

## Challenging Teacher Bias Implementing a Community Learning Fair

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From this fair I could see firsthand how [the] caring-centered framework is an important part of education. . . . I would not want to make children feel excluded or deprived of a learning experience solely because I didn't take the time to understand the dynamics of their culture. (Chelsea, pre-service teacher)

Required courses in teacher education programs can sometimes prompt less-than-positive responses from pre-service teachers. Multicultural teacher educators, in particular, may face resistance from prospective teachers who, believing that they do not harbor prejudices, question the need to examine their attitudes toward culturally and linguistically diverse students (Keengwe, 2010; Markos, 2012; Monteith, Devine, & Zuwerink, 1993; Pang, 1994; Sleeter, 2001). Although Castro (2010) found studies that indicate that attitudes of millennial pre-service teachers may be shifting, his review also revealed a lack of complexity in understanding multiculturalism, including uncritical assumptions about diversity, meritocracy, and student achievement. Reflection through experiential learning has emerged as one way for pre-service teachers to confront their beliefs as they shift from holding stereotypical perspectives to

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understanding the cultural and linguistic richness that children bring to school (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012; Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007; Keengwe, 2010). The purpose of this article is to describe the Learning Fair, an experiential service-learning project that promotes reflection about deficit-oriented prejudices toward diverse students and instructs pre-service teachers about culturally relevant teaching.

Founded on the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education framework (Pang, 2010) and refined over the past 20 years, the current incarnation of the Learning Fair is a collaboration between Sage Street School, a K-8 school in an urban Southern California community, and a local public university. The project combines the school's annual Halloween Festival with booths that feature hands-on, inquiry-based science activities presented by pre-service teachers. The illustrations in this article are drawn from a recent year in which close to 50 pre-service teachers prepared for the community event. The Learning Fair offers an example of how experiential learning embedded in a strong theoretical perspective can provoke thoughtful reflections about prejudice and prompt behavioral changes.

### The Caring-Centered Multicultural Education Framework

Caring-Centered Multicultural Education (Pang, 2010) draws on theories of education for democracy (Dewey, 1916), socio-cultural education (Vygotsky, 1978), and the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) and combines them in a framework to support education of the whole student, as seen in Table 1. Caring-centered multicultural educators develop trusting relationships, affirm and build on student culture, and provide experiences to create a respectful and just community. The goal is to ensure access to academic content for all students (Pang, 2010).

While the concepts underlying the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education framework apply across all subject areas, the Learning Fair illustrates its use in teaching science. Lee, Quinn, and Valdés (2013) have argued that, with the finalization of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS Lead States; 2013) and their cross-referencing to the Common Core State Standards, teaching science presents an opportunity for developing both content knowledge and language skills. For example, the Scientific Practices component of the NGSS requires students to ask questions, construct explanations, and argue from evidence. This use of scientific language encourages social interaction as students participate in inquiry-based activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Discussion of NGSS Cross-cutting Concepts Patterns, such as cause and effect, allows teachers to embrace the ethic of care, with its emphasis on student-teacher dialogue (Noddings, 1984). Shared inquiry of the Core Ideas from the NGSS provides

access to academic content for all students, a key element of education for democracy (Dewey, 1916). The caring-centered framework represents an approach to multicultural teacher education that integrates academic content knowledge with a focus on the whole child.

### Approaches to Multicultural Teacher Education

All states mandate elements of multicultural education in teacher preparation, either through state credentialing or program accreditation requirements (Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, & Agarwal, 2010; Morrier, Irving, Dandy, Dmitriyev, & Ukeje, 2007). These requirements take into consideration that, while the student population in the United States is growing more diverse, the teaching corps is not. In the 2007-08 school year, 83% of teachers were White, and most were middle-class women (Aud et al., 2012; Prater & Devereaux, 2009). Researchers have noted the cultural and linguistic differences between the lives of teachers and their students (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Keengwe, 2010; Smith, 2009). In their review of research on preparing teachers for urban schools, Anderson and Stillman explained that field experiences can offer “op-

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**Table 1**  
***The Three Dimensions***  
***of the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education Framework***

<i>Education for Democracy</i>	<i>Sociocultural Learning</i>	<i>The Ethic of Care</i>
Teachers encourage higher-order thinking skills	Culture shapes thinking and knowledge	Teachers affirm the identity and culture of students
Students are active participants	Learning occurs through social interaction and language	Teachers reflect on their own biases
Students engage in shared inquiry	Teachers build on prior knowledge	Teachers engage in dialogue with students
Schools are laboratories for democracy	Teachers integrate culturally relevant teaching	Teachers develop trusting, reciprocal relationships
	Students construct their own meaning	Schools are centers of care
	Schools are laboratories of culture	

portunities to develop relationships with and practice teaching diverse learners whose racial and ethnic backgrounds, linguistic toolkits, social class status, school experiences, and cultural practices may differ markedly from their own” (p. 4).

While multicultural education courses attempt to equip educators with knowledge for bridging cultural and linguistic differences between students and teachers (Morrier et al., 2007), passive approaches limited to reading and discussion may reinforce stereotypes or allow teachers to disengage (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Gay, 2005; Sleeter, 2001). Pre-service teachers may reject theoretical stances offered in teacher education programs and retain their prejudgments, which may include deficit-oriented attitudes toward students and their families (Sleeter, 2001). Teacher educators must consider ways to challenge pre-existing assumptions, especially through reflection (Goldstein & Lake, 2003; Monteith et al., 1993; Pang & Park, 2003; Smith, 2009). Some scholars have questioned requirements that do not incorporate reflection, while also considering how opportunities for reflection prior to traditional student teaching placements can provide early field experiences in multicultural settings (Bell et al., 2007; Markos, 2012).

### ***Experiential Learning***

Experiential learning has gained popularity as a strategy for translating abstract concepts of race, class, and language into the concrete realities of students’ lives (Amatea et al., 2012; Bell et al., 2007; Conner, 2010; Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008). Also described as service learning, experiential learning projects may occur before the final student teaching placement, often as part of a multicultural course (e.g., Barton, 2000; Conner, 2010; Meaney et al., 2008). In many cases, pre-service teachers and students come together for projects aimed at helping prospective teachers understand school and community contexts (Bell et al., 2007; Meaney et al., 2008). Although some have questioned who most benefits from this approach (Sperling, 2007), one potential of experiential learning is the moving of pre-service teachers from unsophisticated and abstract conceptions of diversity to more complex and specific understandings, such as recognizing varied family structures and using inclusive language (Meaney et al., 2008). In studying a service-learning project for prospective science teachers, Barton (2000) found evidence of prospective teachers developing more nuanced views of culture not as an “add-on” but as embodying students’ world views and ways of knowing. While acknowledging one field experience would be insufficient for forming “comprehensive ideas,” Barton argued, “Most

of them left with a set of understandings framed through questions that could serve as a starting point for further exploration in their developing teaching practices” (p. 805).

When Bell et al. (2007) examined differences in attitudinal change between pre-service teachers who worked solely as school-based tutors as compared to those who worked in the community as mentors, they found that mentors developed a more complex view of diversity and identity as they interacted with students and their families. Mentors were able to move beyond the traditional power relationships situated in schools when they engaged with students in non-academic settings. A tutoring project described by Conner (2010) expressly sought to balance power dynamics by positioning pre-service teachers as “learning partners” with urban high school students. In Conner’s study, pre-service teachers showed improved attitudes about the intelligence and ability of urban teens and noted the influence of negative media portrayals in their original perceptions.

Likewise, in a project that paired pre-service teachers with English learners at a university, prospective teachers acknowledged the stereotypes that they held (Keengwe, 2010). In reflections on their “cross-cultural conversations,” teachers admitted to initial feelings of fear and nervousness but, through the partnerships, began recognizing their role in supporting English learners in their future classrooms (Keengwe, 2010). These examples of prejudice reduction illustrate how service-learning experiences in multicultural teacher education provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to integrate theory with practice.

### ***Course and Partner School Context***

The course described in this article, Introduction to Multicultural Education, is a prerequisite for candidates entering either the single- or multiple-subject credentialing program. Most students are either undergraduates in their third or fourth year of study or recent graduates. The course partially fulfills requirements of the Cross-cultural Language and Academic Development certification required in California and is taught by a variety of faculty members with differing approaches (Morrison et al., 2007). In this particular course section, the first class meeting begins with a visualization activity whereby pre-service teachers reflect on stereotypes around American identity (Pang & Park, 2003). Subsequent activities include a reflective paper and class discussion on personal experiences of discrimination. Some White students struggle to answer the prompt, responding with comments such as:

Trying to think of a time I felt discriminated was actually a difficult

task. Not only is the word “discriminate” a broad term, but I feel like I have been a very privileged White person who has grown up in a relatively nice area.

In the semester’s first half, pre-service teachers also learn about the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education framework and consider it in reference to guest lectures by graduates of the credentialing program who now work in urban schools. Toward the end of the semester, the pre-service teachers read Myers’ *Malcolm X: By Any Means Necessary* and explore, through debate, why little is taught about Malcolm X in schools. Each course component includes reflection and discussion that moves from participants’ personal experiences to implications for education.

The major course project is the Learning Fair, where pre-service teachers move beyond classroom reflections to prepare inquiry-based science activities for a community event. The Learning Fair occurs approximately two-thirds into the semester, on the Saturday before Halloween. Leading up to the Learning Fair, pre-service teachers learn how to read science standards, plan for hands-on delivery of content knowledge, make connections between science and students’ daily lives, and create assessments. They also prepare posters with Spanish translations that describe the booths’ activities. At the class session before the Learning Fair, each group of four to five pre-service teachers presents its activities for the class, in response to feedback from peers and the professor. In this particular year, one group was prompted to completely redesign its activities because they lacked focus on the standards and a clear understanding of scientific concepts. Several prospective teachers were surprised by how much preparation time is required for excellent activities. In a written reflection afterward, one commented, “I learned that we were not as prepared as we thought we were; we should have tried the project before hand and calculated the ingredients better.”

Prior to the Learning Fair, pre-service teachers took a field trip to Sage Street School to become familiar with the site and the school’s educational philosophy. Situated in an urban Southern California neighborhood, Sage Street enrolls 1,200 students in grades K-8. Its student population is 61% Latino, 16% African-American, and 12% White, with the remaining 11% of students identifying as multiracial, Filipino, Pacific Islander, Asian, or Native American. Almost 75% of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost meals, and 36% are classified as English Learners, 49% of whose families speak Spanish at home. As the principal gave a tour of the blacktop area where the booths would be set up, he explained how Sage Street has dramatically improved student achievement over the past few years through a focus on engagement and attributed much of the success to teachers setting high standards while

meeting the needs of students. He also emphasized the importance of community connections, a key element of the Learning Fair, and a link to education for democracy (Dewey, 1916).

Six years ago, the principal, teachers, and Parent Teacher Association at Sage Street School decided to combine the annual Fall Festival with the university's Learning Fair to promote academic expectations and emphasize science, a subject that has lost ground as accountability measures have focused on English and math achievement (McMurrer, 2007). The Learning Fair has developed into a community event that is open to all students and their families and includes face painting, a dunk tank, and carnival games that parents provide, as well as the science booths presented by pre-service teachers. While previous Learning Fairs have included a variety of science activities, the teachers and principal have since requested a tighter focus on specific concepts that teachers could reinforce in the classroom. In the year described, pre-service teachers based their activities on K-8 physical science standards for motion and force. Prepared with the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education framework, the trip to Sage Street School, and rehearsal of their activities in class, the pre-service teachers were ready for the Learning Fair/Fall Festival.

### ***The Learning Fair/Fall Festival***

In the most recent year, approximately 400 parents, students, and community members went from booth to booth and engaged in science activities over the three hours of the Fall Festival. Students learned about friction by predicting how materials such as sandpaper and carpet would affect the speed of toy cars that traveled down a ramp. At other booths, students blew through straws, applied force to the sails of aluminum-can boats, or tried to pull apart magazines held together by the friction of their overlapping pages. As much as the students learned about motion and force, many pre-service teachers gained an enriched perspective on culturally and linguistically diverse families as personal interactions, reinforced by later reflection, brought to life how all parents care about their children's academic success, thereby dispelling stereotypes concerning the lack of interest in education in urban communities.

### **Pre-Service Teacher Reactions**

After the Learning Fair/Fall Festival, pre-service teachers were asked to come prepared to the next class meeting with written reflections on what they had learned about children, what they had learned from interactions with parents, how they would improve their booth's activities, and how the Learning Fair connects to the caring-centered

framework. As others have noted, reflection and whole-class debriefing are crucial to deepening the learning of pre-service teachers (Markos, 2012; Waddell, 2011). During the class discussion, as some revealed their implicit prejudgments, the professor asked them to reflect on this reaction and to consider their biases, resulting in the integration of a reflective component to help them recognize stereotypes (Bell et al., 2007; Monteith et al., 1993). Many pre-service teacher responses also indicated their understandings of how the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education framework had guided their efforts and was operationalized by the Learning Fair.

### ***Ethic of Care***

The learning event tied in perfectly with a caring-centered framework in that it brought a number of people together for the sake of learning and it was in a safe, fun, family-oriented environment. (Marcus, pre-service teacher)

Many pre-service teachers expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the community event. An international student from Norway, who was planning to pursue a teaching career in his home country, wrote, "The whole day I felt a 'big-family-atmosphere.'" Their reactions reflect the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) in how the school becomes a place where teachers engage in genuine dialogue with families and shift from wanting to save students in urban settings to wanting to become a member of that community (Waddell, 2011). As one pre-service teacher wrote, "The caring-centered framework ties in with the learning event because, in order to have a successful booth, it was vital to engage the students on their terms, with ideas they are already familiar with and then expand on their interest." This response illustrates how student-centered teaching is a crucial aspect of the framework.

There were, however, less positive instances, such as the prospective teacher who commented that the school community was essential because "when some of these students leave the school, they don't have that." In this case, the pre-service teacher grasped the concept of caring community but retained a deficit-oriented perspective. This instance serves as an example of realistic limitations to developing relational pedagogy through a single event and stands as a counter to critiques of uncritical appraisal of experiential learning (Sperling, 2007). Nevertheless, the Learning Fair suggests the potential of caring-centered education and the importance of teacher educators facilitating discussion about deficit orientations within a safe learning environment. The opportunity to experience caring community beyond book-bound theory



resulted in generally thoughtful reflections about the importance of schools as community institutions. One pre-service teacher commented, “The school does more than provide a formal education to the children of the community. . . . It has become an integral part of the identity and integrity of the community itself.”

### ***Education for Democracy***

I was very impressed by the students that we had coming up to our booth; so many bright children. (Jason, pre-service teacher)

Concepts around education for democracy (Dewey, 1916), with their emphasis on experiential learning and critical thinking, can remain abstract for some pre-service teachers. Through integrating inquiry-based activities that promote higher-order thinking and, thus, access to academic content, however, the Learning Fair helps make the abstract concrete. Many pre-service teachers observed how, given the opportunity to become active participants in their own learning, students quickly grasped challenging scientific concepts. One teacher wrote, “The experiments helped create a new understanding of the concepts,” and noted how shared inquiry built access to academic content knowledge for all students. Another observed, “Towards the end of the day after visiting many of the booths, students seemed confident about what they knew because they would reference learning the same materials at other booths.” In this way, the inquiry-based activities in the Learning Fair supported full participation.

One pre-service teacher recognized the importance of inclusion in democratic education, stating:

We also allowed space at the end of our lanes for a student in a wheelchair to fit through. If we had not had space for him to maneuver through the lanes, he would have not only felt excluded from the activity, but he may have also felt uncared about.

Here, she extended an understanding of multiculturalism to include students with disabilities, linking education for democracy to the ethic of care. The concrete experience of planning for a student with disabilities added meaning to the theoretical framework of Caring-Centered Multicultural Education.

### ***Socio-cultural Learning***

I could tell that the bi-lingual posters were appreciated because many Spanish-speaking parents were reading the posters to their children and were able to grasp the experiment better through the poster. (Sarah, pre-service teacher)

The third component of the framework, based in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theories of learning, emphasizes the use of culturally relevant teaching (CRT). Pre-service teachers integrated CRT into their lessons, thereby affirming students' cultural identities and background knowledge, by using materials that they have at home, such as toy cars, stuffed animals, magazines, and Mexican coins. Several pre-service teachers noted the importance of having translated materials so that Spanish-speaking parents could assist their children. One explained:

I told her [the mother] in Spanish that I spoke very little and showed her the Spanish translations board. Alex understood how to do the activities with the help of his parents' reading the board to him and me [sic] modeling the activity for him.

She continued by describing an interaction with a hard-of-hearing student and commented:

Both interactions were similar in the fact that communication could have been a barrier, but I worked with the resources I had (the Spanish translations), and the fact that I could use the skills I have (ASL). The caring-centered framework tie[s] in with [the] learning event by really listening to the child and/or parent.

Pre-service teachers also discovered that, if they made personal connections with children and engaged them in highly involving activities, students successfully learned the content. One commented, "The children enjoyed being part of the experiment. They loved making predictions about what was going to happen and why." Other written reflections demonstrated recognition of how students construct meaning through social interaction. A pre-service teacher wrote:

The best assessment we had was when one of the first students we taught came back to the booth with his friend and gave the whole lesson himself to where the friend understood. They were only about in third grade. This made the whole day worthwhile and it was very rewarding!

This example brings together all three components of the Caring-Centered Multicultural Education framework, as this pre-service teacher recognized the students as active learners who drew on relationships within the school community and used language and social interaction to demonstrate learning.

## Discussion

These selected observations and reflections generally run counter to the stereotype that urban families place little value on school (Markos,

2012; Waddell, 2011). Community interactions brought to life abstract classroom discussions about multiculturalism, and subsequent reflection anchored experiences within the caring-centered framework. Debriefing is essential to the project. Because reflection about prejudices can be subtle and difficult to capture, the Learning Fair was developed with all pre-service teachers participating in the same event as opposed to a solo activity such as a “cultural plunge.” During the debriefing, when stereotypical and deficit views arise, all participants can engage in the discussion because all were present, a major rationale for their collaboration. Pre-service teachers must be guided in confronting their biases so as to facilitate respectful perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families.

Experiential learning combined with reflection helps pre-service teachers move past deficit perspectives by creating the crucial opportunity for these teachers to challenge their beliefs about diverse students and to develop self-regulation of prejudice (Amatea et al., 2012; Monteith et al., 1993; Pang & Park, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). Self-regulation entails exploring the discrepancy between one’s stated beliefs about a group of people and one’s actions toward that group (Monteith, 1993; Monteith et al., 1993). As participants in a teacher education program with a strong social justice focus, most pre-service teachers initially described themselves as committed to meeting the needs of diverse students, which projected a low-prejudice mindset (Monteith, 1993). For example, in responding to the prompt about personal experiences of discrimination, many wrote statements like, “It is important to be respectful of everyone and their beliefs,” which reflects a somewhat simplistic understanding of diversity (Castro, 2010). Later, in the debriefing of the Learning Fair, when asked why they were surprised at the children’s intelligence or the parents’ engagement, the pre-service teachers paused to consider the ramifications of their prejudice, admitting they had expected less of students due to the school’s urban location. This ability to recognize stereotypes is a key step in developing self-regulation, or the ability to monitor the discrepancy between a stated belief in social justice and one’s actions (Monteith et al., 1993; Pang & Park, 2003).

What is less known is the long-term impact of experiential learning on behaviors once teachers enter the classroom. The lack of longitudinal studies that track behavior change has been noted, and, thus, longitudinal research is frequently recommended as an avenue for future research (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Castro, 2010; Colón-Muñiz, Brady & SooHoo, 2010). Although Colón-Muñiz et al. (2010) conducted an empirical study of the impact of their program’s multicultural education course, and Conner (2010) included statistical analyses of changes in pre-service

teachers' perspectives on urban high school students, more common in the literature on experiential learning are anecdotal reports of program effects. In the case of the Learning Fair, participants who have remained in the area return to share their experiences teaching in urban schools. One individual, now a math teacher, explained how the class:

. . . helped me understand myself, the role culture has played and continues to play in my life. This helped me identify preconceived ideas that I had about people and learning. This helped me learn to identify conflicts between preconceived ideas and reality, for myself and for other people.

Because these sometimes challenging reflections occurred in a course situated within the ethic of care, pre-service teachers were able to explore their reactions in a safe, supportive setting, while engaging in critical discourse (Waddell, 2011). In describing the redesign of a teacher education program to prepare teachers for work in urban schools, Waddell emphasized the importance of combining experiential learning with safe spaces for reflection, as pre-service teachers confront their assumptions. Whereas Anderson & Stillman's (2013) review of pre-service teachers' beliefs revealed negative biases toward urban and diverse communities, Castro's (2010) review pointed toward pre-service teachers' beliefs in the benefits of examining cultural assumptions, participating in field experiences, and engaging in reflection. These approaches can move pre-service teachers beyond naive understandings of multicultural education (Castro, 2010; Sperling, 2007).

Experiential learning also offers opportunities for collaboration among pre-service teachers. At the Learning Fair, many assisted classmates or visited their booths. During the whole-class debriefing, one pre-service teacher commented that she had made more friends in this course than she had in four years of undergraduate study due, in large part, to the collaborative nature of the project. These opportunities are significant in light of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE; 2010) recommendation that field experiences emphasize collaboration. For a few participants, the Learning Fair appears to have been less engaging, as evidenced by their briefer written reflections; however, most participants shared positive reactions. Overall, the reactions and reflections from pre-service teachers demonstrate the potential of community-based field experiences.

### Implications

The Learning Fair offers a model of Caring-Centered Multicultural Education (Pang, 2010) for pre-service teachers that moves past the

artificial boundaries between university and K-12 practitioners (Gay, 2005). Because the Learning Fair is a semester-long project grounded in a theoretical framework, it bridges theory into practice as well as provides a concrete strategy, which some have identified as lacking in current approaches to multicultural teacher education (Akiba et al., 2010; Howard & Aleman, 2008). Prospective teachers in this prerequisite course begin to develop the capacity for culturally relevant teaching as they build an understanding of diversity rooted in the real world. As they connect academic concepts and language to students' experiences, they develop a deeper understanding of the intersections of school, family, and community in students' lives (Howard & Aleman, 2008; Smith, 2009). The potential result is a shift from deficit perspectives about culturally and linguistically diverse communities to an appreciation of the richness of the socio-cultural context. One pre-service teacher summed up the value of the Learning Fair best by stating, "All in all, I had the overall impression of caring parents who were invested in their child's learning."

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