that pre-service teachers involved in service-learning as part of a course on diversity showed more tolerance than those who were enrolled in the same course without the service-learning component.

Eby (1998) also contends that education courses that have a service-learning component have "[the] potential to transform teaching and learning in the academy and to call a generation of students to develop social responsibility and an ethic of service" (p. 1). Eby explains that the learning portion of service-learning often helps to "develop social responsibility, reduce racism, develop leadership and gain personal and social skills" (p. 1).

Typically, when people think of service-learning, they assume that it means volunteerism; however, this is not a complete portrayal of the experience. In an article describing her research of teacher education programmes that engage pre-service teachers in service-learning, Feinstein (2005) defines service-learning in education as being more than volunteering; in fact, she suggests, "the broad intended outcome of service-learning is to blend service and learning so that the service reinforces the college students' understanding of the learner and educational practices, and in return the learning improves and strengthens the service they can provide as teachers" (p. 3).

Feinstein's (2005) study examined the impact of service-learning on secondary pre-service teachers involved in an Adolescent Development course at a South Dakota college. Pre-service educators enrolled in the course volunteered their time at after-school programmes in high-poverty rural and urban areas. The results indicated that a majority (72 percent) felt that they were able to have a "better understanding of the adolescent," (p. 6,7) and they realised that it was important this experience increased their awareness of the things going on in students' lives outside of school. Furthermore, 82 percent of the pre-service educators believed that they "gained different information as compared to other educational internships" and that this information was invaluable (p. 7). Overwhelmingly, students also agreed that they could see the course topics playing out in the after-school programme. Additionally, the participants saw the real world value in the experience and would recommend the experience and course to other students. Feinstien's study also revealed that "observations, interactions, and reflections provided a more holistic view of the adolescent, enabling the college students to imagine and realise the variety of feelings and actions of their future students" (p. 10). Participants mentioned that the service-learning component augmented the subject matter, and it also "reinforced their confidence in creating a classroom that would be compatible with adolescents" (p. 10).

4. The project

4.1. Pre-service educators and the charter freedom school (CFS)[1]

Over the course of two summer sessions in 2007 and 2008, teacher educators at a large public University in the south-eastern United States involved pre-service teachers participating in introductory Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) courses, in a service-learning partnership with the Children's Defense Fund[2] (CDF) Freedom Schools at an historically Black public university (HBCU)

also located in the south-eastern United States. It is important to note that MAT programme is located on a campus that has a predominantly white student population and is located in a mostly white, upper middle class area of a south-eastern state in the US and that the HBCU is located in the heart of an African American community in a town 8 miles away from the University. Because most of the pre-service educators enrolled in the MAT complete their student teaching interns in the community surrounding the University, there are few opportunities to work with diverse populations. The instructors in the teacher education programme at the University and determined a need for collaboration that would benefit both the MAT programme and the CFS.[3] To date, two different cohorts of pre-service educators, who were majority white and female, voluntarily participated in a service-learning project that spanned the course of five weeks. However, this analysis only includes data from the most recent cohort of pre-service educators who participated in the field experience.

4.2. The master of arts in teaching curriculum

Pre-service educators enrolled in the Master of Arts in Teaching at the University take two courses in their programme during a summer session of their first year. The purpose of the introductory[4] courses in the MAT programme is to familiarise pre-service educators with the profession of teaching and the function of schools and to engage them in issues pertinent to developing teachers. The curriculum includes various aspects of the teaching profession, including diversity, differentiation, multi-cultural curriculum, critical pedagogy and reflective practice. Typically, in the introductory courses, students do not have the opportunity to put theory into practice, as they do not engage in field experiences. However, with the introduction of a service-learning component, there are multiple opportunities to engage in critical reflection and discussion about the urban population with whom pre-service educators are working. Each week, students discuss their experiences and respond to prompted reflections in an online forum. Students involved in the service-learning cohort participate in a weekly debrief, write online reflection journals, and take part in a final reflection and interview based on their experiences. This section documents the experiences of one particular cohort in the MAT that participated in a multi-cultural, community-based field experience.

4.3. Children's defense fund freedom schools

In 1964, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organisations (COFO), two Civil Rights organisations, developed the "Mississippi Freedom Summer Project." Originally designed to "engage Black students and community volunteers in a variety of strategic activities to ensure basic citizenship rights for all Mississippians,"[5] the Freedom Summer Project organised voter registration drives for thousands of disenfranchised African Americans, resurrected community centres to provide instruction for African Americans, created Freedom Schools, and sought to encourage young African Americans to become change agents in their

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[1] Charter Freedom School is a pseudonym.
[2] The Children's Defense fund is a non-profit child advocacy group.

[3] This partnership developed through a conversation between the researcher and the founder/director of the Charter Freedom School, both of whom were doctoral candidates at the large public University.
[4] In the first summer session of the Master of Arts in Teaching program, pre-service teachers enroll in Introduction to Teaching and Introduction to Schools. These two courses introduce pre-service teachers to general teaching strategies and issues pertinent to teachers of all content areas. Most of these pre-service teachers have not had any prior experience as teachers in their own classrooms.
[5] The Children's Defense Fund website. Date accessed: 29 September 2008. http://www.childrensdefensefund.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Freedom_Schools_history.

communities. In 1992, Marian Wright Edelman, a lawyer and advocate for children, revived the Freedom Schools movement focusing on literacy, parental involvement, conflict resolution, and social action. At the centre of the Freedom Schools model is the belief that all students can learn and achieve at high levels if not considered in the deficit paradigm. Freedom Schools are five to six week summer enrichment programmes for children in grades K-12 and are typically located in churches or community centres in cities across the US. College-aged "Servant Leader Interns" (SLI) create lessons and facilitate learning experiences based on training they receive through the Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute, which is a national training workshop at the CDF Haley Farm in Clinton, TN and University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

The Charter Freedom School is part of the CDF Freedom Schools and was developed as part of an initiative to introduce culturally-relevant teaching that features hip hop[6] curriculum into area schools in order to foster readiness and academic preparedness. Over the course of two summers, 110 scholars, mostly African American youths aged 9–15,[7] enrolled in the CFS. CFS's mission is to inspire students to read, speak and transform the world around them through the CDF's Integrated Reading Curriculum[8] and the HBCU's *Hip Hop Initiative's* arts and leadership curriculum. The focus of the CFS model emphasises empowerment and provides a space where scholars can develop their own funds of knowledge, a practice that traditional public schools often fall short of doing.

4.4. Engaging pre-service educators in a service-learning experience

Prior to the second year of this partnership, faculty members, summer session instructors, and CFS representatives used student evaluations from the previous year to develop a more cohesive format for the upcoming courses. We established that pre-service educators and CFS staff needed more time to get to know each other so that there would be more collaboration. In the first year of the experience, some pre-service educators explained that they felt like intruders in the CFS classrooms and did not know what their roles should be. Consequently, we decided to have the CFS staff train the pre-service educators prior to meeting the CFS scholars[9] in addition to the service-learning orientation they would receive.

During the summer session of 2008, the second cohort of 15 pre-service teachers participating in this service-learning field experience attended an orientation with university faculty and the CFS staff and Servant Leader Interns. In this initial orientation, pre-service educators were introduced to the concept of service-learning, learned about the research connecting service-learning and teacher education, and discussed prior experiences with service-learning, volunteerism, and community service. After the CFS staff introduced themselves, they explained the history of CDF Freedom Schools and the curriculum of the CFS, which focused on

the four elements of hip hop culture—emceeing,[10] DJing,[11] graffiti,[12] break-dancing.[13] After presenting this information, pre-service educators and CFS Servant Leader Interns (SLI) established which classes the pre-service teachers would work with based on their personal talents and interests. The afternoon courses developed from the specific interests and talents of the SLIs and the hip hop focus, which meant that those pre-service teachers with similar interests would collaborate with the staff members in order to provide for the best possible environment for the scholars.

After the initial training, MAT pre-service educators visited the Charter Freedom Schools once a week from 8:30 AM until 3:00 PM. Their day started with *Harambee*,[14] which took place in the HBCU School of Education auditorium. Pre-service teachers sat with the scholars, sang songs with them, and participated in the daily read-aloud, announcements, and moment of silence each morning. Then, pre-service educators accompanied scholars to their morning classes, where they read-aloud with the students and assisted servant leader interns with the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC), which focused on books written by African-American authors and concentrated on themes related to growing up in urban, multi-cultural areas. After eating lunch with the scholars, the MAT pre-service teachers assisted Servant Leader Interns with the afternoon hip hop curriculum activities. The scholars were divided in groups based on their interests in art, music production, rapping, dance, and healthcare issues facing the urban youth population in the city.

In addition to engaging with students during these afternoon sessions, the pre-service educators helped plan and participated in the Finale, which was a showcase where the student scholars displayed talents and the lessons they learned during the summer programme. This project was developed as an attempt to immerse pre-service educators in an environment where culturally responsive pedagogy was used with an urban student population. At the end of each day, pre-service educators were also asked to critically reflect on their experience in order to challenge their perspectives and biases about urban student populations.

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants

There were nine students enrolled in the Introduction to Teaching course in the summer of 2008. Although these students came from diverse backgrounds, the majority was white and female. The class composite included two White males, one from the north-eastern section and the other from the south-eastern section of the United States; two Black females, one who self-identified as Caribbean American and the other as African American, both from the northeast; and five White females from states located in both the mid-Atlantic and southeast regions of the US. Five of the students had completed their bachelor's degrees in their specific content area the month prior to entering the MAT programme, and three of the females finished their undergraduate education prior to spending brief time in careers outside of education. All pre-service teachers were between the ages of 22- and 25-years-old.

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[6] In American society, hip hop culture represents the primarily Black and Latino urban youth culture in America. Hip hop is a movement that of freedom of expression and the struggle for social liberation that was begun in the Bronx, NY in the 1970s. The term hip hop was formally recognised in lyrics to the song, "Rapper's Delight," which was released by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979 (Smitherman, 1997).

[7] One male student identified as Latino.

[8] Integrated Reading Curriculum emphasises books that are age and developmentally appropriate and that reflect a wide variety of experiences, cultures, and characters. This activity oriented curriculum "promotes skills in reading, cooperative learning, critical thinking, social action, conflict resolution, and discussion skills." "Integrated Reading Curriculum." The Children's Defense Fund website. Date accessed: 26 December 2008. http://www.childrensdefense.org/site/PageNavigator/Freedom_Schools_IRC.

[9] In the DFS model, students are called scholars in order to promote academic excellence.

[10] Emceeing, or MCing is the art of rhyming or rapping to a beat.

[11] A DJ in hip hop culture mixes songs in order to create a new sound.

[12] Graffiti in the 1970s became the visual representation of rap music.

[13] Break-dancing gained popularity in the South Bronx of New York in the 1970s and was performed to the music created by hip hop DJs and MCs.

[14] *Harambee* is Swahili for "let's pull together."

5.2. Narrative inquiry

This project relies heavily on qualitative research methodologies. I employed narrative research while taking notes, facilitating the daily debrief, and analysing journal entries completed by pre-service educators about their experiences in the Freedom School. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) define narrative research as the study of "the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). Narrative research, which has a long history in the field of education, uses a methodology that allows people to describe the stories of their storied lives. The researcher collects data about people's lives and collaboratively constructs a narrative about the experiences of the participants and the meaning attributed to the experiences. Moreover, according to Connelly and Clandinin narrative research is an epistemological stance, a research methodology, and scholarly discourse—all uniquely capable of accessing the content of human lives. Connelly and Clandinin argue that by using narratives to present the experiences of research participants, the researcher provides a clearer picture of how time, space, and connections within relationships are always a part of lived experiences.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain the importance of gaining access to a population with which to participate in a narrative research. Since I was the instructor in the course, which typically places me in a power role, it was imperative that I develop a space where participating pre-service teachers felt comfortable being honest and engaging in difficult conversations. By the middle of the experience, most students openly shared their thoughts and stories, which suggests they felt part of a collaborative learning community. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argue, "Narrative inquiry is, however, a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds" (p. 4). My background as a classroom teacher allowed me to participate in the pre-service teachers' conversations and give examples from the field to validate their concerns about teaching.

5.3. Data collection

In addition to taking detailed notes during the afternoon debrief sessions with the pre-service educators, I also required they respond to prompted reflective questions using an online discussion board. Students had the option of posting anonymous responses to the discussion questions; however, each student revealed their identity with each response and always identified themselves when responding to other students' posts. As well as collecting data by using the online discussion board, I often requested that students write open-ended reflections at the beginning of the classes the day after visiting the CFS. This assignment offered pre-service educators the opportunity to provide more details about their experience on the previous day and possibly respond to the day's activities in a more reflective manner.

6. Analysis

6.1. Initial impressions

The most powerful and telling of the narrative data collected from pre-service educators were found in their journals and online reflections. I use this rich data to draw conclusions about the impact the service-learning experience had on the pre-service teachers. After the initial visit to the CFS, students were asked to discuss the need for the Freedom School in the community in which it is located, describe the population being served, what social factors within this community create this need, and how they might offer authentic assistance to the organisation/school. This first written service-learning reflection indicated that the pre-service educators understood that some students did not necessarily have a positive experience in public schools. One white female noted that she thought the programme was important because "[the students] are building a positive cultural identity (something I never really developed) while supplementing the history they learn in school." She went on to praise the fact that the curriculum cantered on Afrocentric books with which the scholars could identify. This student also acknowledged that these students "would most likely not be exposed to [these texts] in school," which indicated that she was aware that the public school curriculum might not necessarily be inclusive of cultural backgrounds of all children.

Responding to this same prompt, one of the white male participants implied that scholars' participation in the Freedom School "prepares scholars to be the agents of change, instilling in them a value of and duty to create change in not only their community, but the nation and world." He continued to explain, "Freedom School helps scholars become actively engaged citizens capable of actively participating in democracy so that the current state of their community is not perpetuated." In class, this same pre-service educator, who plans to become an English teacher, recognised that many students of colour are often silenced by the curriculum and lose interest in school because of the lack of materials that are related to their lives.

Furthermore, an African American female pre-service educator answered the prompt by noting that her experience with public schooling made her feel left out and "rejected" because the history curriculum rarely mentioned her heritage. She reflected,

> African-American history as a part of American History has not been taught and many African American students have seemed or been disengaged from learning in many public schools. As a result, The CFS takes what is common to many African American youth, hip hop, and uses it to create a curriculum that is more relevant to its students. Hip hop too, is something that was created by black people in Jamaica and New York. Because of this, many students will renew their excitement for learning and hopefully transfer that energy to their schools during the academic year.

This pre-service educator not only recognised the importance of relating the curriculum to the interests of students, but also demonstrating how that history is valid and something in which they should take pride. She also recognised that many of these students had a different school experience than she did, and she remarked that she did not think that she would have realised this possibility without having an early field experience.

6.2. Theory into practice

After their first full visit to the CFS, the pre-service educators were challenged to evaluate their perspectives about urban African American students. Even though two of the pre-service educators were African American, they understood that they might have had a more positive experience with school, as they had continued into college and a master's degree programme. In the daily debrief, I noted that these two women mentioned they realised for the first time that they might be challenged in the classroom to teach students who looked similar to them, but had dissimilar home lives and school experiences. Thus, this initial glimpse into the CFS helped them gain insight into the issues faced by many urban students.

Over the course of the five-week field experience with the CFS, pre-service educators reflected on their initial impressions of CFS and service-learning. In her weekly post-experience reflection, one

white female student echoed the words of Paulo Freire (1970). She stated:

Service learning at the Freedom School has been a learning experience for me and I feel as if the scholars took on the role of the "teacher." They "taught" me what it was like to be semi in-charge of a classroom and they "taught" me how to get to know my students. [The instructors] weren't necessarily my only teachers this semester while participating in service learning, but the scholars were as well.

This student has engaged in critical pedagogy before actually becoming a classroom teacher; she began to realise and value the knowledge and talents of the students with whom she was working. Furthermore, her experience at CFS validated her under-standing of one of the central tenets of critical pedagogy—that teachers can be learners and learners can be teachers.

After the third visit to the CFS, while reflecting on the rela-tionship between the course readings and the service-learning experience with scholars at CFS, the white male student from the northeast specifically commented on the topic of diverse learners and public education:

…the readings we've been doing of late put things in another light: maybe the target population for CFS isn't necessarily low-income or otherwise socioeconomically disadvantaged minority youth–maybe it's just minority youth, period. For whatever reason, a bias exists in the education system against these children for reasons that don't always stem from issues like being on free/reduced lunch or being an ELL.[15] Sometimes, the simple fact that they aren't white, middle-class Americans is enough to be a roadblock. CFS, then, exists to give scholars tools they need to overcome such biases. Maybe, one day, such bias will no longer be an issue; for now, though, CFS serves the population that must struggle against it.

In the above response, this student critiqued social institutions like schooling and demonstrated that he was beginning to under-stand that some institutions were inherently biased against certain members of society. His reference to the course readings suggests that until this point in his own schooling experience, he might have not thought about these issues. It is my opinion that without the experience with the CFS, this student may not have gained this insight from reading an educational theory textbook or an article in an online journal. These are the types of connections that one only makes through experiences with real people.

In the next paragraph of his response, this pre-service educator explained that the most important message he had taken from the course readings was, "that the issue is not necessarily about heri-tage or ethnicity or other code words for skin colour; it's about being an individual." Then, in a commentary about individuality, he continued his rationalisation with an example from an experience with a CFS scholar. He wrote:

Charles,[16] like almost every other CFS scholar, is black, but there's much more to him than that; he likes to play baseball but not watch it (it just makes him want to be on the field, he told me), he wants to be a chef or maybe go into business, and in the brief time we spoke he did a commendable job of explaining the basic principles of compounding interest. No lie. Quite simply, what I took away from that conversation was that this was an amazing child. He has such a wide range of interests and such

high goals for himself; these are the factors that ought to define him, not race. Unless, of course, race is an identity he chooses to value. The point is that students–children–are people. Their comparative lack of age and experience (which, at my ripe old age of 22, is realistically not that great) should in no way belittle their thoughts, opinions, and aspirations. Colour-blindness (though I phrased it rather more bluntly in class) is an impossibility; nevertheless, I feel that teachers must strive to view and under-stand their students first and foremost as valuable individuals. Race can't and shouldn't be ignored, and neither should religion, sexuality, or any of the other myriad issues we put on the board last week; but they shouldn't be solely relied upon, either. They are parts of a whole, and it is the whole that we are to teach.

This statement is extremely intuitive for a pre-service teacher who has never entered the classroom in a teaching capacity. I will not go as far as to propose that this pre-service educator was greatly changed by this experience, but I think it is important to note that his approach to the topic of diversity became much more critical over the course of the semester.

In relation to a course reading on classroom management in the fourth week of the summer session, a white female student explained that she thought service-learning would be a possible way to develop classroom community. "I feel that using service-learning in the classroom is an effective way to apply and implement Kohn's theories…Students can work on being respectful and supportive of each other regardless of their varying levels of ability, and then they can take that open-minded approach out into the community." While studying service-learning theory in the classroom, she was witnessing its enactment when CFS scholars wrote to their local congressperson about the need for free public healthcare for chil-dren. The scholars worked together with help from their Servant Leader Intern and pre-service educators to compose letters that explained why children in their community were affected by the decision of national legislators not to approve a bill that would provide free healthcare to American children. Through her reading about the benefits of using service-learning in the public school classroom and viewing this theory in action, this pre-service teacher was able to see the link between theory in practice, while also learning more about developing classroom community.

Toward the end of the five-week period, in the daily discussions about standardised testing and assessment, the pre-service teachers would mention that this form of evaluation is culturally biased and unfair to students. They began to realise that not all children had books in their homes and the developmental computer games that many middle class families take for granted. In a final discussion at the end of the semester, pre-service teachers also explained that they felt more comfortable discussing race and institutional racism with their peers as a result of the service-learning experience. They also admitted that they would be uncomfortable talking about biases and prejudice in their class-rooms, but that they saw a need for these discussions.

6.3. "Finale" conclusions

The final reflection of the five-week course asked pre-service teachers to revisit their initial understanding of service-learning and examine how being on the "learning" side of service-learning might help them engage students in this practice. Students were also asked to discuss the benefits and limitations of service-learning in a pre-service teacher education course.

One African American female from New York City responded,

…through class discussions…I have realised that learning can take place in any situation, even if it's learning about what does not work. In fact, learning why certain practices are ineffective is

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[15] In the United States, the population of students who are not native English speakers is growing rapidly. These students are identified as English Language Learners (ELL).

[16] Name has been changed to protect the identity of the scholar.

probably more valuable than shadowing the "perfect teacher". To be fair, though, I must reiterate that I have learned that confidence and respect generally works as a classroom management tool.

Although this pre-service teacher is a talented entertainer, early in the semester she admitted to being terrified that she would not be able to maintain authority in her music classes. Through her work with CFS, this pre-service teacher learned that she could easily develop a classroom management plan and that if she respected her students, they would likely show her respect in return.

Another African American female student, who had just completed her undergraduate degree the month before class began, gave an example of a personal experience that taught her a lesson that would be useful in her teaching career. While observing a group of African American pre-adolescent female scholars, she overheard them talking about exercise and dieting. At first she "panicked" because she was afraid the girls were "falling prey to the lies of the media!" However, once she joined their conversation, she realised that these girls were actually discussing body types and explaining that they should be happy with their own shapes. The pre-service teacher explained, "I was so shocked that 10 and 11-year-old girls had such a positive view of their bodies and other's bodies." She admitted that she learned not to "judge before I truly knew what was going on!" This pre-service teacher was sceptical of the service-learning experience throughout the semester; she did not see the connection between volunteering with pre-teens and teaching a secondary math course. However, as this final reflection indicates, toward the end of the experience she seemed to be less resistant and became more aware that these scholars were representative of children of all ages.

The final project for this course usually challenges participants to synthesise the concepts discussed during the course and reflect upon their knowledge. Although they were required to reflect on their experience and the course materials, the final project challenged participants to assist with the planning, promoting, and execution of a Finale, where the scholars demonstrated to their families and the community what they had learned during their summer experience. Throughout the summer session, the instructors reiterated the importance of getting to know students outside of school; by getting to know the interests of their future students, they could develop a sense of community and trust within their classrooms.

The pre-service educators' participation with the Finale allowed them to see the actual importance of supporting students outside of the classroom and getting to know their families. When one group experienced technical difficulties during their Finale presentation, the Freedom School scholars cheered them on and joined in with the skit. The level of support scholars gave the pre-service teachers bolstered their courage and enabled them to perform in front of an auditorium of complete strangers. This situation also showed the teachers the importance of investing in their students.

7. Implications for the field of teacher education

The field of teacher education and the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools can learn from each other. CDF Freedom Schools are inherently transformative and culturally responsive. The Freedom Schools operate on the understanding that scholars, particularly those with less privilege, can be encouraged toward expansive affective cognitive growth. Moreover, Freedom Schools are transformative because they work as a vehicle for change and help redefine democracy and equality. The Freedom School model reminds us that all education must be multi-cultural in order to promote social justice and equality.

Adding a service-learning component to pre-service education courses provides an opportunity for collaborative engagement from

representatives of the university and involvement in the greater community. Furthermore, it is a unique opportunity for the instructor and pre-service educators to develop relationships with students and university colleagues outside of their own collegiate environment. As the research suggests, community-based field experiences can truly offer the opportunity to see how diverse populations interact and succeed in society. Furthermore, by observing and reflecting on alternative models of schooling, like the CDF Freedom Schools, pre-service teachers might be more likely to develop curriculum around the needs and interests of their future students.

8. Conclusions

I return to Sleeter's (2008) recommendation that teacher education programmes be supported by three pillars that provide "preparation for everyday realities and complexities of schools and classrooms; content knowledge and professional theoretical knowledge that universities can provide; and dialogue with communities in which schools are situated." The narratives of pre-service educators involved in the partnership between the MAT programme and the CDF's Charter Freedom School, suggest they may have benefited from an early community-based field experience. Not only did they explain that many of the experiences gave them a better understanding of how to interact and communicate with students in multiple contexts, but their stories provided evidence that the course content, coupled with the service-learning experience helped bridge the gap between educational theory and classroom practice. Moreover, these pre-service teachers had the opportunity to engage in weekly conversations with children, Servant Leader Interns, parents, and volunteers within the community surrounding the historically Black university, which they would not have had in the typical student teaching experience. Additionally, pre-service teachers also had the chance to communicate with community members during the Freedom School Finale.

Through this experience, the researcher recognises that service-learning offers an exceptional opportunity to engage pre-service educators in diverse communities in order to contextualise their classroom experiences and reflect on the stereotypes and assumptions they bring to the classroom, thus better preparing them to enter the diverse classrooms in the 21st Century.

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