Academic Service Learning as Pedagogy: An Approach to Preparing Preservice Teachers for Urban Classrooms

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Abstract

Teacher educationalists often struggle with multifaceted and increasingly complex issues surrounding preparing majority (White) teachers to work effectively with minority (non-White) students, families, and communities. Novice teachers entering the workforce need to be culturally responsive. What are the benefits to students, communities, and universities when academic service-learning (AS-L) is a course component? How does AS-L impact the personal intellectual growth of preservice teachers? This study examined the dispositions of 177 preservice teachers engaged in literacy and multicultural education courses with AS-L components. The investigation has suggested that AS-L components improved and strengthened teacher education courses in terms of adequately preparing preservice teachers to teach successfully in urban environments. As a result, preservice teachers' dispositions and appreciation of diversity and culturally responsive approaches to teaching have increased.

Teachers have a tendency to teach students who resemble them (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clark, & Curran, 2004). However, when school-aged children hail from a background markedly different from their teachers, disconnection can occur and tensions can surface. In fact, the mismatch between the social, cultural, experiential, and linguistic backgrounds of students and their teachers could be viewed as one of the reasons why some school children fail. To help address this disconnect, colleges, universities, and school districts partnering in teacher education preparation and programming should explicitly address the educational impact of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and economic differences with preservice teachers, especially in urban systems.

Academic service-learning (AS-L) is one way to address these tensions and to reduce the distance between students and teachers by engaging university students in activities that expand their cultural horizons and frames of reference, while simultaneously providing a reciprocal benefit to service recipients. Within AS-L, structured opportunities are provided for university students, especially preservice teachers, to synthesize course objectives while engaging in service activities. In AS-L classrooms, education course objectives are matched to common needs to the mutual benefit of students, faculty, K-12 institutions, and

community agencies (Tai-Seale, 2001). For university students majoring in education, AS-L helps preservice teachers (a) apply concepts in a practical fashion from the classroom to the community, (b) learn to work with diverse peoples, (c) gain knowledge from the community, (d) question and evaluate civic values, and (e) prepare novice teachers entering the field to participate in research (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Schnaubelt, 2001). According to Rex Honey, professor of geography at the University of Iowa, “service learning can only enhance the academic experience. It moves students beyond theory to an understanding of real-life situations and issues” (Kuhlmann, 2006, p. 8).

Butin (2003) focused on four conceptualizations of service-learning: technical, cultural, political, and postconstructivist. According to Butin’s conceptualization, this examination can be viewed as a dual conceptualization of cultural and technical service-learning. Through this study, the technical concerns of the implementation were illustrated and service-learning became a pathway for nurturing students’ awareness, respect, and acceptance of diversity (Butin). This study is a prime example of AS-L as pedagogy in the context of undergraduate courses such as those on methods and multicultural education, where objectives were internalized through the establishment of gardens by preservice teachers at a local school and housing development. Service-learning served as a pedagogical vehicle for delivery of content knowledge (Kendall, 1990).

In a study of AS-L’s benefits, the dispositions of preservice teachers engaged in literacy and multicultural education courses with AS-L components were examined. Specifically, 177 preservice teachers enrolled in an undergraduate program at a mid-sized university in south Mississippi helped establish and maintain two community garden sites: one at a local elementary school and the other located at a community outreach center situated adjacent to a public housing complex where many of the children resided. Both community garden sites were located within the same community in which the teacher education program was also situated.

Research Issue: Cultural Mismatch in Teacher Preparation

The majority of preservice teachers in current teacher education programs in the United States are White females from middle-income backgrounds. By contrast, close to 40% of school-aged children enrolled in American public schools are described as children of color (non-White). In many urban school districts, the number of non-White children is much higher than 40%, while inner city schools often contain student populations that are almost exclusively non-White (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 2003). Often, concentrated pockets of poverty exist in inner city, urban student populations. US Colleges of Education teacher accreditation programs struggle with the multifaceted and increasingly complex issues surrounding the preparation of majority (White) teachers to work effectively with minority (non-White) students, their families, and communities in urban areas. To develop sensitivity toward diversity and teach responsibly, novice teachers entering the workforce need to be culturally responsive (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Irvine).

As public school demographics continue to shift, tensions surface in classrooms around issues of ethnicity, culture, race, socioeconomic status, and

linguistic diversity (Andrews, 1993; Delpit, 1994, 1995; Anyon 1995; Bartoli, 1986; Cazden, 1996; Christensen, 1994; Freedman, Simons, Kalnin & Casareno, 1999; Foster, 1989). Different lifestyles, including culturally specific styles of expressions, warrant study as the tensions that arise as a result of differences between students' home culture and those of teachers, classrooms, and schools affect learning and teaching (Au, 2005-2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Individuals responsible for teacher education preparation programs need to closely examine how teacher education can address cultural mismatch in the classroom (Selwyn, 2005-2006).

Relevance of Academic Service-Learning as Pedagogy

AS-L as a pedagogy engages university students in activities that broaden their frames of experience. Additionally, as a teaching method, AS-L connects significant service to academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibilities (Schnaubelt, 2001) and requires authentic and meaningful service that university students provide to the local community aligned with university course objectives and goals. AS-L, then, is a pedagogy of action. Unlike traditional field education programs where service is performed *in addition* to students' course work, AS-L integrates service *into* the course (Furco, 1996). "Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning that involves having students perform community service as a means for achieving academic goals" (Billig & Furco, 2002, p. vii).

While to some in academia AS-L may be viewed as a fad, providing out-of-class opportunities for students to actually apply their knowledge in real-world situations is a concept that dates back to Dewey (1915, 1938). Finally, AS-L can be viewed as a transdisciplinary approach to learning, assisting preservice teachers in particular as they learn the benefits and intricacies of integrating subject matter.

A Pedagogy of Action as a Theoretical Frame

The mismatch between the predominant White school culture maintained by many urban teaching forces and the social cultural, experiential, and linguistic backgrounds of non-White children could be viewed as one of the primary reasons for school failure among American children of color. Moreover, culturally expressive styles also bring about tensions between a student's accepted home culture and the one of their teachers. Many of the academic problems attributed to children of color are actually a result of the cultural mismatch in the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Hale-Benson, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1994). To help alleviate this problem, colleges and universities can explicitly address the issue of cultural and economic mismatch by incorporating AS-L components in teacher education coursework. It is critical for preservice teachers to acknowledge, accommodate, and appreciate ethnic, economic, linguistic, and cultural diversity to teach effectively.

Rauner (1995) completed a two year study of 58 students enrolled in service-learning courses. Students reported that interacting through AS-L had a great impact on their dispositions as their experiences forced them to confront stereotypes as well as help them to increase awareness of the significant

differences in physical environments and resources available to people. Similarly, Blackwell (1996) examined students' perceptions of learning in courses with an AS-L component. In her study of 142 students, 93% claimed service-learning helped them grow intellectually and emotionally. Like Rauner and Blackwell, Astin and Sax (1998) reported student outcomes were favorably influenced by a service component including enhanced awareness and knowledge of different races and cultures.

Focusing exclusively on the impact of AS-L on preservice teachers, Boyle-Baise (1998) conducted a case study of 65 preservice teachers who claimed their involvement in service-learning courses increased their awareness of the varied and complex issues involved in teaching in culturally diverse situations and their comfort levels. In a follow-up investigation, Boyle-Baise and Kilbane (2000) completed a case study of 24 preservice teachers enrolled in a multicultural education course with an AS-L component. Students reported that the service-learning activities in which they participated challenged their stereotypical perceptions and deficit-orientation toward people from low socio-economic groups and cultural and racial groups different from their own. Such activities significantly assisted in their preparation to work in culturally diverse contexts. Preservice and new teachers may possess assumptions about minority families if they lack direct contact with cultures and races differing from their own, basing instead their perceptions on negative media portrayals (Compton-Lilly, 2004). In subsequent reporting, Boyle-Baise (2002) presented numerous studies that explored theoretical, conceptual, and philosophical frames to assist teachers in increasing their understanding of diversity, communities, and classrooms. Without experiences such as AS-L course components where such assumptions can be explored and addressed in a non-threatening context, many preservice teachers remain reticent to engage in dialog on complex social issues such as homelessness, racism, and equity that impact education (Van Sluys, Legan, Laman, & Lewison, 2006).

Study Questions

For teacher education majors in particular, AS-L helps them to apply theory from the classroom, value and celebrate diversity, view community as a source of knowledge and expertise, and gain civic values (Schnaubelt, 2000). AS-L can be an appropriate solution when teachers' cultural orientations differ markedly from their students and students' families. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standard #4 (2002) mandates in-school experiences that assist teacher education candidates to explore how diversity impacts teaching and student learning, and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Principle #3 (1992) states that novice teacher dispositions to be nurtured include respect for differing family backgrounds and sensitivity to community and cultural norms. Mandates and principles aside, it is truly up to educators at all levels to take the initiative to understand and appreciate cultural backgrounds of students' families differing from their own (Gestwicki, 2004). How, then, could reflection about race, economic difference, and cultural and linguistic diversity in a knowledge-building and shared risk environment be encouraged?

Two general questions frame this study:

1. What are the benefits to students, community, and university when AS-L is a course component?
2. How does AS-L affect the personal intellectual growth of teacher education students?

Four specific questions guided the study:

1. Why is AS-L appropriate as a method for preparing preservice teachers for urban classrooms?
2. How does AS-L assist preservice teachers in their understanding of ethnic and cultural differences?
3. How does AS-L impact preservice teachers' perceptions of socioeconomic status?
4. How does AS-L help preservice teachers acknowledge and accept linguistic differences encountered in the classroom?

Methods

This study examined the dispositions of 177 preservice teachers engaged in literacy and multicultural education courses with AS-L components. A nested design was selected for this study. Consider the design as a series of concentric circles with preservice teachers situated in the middle, surrounded by the university's educational preparation, in turn, surrounded by a larger circle encompassing local K-12 public school institutions and community. Figure 1 illustrates the study design.

Figure 1. Study design.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using four different sources, although written reflections were the primary source. The ethnographic techniques of participant observation and informal and formal interviewing were also used to collect data. Analyzing artifacts and field notes resulting from observations and interview transcripts provided opportunities for triangulation, “a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning” (Stake, 2000, p. 443). Data were collected over the course of five consecutive semesters. Participation was voluntary. Students enrolled in a foundations course on multicultural education and a literacy course were invited to participate.

Written reflections were collected at three points during each of the four semesters during which the study was conducted. An *initial* reflection consisted of asking students to write about any assumptions they had regarding the impending gardening experience locales. A *medial* reflection required students to write about what surprised them about the experience, and an *exit* reflection asked students to describe how the experience had changed them as prospective educators.

Participant observation included field notes recorded during and after garden sessions and during class and after sessions had occurred. Each time students were required to participate in a garden experience, I observed and also participated as a supervisor/evaluator, professor/teacher, and guide/mentor. During the fall and spring semesters, students participated in the gardening experience approximately eight times over the course of 16 weeks. In the summer semester, students participated six times during an accelerated 10 week session.

Formal interviews with students were conducted during the spring and summer of 2002. One student from each semester was asked to participate as an interviewee. Interviewees were selected based on provocative comments made during the gardening sessions, during class time, or in written reflections.

Collected artifacts included written comments from the local elementary educator who facilitated our involvement in the gardens at the school site, written responses from both the elementary building administrator, and the outreach coordinator of the community-based center. Photographs of activities were also examined.

Participants

Of the 177 students who participated in this study, 158 were White females, 2 were White males, 15 were Black females, and 2 were Black males. These are demographics that mirror American teacher demographics (Delpit, 1995; Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, M-Class Teams, & Casareno, 1999). Students ranged from sophomores to seniors. Some students had completed all required field experiences; other students were at the beginning of their professional sequence of study and had not participated in any field components. All course work was completed prior to student teaching. The gardens were situated on the grounds of an elementary school and a community housing complex, serving an all Black population. The building principal was a Black female, whereas I am a White female. The elementary teacher who facilitated the gardens was a White female.

Both the Community Center Director and the university's Director of Service learning were White males.

Context of the Setting

Mann (2005) wrote: "Nowhere more than in Mississippi is America's Black population so oppressed and impoverished" (p. 50). In a recent report by the Southern Education Foundation (2007), Mississippi was listed as having the highest number of Black children living in poverty. Another recent report, sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund (2006), revealed other startling statistics: the state ranks 50th in percent of poor children, 50th in terms of low birthweight babies, and 50th in expenditures per pupil. Other statistics for 2004 reveal that of the approximate 749,569 children (31%) in Mississippi, 227,656 are labeled as poor; 49,749 were White (12.4%) and 151,217 (44.1%) were Black (Children's Defense Fund, 2006). Located just 62 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, the town in which the university was located and this study was conducted reflected the de facto segregated education system found throughout the southern United States. In this environment, the majority of White students attend either private, Christian-based "academies" or public county schools located in White-flight communities surrounding urban centers while Black students predominantly attend public city schools.

In 1999, when I moved my family to this community in south Mississippi to join the university's faculty, many of my colleagues were dismayed and shocked to learn I had enrolled my children at the local public high school. One colleague even accusingly asked me if my children were a part of some sort of social experiment. My children's high school was 85% Black; White children who attended had parents who worked at the university or who were stationed at a nearby military installation. Like myself, these parents abhorred and ignored segregated practices, believing instead in the strengths of a pluralistic society. When I informally polled my class as to their educational backgrounds, with the exception of one older, nontraditional White student, all other White students had attended private academies or county schools. Without exception, my Black students had graduated from public city schools.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998). Such a method is "systematic yet dynamic" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 17). Initial analysis was conducted by reading through written reflections, field notes, interviews transcripts as well as written comments defined as artifacts and coding the data according to content. According to Charmaz (2000), comparing different data sources allows a researcher to compare views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences of different individuals. General categories that correlated were reviewed. A comparison was then conducted of students' initial reflections to their medial and exit reflections for evidence of changing dispositions. Themes developed to the point of saturation when no new themes emerged. Four significant themes were identified from the data: (a) displacement, (b) transformation, (c) acceptance, and (d) moving from negative, judgmental attitudes to positive, non-judgmental attitudes.

Results

The school and housing complex with adjacent community center were located within a 3-mile radius of the university's location. The adjacent neighborhoods where the gardens sites were located were low income areas as identified by abundant Section 8 housing and were situated in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Despite the close proximity to the campus, the vast majority of university participants experienced this community for the first time by participating in the service-learning garden activities.

It was imperative that, as the professor for these courses, I set the tone and provided my students with a demonstration of what I expected from them when on site in the gardens. That meant I dressed for gardening, I interacted with staff and students, and I participated fully in planting, weeding, dead-heading, and harvesting the gardens. I also took great care to ensure that school and community center schedules coincided with university schedules. In addition, I provided students with maps to each site and asked both a classroom teacher, designated as the elementary school's contact, and the community center's Director to visit my class for an orientation prior to the start of visits each semester to orient preservice teachers to the community. The university's Director of Community Service Learning also visited my class as a guest lecturer in an effort to orient students to AS-L.

Displacement

Although field notes were made during observations and interviews and artifacts were used to triangulate data, reflection data appeared to be the most compelling. As a body of data, it also constituted the largest amount of data collected.

Of the 177 participants who completed the initial reflection, 155 indicated they were initially apprehensive, scared, exhibited a negative, judgmental attitude and felt out-of-place traveling to either site. Comments such as, "I am going to feel conspicuous," and "I have never been in the bad part of town," and "Will I be safe?" and "I can't tell my parents what I am doing" are indicative of students' assumptions and highlight the initial dispositions of the students participating in this study. Comments reflected the segregated lifestyles of these preservice teachers where Black and White existed separately. The majority of my White students had little prior experience with Black children. One student's initial reflection epitomized what I labeled as a negative, judgmental attitude, as she stated that "children were going to have discipline problems." Yet, another wrote that "children will be wild, unruly," while another classmate claimed that "children WILL NOT mind" (student's emphasis). While it is customary for preservice teachers to feel unsettled when faced with the prospect of teaching for the first time, for many of my White students these feelings were exacerbated.

Field notes and interview data confirm initial reflection data as they revealed how students bunched and clustered together at our first garden visit. One interviewee stated, "I was scared to go into the 'hood. I didn't know what to expect, and I was afraid I would stand out." Questioned further during an interview, this student explained that she felt out-of-place just being in the neighborhood. When asked if she had actually felt unsafe, she responded, "I didn't know how to feel. I just felt weird being there, like I didn't belong, like I

was so White.” Another quote, culled from initial reflections affirmed the assumptions of many as she stated, “I was a little bit scared and shaky about going into that area.”

It was interesting to note that after our first visit, one of my Black students shared her perception with me, “These are [Black] folks, but they sure are poor [Black] folks.” This student’s comment illustrates how, despite cultural sameness, economic differences become apparent. Such comments exemplify initial dispositions and the displacement theme that emerged in this study and also illustrate how many in the US have trouble recognizing social class stratification and are uncomfortable when faced with class difference (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000).

Transformation

Second round reflections that were gathered at the mid-point of this study indicated a subtle shift in dispositions as students reflected a growing sense of belonging and grew more familiar and comfortable with working in the gardens. A total of 174 mid-point reflections were submitted. With the exception of just two, students’ comments reflected a growing ease, familiarity, and acceptance of working in the gardens. As university students established relationships with elementary students and became more familiar with the community settings of the gardens, their comfort level seemed to increase. Reflections suggested personal transformations from expressions of fear and trepidation to eagerness and delight. Through examination of reflections and field note data, evidence of transformation emerged, and for my White middle-class students and some of my middle-class Black students, the experience was preparing them to teach in a settling unlike their own homes and communities. For example, one response on a mid-point reflection revealed evidence of transformation as the student noted, “I never thought about having children different than myself in my classes until now.” Another wrote:

When I first heard we were doing this service thing, this field experience, I had my reservations. Coming from a middle class, White family, my experience with African-American culture had been limited. I did not know if I would be able to relate to them in a way that was effective for them and me. Now I know I can, and this experience has been successful for me. Now I see these kids as just regular kids. They have a special need for attention, but that is not something defined by race or SES.

Culled from interview data, the following excerpt confirmed reflection data regarding the observation of dispositional transformation as the student stated:

Visiting the garden is the highlight of my week. I look forward to seeing Jasmine and working with her. In just four weeks, I have grown so close to her. Is this what teaching is about? I can’t even remember now why I was afraid to go there in the first place. All I know is that I have been afforded the chance to get to know and work with an adorable, bright little girl. I get so excited about teaching after visiting the gardens.

Data analysis indicated an increased acceptance, willingness, and tolerance to working in a diverse setting. And, it appeared that preservice teachers were beginning to rethink their standards for what they considered to be “typical, normal and regular” behavior among student populations.

In the summer of 2001, the elementary teacher who was facilitating at the elementary gardens sent a note. She shared with me how gratifying it felt to help nurture the next generation of teachers. She noted what she perceived as a growing commitment on part of the preservice teachers as evidenced by several who had approached her asking for permission to return as volunteers the following fall semester. Field note observations noted the same growing confidence as well as evidence of preservice teachers making wonderful connections between subject areas as their experiences accumulated. Classroom discussions back at the university indicated that preservice teachers were increasing their ability to integrate subject matter around the common theme of gardening. A bibliography of garden-themed books was compiled based on preservice teachers growing awareness of increasing literacy through a gardening theme (Appendix A). In addition, preservice teachers began to create ways to naturally integrate other subjects such as math, science, and social studies through a garden theme as well as how to promote vocabulary development through subject integration.

As each successive semester’s group of students examined the body of literature from the preceding semester’s students and continued to maintain, harvest, or replant the gardens, different ideas for gardens also emerged. For example, butterfly gardens were established to attract butterflies to study life cycles in science. When the large, showy garden also attracted hummingbirds, this generated another cycle of inquiry. Seven other types of gardens were also established and maintained, including a bulb garden, a pizza garden, a kitchen garden, Peter Rabbit’s garden, an “animal” garden, a potpourri garden, and—a clear favorite—a sensory garden (Appendix B). By the middle of each semester, students were no longer preoccupied with where the gardens were located or with whom they’d be working, rather, they became focused on gaining more teaching experience and the challenges of integrating subject material.

Often, comments surfaced during class discussions that illustrated how university students’ dispositions were shifting regarding the students and communities with whom they were interacting. One student boldly proclaimed one day that she was learning more than the student with whom she was working. That comment epitomized the reciprocal and mutually beneficial nature of AS-L. Such comments reflected the thinking of students involved in a study conducted by Berson and Younkin (1998) who stated that the majority of the 286 students in their study reported a greater level of satisfaction with AS-L courses than with non-traditional coursework. As authentic experience, working with the garden project, had value beyond the instructional context.

Acceptance

Data analysis of exit reflections indicated preservice teachers’ dispositions toward children from impoverished homes and economic strata vastly different from their own, children who differed from them culturally and linguistically, moved from distrust to acceptance. 176 students completed exit reflections. If the

volume of response can be considered as an important indicator of change, final reflections sometimes were up to three additional pages of response. While initial and mid-point reflections never exceeded the one required page, final reflections resulted in volumes of “testimony” and data. Page after page of exit reflections indicated that student’s dispositions had shifted because of the AS-L component. Preservice teachers’ excitement toward teaching was evident as were feelings of acceptance toward their students.

The following three comments, taken directly from exit reflections, embody the dispositional transformation to acceptance: “Just because someone does not believe as I do does not mean they are weird,” and “I think that my views, opinions and perspectives are not as narrow as they used to be,” and finally, “I now do not look at people unlike me as weird or wrong. I look at them as different and special.”

Exemplifying the shift in disposition, another student selected as an interviewee because of her exit reflection response wrote, “I quit feeling sorry for my child. I realized that I needed to see her as she was, not label her because she was Black and lived in public housing. I learned to see Tinesha as a little girl under my care and supervision, not as a victim. I am left wondering why I felt the way I did in the beginning.” During the formal interview, she continually expressed her gratitude for the opportunity. She also shared this experience was more helpful to her than any other practicum field experience as she was “forced” to examine her own belief system and feelings. The AS-L experience was transformative for this student, who, like so many others who participated in the Garden Project, became knowledgeable about social, economic, and linguistic difference, thus, internalizing course goals and objectives, and began to examine how her identity was shaped by her world view.

This reflection response and other responses bolstered my own notions that this AS-L experience, while time consuming, was extremely beneficial in terms of preparing my students to work in urban environments. A classmate corroborated her reply in her final reflection, “Everything we did in class made me stop and think.” These two students were not alone in confirming, via reflection data, that an AS-L component was authentic preparation for urban classrooms. Others typified the beneficial aspects of AS-L as an educational field experience as a junior education major wrote, “I believe that this is one course that I will remember forever.” And, although stated somewhat awkwardly, the following student’s response not only backed up the authenticity of an AS-L experience, but she touched me deeply as she professed, “Before I took this course I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but this class made me know it.”

Fieldnote data confirmed what students were telling me in exit reflections. The last day of each garden visit became a celebration. Preservice teachers lamented the end of the experience. The building administrator offered profuse thanks for help for her students, and a significant number of students inquired how they could return and volunteer the following semester, indicating the sustainable nature of AS-L. Digital images of preservice and elementary students working together highlighted the teaching and learning connections fostered through this garden experience.

Moving from Judgmental Attitudes to Non-Judgmental Attitudes

One of the surprises of this research study was the shift in preservice teachers' dispositions from being judgmental in an accusatory, negative sense (blaming the victim) to being positive and non-judgmental or accepting of difference. While many initial reflections and comments reflected an attitude of blame, ridicule and scorn toward the children with whom we worked; exit reflections showed evidence of a shift in perception and disposition. No longer did reflective comments claim, "Don't these people care about how they live?" Such reflections were replaced with responses such as, "I have learned to think about different cultures in a less judgmental way. Also, I now see the need to be educated about other cultures to benefit the children I will be teaching." In particular, the following two exit reflection responses epitomized the dispositional transformation evidenced in exit reflection data: "This course has changed my whole perspective on culture. Now I am more considerate, more sensitive..." and

I had such a judgmental attitude toward other groups of people who did not share my beliefs and background, and because of this class I feel so ashamed of my attitude. I have become more tolerant of others because of this class. This class has impacted my attitude toward students more than any other [class].

The following excerpt from a preservice teacher's interview solidified and reconfirmed exit data that an AS-L experience was helping to prepare my students to teach in urban environments:

These are children like any other children. They may be poor, and they will never look like me, but I now know that most of them come from loving homes. They all wanted to learn, and that view has changed me the most. Before working in the gardens I figured people chose to be poor. I was so ignorant. Now I know differently.

Through this AS-L experience, preservice teachers increased self-reflexivity, awareness of cultural difference, and responsiveness to the students with whom they were interacting.

Conclusions

As society shifts and public school demographics change, teacher education needs to transform how preservice teachers are prepared to understand cultures other than their own. This study demonstrated how AS-L experiences were pivotal to those middle class students enrolled in education, creating an even greater awareness of cultural, linguistic, and economic difference. By integrating AS-L into field experiences in a thoughtful, organized, and structured manner, complete with time to reflect and discuss events and situations encountered, preservice teachers made powerful connections between the AS-L experience, their learning, and their world view. AS-L was an effective tool of preparation for preservice teachers. The following quote captures the dispositional change students encountered:

Multicultural education would not have been as effective if it had not been for the service learning component. It gave me a chance to actually see the things we were discussing in class come to life. I am so glad I had this opportunity.

A student from a literacy course expressed a similar view as she reflected, “I am so glad that I took this class. I feel more comfortable with myself and others, I feel like I have grown a lot since the beginning of this semester.” According to Dyson & Genishi (2005), such interpretations are based on our experiences.

How Does AS-L Assist Preservice Teachers in the Understanding of Ethnic and Cultural Differences?

Recognizing that large numbers of American educators are White females and many urban and inner city student populations are non-White, AS-L activities situated in urban environments allow preservice teachers to experience cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity first-hand. Under the support and guidance of university instructors, preservice teachers can explore diversity in non-threatening and focused ways. In this study, the complexities of American racial, cultural, and linguistic difference were explored through AS-L.

How Does AS-L Impact Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Socioeconomic Status?

Teacher education coursework needs to address disparities among income levels. While discussion is a starting point, nothing can replace a preservice teacher's experience in an economic level different from his or her own. Working in an impoverished urban environment affords individuals from middle-income backgrounds with a realistic view of the unique demands of low-income living. Participants involved in this study began to question stereotypical views often perpetuated through media as well as beliefs acquired from family.

How Does AS-L Help Preservice Teachers Acknowledge and Accept Linguistic Differences?

When a methods course, especially a literacy course, includes an AS-L component that offers experience with a culture that differs from a preservice teacher's own experiences, preservice teachers gain valuable insight into differing language registers, dialects, and different language variants. In such a situation, where preservice teachers hear language significantly different from their own, they begin to grasp the complexities of language instruction and the demands different language registers and dialects places on literacy instruction. In an atmosphere of trust and support offered through such courses, these preservice teachers viewed language variance as both emblematic of culture and as a potential obstacle in terms of access to opportunity.

Why is AS-L appropriate as a Method for Preparing Preservice Teachers for Urban Classrooms?

AS-L components offer opportunities for students to work in urban communities, providing students with a slice-of-life view of an urban community. Such authentic experiences are dynamic, generative and, in many instances, cannot be replicated.

Implications for Teacher Education

Through an AS-L component, teacher education can be improved and strengthened in terms of adequately preparing students to teach successfully in urban environments. A senior education major, poised to student teach, shared the following during an interview:

The last time we went to the gardens was the first time I understood why we did the garden project. When my kindergartner grabbed my hand and said, “Let’s go outside, I want to dig.” I realized the whole reason we do the garden project was the same reason I went into this profession, that is to make a difference in people’s lives. The garden project Nan and yourself have started does just that by exposing children to hands-on learning. I learned something about myself by being involved in the garden project. I now know that I could teach in the [Urban] City Schools. Children are wonderful no matter what color, and all children deserve the same opportunity to succeed in life.

Figure 2 illustrates the dispositional transformation preservice teachers exhibited through AS-L courses.

Figure 2
Dispositional transformation.

Limitations

Some of the most common reasons students give to be engaged in AS-L experiences are to help others in need, experience feelings of personal satisfaction, help a community, and make society a better place. Many university faculty perceive AS-L as a way to change perceptions through experience with “others” especially in the arena of educational preparation. This approach can foster a sense of noblesse oblige and actually reinforce stereotypical views (Boyle-Baise, 1998). In fact, one could argue that a paternalistic, charitable, even missionary orientation are promoted through AS-L. It is possible that privileged university students from middle-class backgrounds who gain experience in poor, urban situation with a culture, economic strata, and language unlike theirs, can view AS-L as do-good deeds completed in impoverished and marginalized

communities. Additionally, many question the sustained community impact, how to document learning, and how to evaluate the benefit to recipients.

Bias can be an issue in qualitative work and in courses with an AS-L component. Admittedly, my enthusiasm for the garden project could have biased my students' involvement and reflections. Did they simply learn what was expected and accepted what was advocated as important, or did this AS-L experience truly impact their dispositions? As in all learning situations, it is a teacher's actions and words that impact learning.

Closing

In the foundational areas of multicultural education and literacy, AS-L components can assist preservice teachers in an examination of their existing beliefs and world view. AS-L field experiences help education candidates gain authentic experiences in urban settings and transform students' attitudes toward children who are different from themselves. These results help prepare preservice teachers to work in urban environments. There is nothing more important than our children and teachers are at the heart of learning.

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APPENDIX A

Children's Literature compiled during "The Garden Project"

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APPENDIX B

Themed Integrated Instructional Gardens (established via “The Garden Project”)

Animal Garden: contains plants whose names include animals, such as cowslip, lamb’s quarters, snapdragons, tiger lily, dogwood, catnip, horse daisies, and spider plants (great border plant in the South).

Bulb Garden: planted entirely with bulbs, this was a giant experiment as some, such as tulips, did not fare well in the South’s extreme heat. Many lily plants were successful such as calla lilies, and varieties of Asiatic lilies, narcissis and tiger lilies. As university students shared class stories with their families, our gardens became the recipients of their mother’s and grandmother’s (nothing sexist here, this is just how it occurred) heirloom flowers, including bulbs like Mount Brescia, Louisiana Hollyhocks and Louisiana orchids. We could not find some these plants in garden centers or listed in plant literature, so we assumed either they were heirloom or were not called what conventional garden center labeled these plants. Once planted, this garden was low maintenance and only “harvested” when we needed to thin areas; then bulbs were replanted around the school and homes.

Butterfly Garden: designed to attract and feed butterflies. As a general rule, butterflies are attracted to deep yellow, orange and purple flowering plants such as sunflowers (which also clean the soil of toxins), marigolds, zinnias, cosmos, lantana and celosia. This garden is also planted with a succession of flowering plants in mind so that when one variety fades, another takes its place. In our experience, hummingbirds, specifically the ruby-throated hummingbird, was highly attracted to the garden. Our inquiry revealed that “hummers” are territorial birds, and in fact, they returned in following years.

Kitchen Garden: also referred to as an herb garden, it has plants used in cooking such as parsley, varieties of basil, dill, oregano, thyme, sage, rosemary and chives. We also planted a variety of mint and later; we made sun tea using our dried produce. As we were in the South, we also planted a variety of greens such as collards, mustard greens and turnips. Green onions and tomato plants were also included. As a side note, we practiced companion planting where a plant like a tomato, was supported with marigolds, which served as a natural insecticide.

Peter Rabbit’s Garden: planted with all the flora featured in the Beatrix Potter classic including: beets, radishes (planted very early in the South), mint, lemon balm, lavender, chamomile, hyssop, sage, rosemary and even strawberries!

Pizza Garden: everything (vegetarian) you might put on a pizza was grown in this garden such as Roma tomatoes, grape tomatoes, green onions, white onions, a variety of peppers including jalapeños, plus herbs like oregano, basil, and chives. This garden was planted in a circular shape with each different species placed in wedges to emulate a pizza.

Potpourri Garden: one of our sorority students dreamed up this garden. When first presented, we laughed, but it was a huge hit, especially at harvest time. We planted lots of lavender, baby's breath, and chamomile, different varieties of mint, lemon balm, lemon grass, scented geraniums and even roses and ended up having the entire sisterhood of volunteers to come help children fill sachets, hand-stitched by sorority sisters with our bounty. The cross-cultural exchange was a delight to experience as the sorority "sisters" explained how to make the sachets and keep them in their undergarment drawers. It was a rare day indeed, and went miles in terms of breaking down barriers as the sorority women shared their knowledge with the elementary school female students. As the sorority was committed to a philanthropic project, we witnessed a double service opportunity, with their efforts resonating with the course objectives.

Sensory Garden: this was another favorite. Each plant in this garden included plants that appealed to the five senses. For example, lamb's ear was soft to the touch, varieties of basil were included for taste, lavender and verbena for smell, brightly-colored poppies for sight, as well as snap dragons and snap peas for sound. While all gardens were designed as experiential, the sensory garden one was especially popular with children.