

Citation

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From Stranger to Friend: The Effect of Service Learning on Preservice Teachers' Attitudes Toward Diverse Populations

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Service learning experiences hold the potential to significantly influence participants' view of cultures other than their own. This qualitative study examines how service learning affects preservice teachers' attitudes about working with students from diverse backgrounds. Two groups of preservice teachers enrolled in a reading methods course participated in focus group interviews both at the beginning of the project and at the end. The results revealed that the service learning group (vs. the non-service learning group) changed significantly from the

beginning of the project to the end in terms of their attitudes toward students from diverse populations, level of engagement in the focus group interviews, the group synergy, and the quality and level of nuanced responses to key questions about diversity.

The roots of service learning lie deep in the mission of education. Educators commonly serve the needs of others; so it comes as no surprise that *service learning*, “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2009), is commonly employed by them, especially at the K-12 level. Recently, members of the higher education community have begun to take note of service learning as an appropriate educational tool for college students, with practitioners asking if service learning can be used to influence student *values*, as well as content areas. We carried that idea a bit further and sought to learn if a service learning project involving *preservice teachers* could assist these students in developing an appreciation for and understanding of cultures other than their own.

The literature supporting serving learning begins with an exploration of the concept of volunteering. Volunteerism is “a formalized, public, and proactive choice to donate one’s time and energy freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Dutta-Bergman, 2004, p. 355). Since the 1970’s, volunteerism research has received increased attention and resulted in numerous academic journals addressing the topic. In 2001, 44 percent of Americans engaged in some type of formal volunteering (Dutta-Bergman). While Bussell and Forbes (2001) noted that the population of volunteers is extremely diverse, other researchers (Wilson, 2000; Freeman, 1997) posited that increased education and age boosts volunteerism. They also established that women are more likely than men to volunteer. Individuals who are employed and who have higher potential earnings were more likely to volunteer than those who are unemployed and who have lower incomes. Reasons for volunteering ranged from the desire to help others and feel useful to the desire to gain work-related experiences and enhance personal development (Anderson & Moore, 1978). Bussell and Forbes (2001) suggested that in addition to fulfilling a moral obligation (eg. giving back to an organization that benefitted a family member), individuals volunteered in order to build human capital, that is, to gain marketable skills, to prepare for the workplace, and to obtain future employment.

Volunteerism typically involves working with people from diverse populations: often they are poor people from a milieu labeled over four decades ago as *The Other America* (Harrington 1962). In general, the American public endorses programs that support children from poverty, but there is an inevitable tension between supporting the child and supporting the “able-bodied adult” connected to that child (Hecl, 1997). Hecl posited that the public endorses familiar reform refrains, such as “help those who help themselves” and “a hand up rather than a handout.” Therefore, assistance programs that offer opportunities for individuals to get the help they need so they can become self-sufficient are highly valued by the American public.

With respect to education, children in low-income schools are generally served by teachers new to the field and by teachers who are more likely to be teaching outside of their specialty area. Bennett (2008) found that preservice teachers have little knowledge of poverty and how the conditions associated with poverty affect students on a daily basis. Robinson’s (2007) study of 400 teachers in San Diego, California addressed how teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about

poverty influenced their behavior in the classroom. He believed that teachers' "poverty ideology" impacted their sense of job efficacy and satisfaction. Teachers who adopted an ideology that blamed the individual for being in poverty (lack of thrift, lack of effort, etc.) were less suited to teaching in low-income schools. On the other hand, teachers who adopted an ideology that blamed the system and not the individual for being in poverty were more likely to experience satisfaction and a strong sense of self-efficacy while teaching in these low-income schools. Developing an understanding of and an appreciation for individuals from different cultural and economic backgrounds then becomes an important aspect of teacher preparation programs.

Much of the literature on service learning is fairly recent. Service learning "involves the integration of community service into the academic curriculum" (Koliba, Campbell, & Shapiro, 2006, p. 685). Through service learning activities, participants fulfill a need in a community and form partnerships with community organizations, agencies, and/or schools (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Not only does the service learning project meet the needs of a community, but it also demonstrates the value of active community involvement and promotes the notion of caring for others (Koliba, et al., 2006). Furthermore, candidates in professional preparation programs cite service learning opportunities as a powerful tool to increase multicultural awareness and a sense of social justice, allowing them to be better able to work with students and families from diverse backgrounds (McHatton, Thomas, & Lehman, 2006). Middleton (2003) emphasized the effects of the integration of service learning in preparing preservice teachers to understand and address discriminatory practices in school settings.

Westheimer and Kahne (2007) explored the role service learning played in facilitating preservice teachers' understanding and awareness of diversity. Barton (2000) asserted that involving preservice science teachers in community service learning influenced their views on multicultural science education. The most notable outcomes reported by the preservice teachers involved in a service learning program were the building of positive attitudes towards people with disabilities, and a deeper knowledge and understanding of diversity (Stamopoulos, 2006). Preservice teachers' philosophies of teaching and learning can have a critical influence on their educational practice, especially as it relates to working with underserved populations. This study explores the impact of a service learning tutoring program on preservice teachers' attitudes toward diverse populations; therefore, the research question that guided this study was this:

How does participation in a service learning project change preservice teachers' attitudes and dispositions about working with students from diverse backgrounds?

Methods

The impetus for our study were two sub-grants in Learning to Teach, Learning to Serve (LTLS) from a service learning umbrella project at a flag-ship university in the southeastern United States. The purpose of the service learning umbrella project is to establish a replicable model, by means of grants to 12 public and private universities, to integrate service learning into teacher education so that preservice teachers will develop an enduring habit of service and civic responsibility. The primary sub-grant assisted our department in designing and implementing service learning components for preservice teachers taking a methods course in reading

education. The second sub-grant assisted in the collection and analysis of data from the service learning project at our institution.

Sample Rationale

We used purposive sampling (Merriam, 1988) in order to gain the most insight into the experience of preservice teachers' motivations regarding volunteering as well as their attitudes toward and dispositions about working with students from diverse backgrounds. Participants for this study were 46 undergraduate preservice teacher candidates enrolled in two sections of a reading methods course during the spring semester of 2008. Each section of the course had about the same number of students (22 in Section 01 and 24 in Section 02). The reading methods course was a natural choice for us because the instructor (one of the authors) was the same for both sections of the course: the only difference was the implementation of a service learning component in one section of the course. Both groups of preservice teachers tutored elementary school children in reading. Working with the elementary school students on a weekly basis throughout the spring semester, the preservice teachers administered the following informal literacy assessments: running records (Clay, 1993), the Qualitative Reading Inventory-4 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006), the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990), and the Burke Reading Interview (Burke, 1980). Based upon these assessments, the preservice teachers designed and taught lessons that targeted the students' needs while building upon their strengths.

They also shadowed the at-risk learner during reading and writing instruction. The field-based experience for the non-service learning section (NSL) was structured as a traditional university-assigned placement wherein the supervising clinical teacher selected the student to be tutored. The chosen case study student was not necessarily an at-risk reader but one that the teacher believed would make an interesting case study student. Members of the service learning group (SL) were placed in the same low-socioeconomic school and were carefully matched with an at-risk reader in grades kindergarten, first, and second. Both field placements required the same number of hours, the same assessment procedures, and the same number of individualized tutoring sessions. The instructor believed that learning the elements of reading instruction (e.g., assessment procedures, lesson planning, and tutoring) were important for all of the preservice teachers in this course. She therefore supported the development of that knowledge in both the NSL and SL groups through class lectures, hands-on experiences in the university classroom, and individualized feedback on course assignments.

The major difference between the SL group's field experience and the NSL group's field experience was that the instructor emphasized the importance of fulfilling a need in the community – namely supporting the at-risk readers in the SL experience. The needs of the elementary school students were discussed during SL group's class sessions and options for addressing those needs through instruction were highlighted. In addition, the SL group completed weekly reflection logs that were guided by the work of Cress, Collier, and Reitneurer (2005). Reflection logs have been identified by Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) as an essential link between the community experience and the academic learning as they encourage the service provider to consider the benefits they are providing for the community as well as the benefits they are receiving as a result of the service experience. Therefore, following the tutoring sessions, members of the SL group reflected on what they gained from the interactions and what

they contributed to the students and/or the teacher. Through frequent interaction with other faculty project participants and the project research faculty, the instructor attempted to ensure that the classroom and field experiences were as similar as possible for both groups of students and that her attitude toward the service learning component would not influence her instruction and feedback to students in either section of the course.

Data Collection

We used focus group interviews (FGIs) as our primary means of collecting data. Krueger and Casey (2009) define a FGI study as “a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment.” The purpose of the FGI is “to listen and gather information.” Important to our study, Krueger and Casey emphasize that the FGI “is conducted several times with similar types of participants so the researcher can identify trends and patterns in perceptions” (p. 2). In addition to the focus group interviews, the instructor also kept a log of the observed preservice teachers’ interactions with their students and copies of assignments submitted by the preservice teachers.

We conducted the first series of FGIs in January, all with the same moderator, duration of time, interview questions, room and digital video-recording conditions. The interview guide contained six questions, two dealing with attitudes toward volunteering, one with expectations regarding working one-on-one with children, one related to attitudes toward diverse populations, and two focusing on the drop out problem in American schools. Participants selected a pseudonym which was used throughout the pre and post interview process. In order to allow for more interactions within the interviews, the number of participants in each interview was targeted at 10 (Krueger and Casey, 2009). In January, the Non-Service Learning Group (NSL) participated in two FGIs: 10 participants in one and 12 in the other. The Service Learning Group (SL) participated in three FGIs: 4, 11, and 9 participants, respectively. The numbers in each group were dictated by the students’ availability, as well as that of the moderator, room and recording operator. In April (the end of the semester), we conducted follow-up FGIs, again with the same moderator and identical conditions, except for the interview guide which had been changed to allow students to reflect on their experiences over the semester.

Data Analysis Framework

Alan Peshkin’s (1991) *The Color of Strangers, the Color of Friends* reports a study of a diverse ethnic community, Riverview, and its high school. Peshkin begins with the idea that “distinguishing others as strangers, as not one of us and therefore less worthy and wonderful than we are . . . is so ubiquitous in human behavior as to seem bred in the bone” (p. 30). At the multi-ethnic Riverview High School, Peshkin was surprised to find that often “students [made] a passage [from the status of stranger] to the status of friend” (p. 211). He argues that the designation of “friend . . . diminishes one’s otherness, one’s object-ness, and demands us to accept the burdens (and joys!) of compassion, support, and caring” (p. x). The teachers in his study claimed to be color-blind and said that “kids are just kids.” But he notes that “by claiming that ‘kids are just kids,’ teachers save themselves from explicitly asking, ‘Does student ethnicity constitute a fact with instructional consequences?’” (p. 264-265). Thus examining the impact of a service learning program on students’ attitudes towards diversity can focus on the extent to which preservice teachers see children from diverse populations as *friends* versus *strangers*. The impact on attitudes is even more important because of the subtle link between student/teacher

ethnicity and instructional consequences. Peshkin's seminal work in how one views *others* provided us with a framework and touchstone for analyzing our data.

Data Analysis Rationale

At the beginning of our project, we asked: "How does participation in a service learning project change preservice teachers' attitudes and dispositions about working with students who come from diverse backgrounds?" One analytical framework, the constant comparative method, allowed us to examine our research question from different vantage points. Analysis of FGI data is "a deliberative, purposeful process" according to Kruger and Casey (2009). They state: "It consists of four distinct and critical qualities. It is systematic, uses verifiable procedures, is done in a sequential manner and is a continuing process" (p. 128), all of which qualities fit within the scope of the constant comparative method.

The objective of the constant comparative method, which owes its origin to *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is to generate theory systematically and then plausibly suggest "many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems" (p. 104). More importantly, the constant comparative method "is designed to aid the analyst . . . in generating a theory that is integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data" (p. 103). The constant comparative method is *not* designed "to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results; it is designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility that aid the creative generation of theory" (p. 103). The basic, defining rule for the constant comparative method is that: "*while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category*" (p. 106).

Using the constant comparative method, we were able to compare "indicator with indicator, concept with concept," consequently allowing us to "identify patterns and thus to label similar incidents as a category and to identify the properties of the category" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 158). The constant comparative method provided a good fit between our question and the method; it allowed us to process our question "about changing experience over time" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 30). It also provided a good fit between the type of data (focus group interviews and the instructor's log, which included lesson observations and case study lesson templates kept throughout the study) and the method (Morse & Richards, 2002). Finally, the constant comparative method afforded a good fit between our data, our analytic techniques and the method: our primary data sources were video-recorded FGIs; the secondary sources, the instructor's log and copies of student assignments. Our analytic techniques involved developing concepts, coding at categories, and open coding (Morse & Richards, 2002).

FGI video-recordings were transcribed during the summer and fall of 2008. In January of 2009 our research team (the four authors) began meeting weekly in order to code the data. Following the work of MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, and Milstein (1998), Fernald and Duclos (2005), and Fonteyn, Vettese, Lancaster, & Bauer-Wu (2006), we adopted a codebook structure and the iterative process of discussing each code until agreement was reached. One group member was assigned the role of *code keeper*; another, the role of *note taker*. The team members, working both independently and collaboratively, helped the *code keeper* give each code a definition, set inclusion and exclusion criteria, and identify sample text references from the transcripts. Each

transcript was independently coded by three members of the team. Disagreements were resolved through discussion at our weekly meetings so that the codes were further refined (Fonteyn et al., 2006). We believed that this process enhanced inter-coder consistency. Wherever possible, team members attempted to use participants' own words "to guide the construction of codes and their definitions for in-depth analysis," a process referred to by MacQueen et al. (1998) as *emic* or non-structural coding (p. 33).

In February, 2009, we imported the transcripts into NVivo 8 to assist with further coding and analysis. NVivo 8 enabled us to code each FGI participant, as well as group and individual responses to each question, and thus track comments and attitude changes from January to April. We examined the attendance at and participation in the FGIs in January versus April, NSL versus SL. We also looked closely at the extent of participation (the amount of what was said) again for January versus April, NSL versus SL. In addition, we observed with interest the extent of synergy in the FGIs (numbers of incidents of students' responding to each other, asking each other questions, or referring to another group member's contribution). Finally, *and most importantly*, we compared and analyzed the quality, content, and level of nuance in responses, January versus April, and NSL versus SL. While examining students' responses, especially to the questions about diversity, we took note of the length of responses and also the effort students appeared to take to answer the questions, for example their searching for words to express their ideas, changing gears while talking, or hesitating to assert their opinions as fact. We also observed the number of times students responded to the same question and the number of times students commented on other students' experiences. We were surprised to find that occasionally a student would respond to our question with a question of her own. Below are two responses that illustrate to some extent the difference between a nuanced response of high quality and content, in our opinion, and another one not having these characteristics:

Erika (SL group): I had an experience when I was in my school. I went to a third-grade classroom, and it was not exactly the best area, and there were a lot of kids on food stamps and problems at home. And I learned by working with them every single day, five hours a day, that they did want to learn. Most of the kids, they wanted to learn. They want to . . . just *strive* to be as good as the salaried kids. They just need the extra help! If you actually give them the time, or you actually show them that you are there to actually *care*, you know, it really makes a difference. I worked with so many kids, and they came out of it so positively! So whenever I see a child who does not have . . . exactly the things like other students do, I don't look down upon them because I know that deep down *somewhere*, they just need that little bit of extra help to . . . motivate them to get their self-esteem back and be positive. Show how good you can help, and do not judge them because really they do want to learn; and they like being in school because usually school is a *friendlier* place. You just have to get them to put away the . . . negative aspects of what could be going on.

Meredith (NSL group): Yeah, I don't agree with that ["people on social services have only themselves to blame"]. We can't say that; it's very difficult. Different people do have different situations.

Coding

During the focus group interviews, the first question we asked participants was this: “Think back to your childhood and teen years. Do you have any memories, good or bad, about volunteering? For example, can anyone tell a story or incident involving an experience in volunteering?” Using N Vivo 8, our team examined the responses independently; and then we met, discussed the codes we had assigned, and generated the following primary codes (or, in N Vivo language, *parent nodes*) for this question. The preservice teachers in this study identified five main reasons for volunteering. They believed able-bodied individuals should give back to the community (Bussell & Forbes, 2001). They believed that by volunteering they could have a positive impact on others, particularly those who were less fortunate. These preservice teachers identified volunteering as being intrinsically rewarding. For example, when asked why she thought people volunteered, one participant replied, “I am interested because I feel good when I do it.” Finally, they cited practical reasons, (it is required for a class), and professional reasons (to gain marketable skills) for volunteering (Anderson & Moore, 1978, Bussell & Forbes, 2001).

However, we were more interested in the students’ attitudes toward children (and parents) from diverse backgrounds than their attitudes toward volunteering; so we framed two questions to explore the diversity issue. In January, we asked the focus group participants to react to the following provocative statement: “People who receive social services largely have themselves to blame.” Each of our team read through the responses to this statement, attempted to determine if students agreed or disagreed with this statement; and then we met as a team, discussed the codes we had assigned, and finally agreed on a primary attitude code for each response:

1. agree
2. disagree
3. “can go both ways”

But we also coded these responses in terms of their content:

1. Social services as a repetitive cycle
2. Impact of social services on children
3. Teaching strategies for at-risk children
4. Parents at fault, not children

In April, we continued to pursue the issue of diversity; but in the focus group interview guide, we reframed the diversity question to allow for the students’ recently-completed field experiences and their reflections on them. We asked the focus group participants: “How has your experience working one-on-one with children this semester affected your attitude about people from different backgrounds? Does anyone have an interesting example or anecdote about working with a child from a diverse background?” Again, following our patterns of individual coding and subsequent team discussion, we arrived at the following primary codes and sub-codes (*parent and child nodes*) for this question:

1. Teaching strategies
 - a. Provide extra support, time, and attention
 - b. Provide a safe environment
 - c. Break the rules (e.g., allow poor children to take home books)
 - d. Step outside the box
2. Attitudes

- a. Teacher attitude toward poor children & non-native speakers of English
- b. Compassion for poor children from poverty
- c. Put self in child's shoes
3. Backgrounds
 - a. Novice regarding diversity
 - b. Different backgrounds and situations
4. Perceptions
 - a. Teachers' perceptions about children from poverty in general
 - b. Teachers' perceptions about children from poverty attitudes towards reading
 - c. Preservice teachers attitudes about children from poverty desire to learn
5. Affects
 - a. Interaction effect (teacher's background vs. child's background)
 - b. Attempt to understand poverty
 - c. See child as "friend" not "stranger"
 - d. Unexpected responses

During the initial focus group interviews, both the SL and NSL participants were "novices" regarding diversity. Many admitted to having limited understandings of people from different cultures. Their perceptions of children from poverty were prominent in the initial focus group interviews and ranged from statements about poverty being associated with laziness to those in poverty needing a "hand up" (Helco, 1997). In the final focus group interviews, when the preservice teachers were able to reflect on their field experiences, the patterns of responses focused more on the interaction effects of teacher's background with the child's background and how to employ teaching strategies to reach all children.

The process of deriving codes independently and then through group discussion strengthened our understanding of the data, our ability to work effectively as a research team, and our confidence in the results.

Results

Level of Engagement

The interest and participation by the two groups in the focus group interviews was similar in January but very different in April. In January, 22 students in NSL were scheduled to participate in the FGI, and 18 attended (82%); while only 20 of 26 (77%) of the SL participated in the January FGI. However, in April the story was very different. As shown in Table 1, 15 of 20 students from NSL attended the focus group interviews (68%); while 23 of 24 from SL attended (96%). We found another measure of engagement in the service learning project: the number of students who attended *both* FGIs differed from those who attended just *one* FGI. In NSL 13 of 20 students attended both interviews (65%); while in SL, 20 of 23 students attended both interviews (87%). More important than the above indices of engagement are the volume and quality of contributions made by participants in January versus April. Among NSL, nine of the 13 participants made more comments in January than April (69%); while four (31%) contributed about the same in both interviews, and not one student said more in April. Again, among SL, the difference is striking: only four of 20 (20%) made more comments in January; nine of 20 (45%) contributed about the same in both interviews, and seven of 20 (35%) contributed more in April. We believed we could safely conclude that *interest* in talking about service learning, volunteering and diversity had increased more in SL than in NSL.

Quality of Responses and Meaning

Group *synergy* was an interesting issue of engagement to explore: we watched the video-recordings, read and re-read the transcripts and even counted the incidents of students responding to each other, asking each other questions, and referring to each others' comments. These incidents provided some concrete evidence for a difference in group synergy. For example, within NSL there were ten such *synergy* incidents in January and two in April (as a percent of total participants in NSL, that number would represent 77 percent in January vs. 15 percent in April). SL demonstrated a higher level of group synergy: 12 incidents in January (60 percent, actually less than NSL in January); but 10 incidents in April (50 percent).

Table 1.

Level of Engagement

Type of Engagement	SL Group	NSL Group
FGI Attendance in January	20/26 (77%)	18/22 (82%)
FGI Attendance in April	23/24 (96%)	15/20 (68%)
Attendance of <i>both</i> FGIs	20/23 (87%)	13/20 (65%)
Higher Quantity of Comments in January	4/20 (20%)	9/13 (69%)
Higher Quantity of Comments in April	7/20 (35%)	0/13 (0%)
Group Synergy Incidents in January	12 (60%)	10 (77%)
Group Synergy Incidents in April	10 (50%)	2 (15%)

Most importantly, in addressing our research questions, we assessed the responsiveness, content, and level of *nuanced* responses in the April interviews. Again we found SL to have made more responsive and nuanced comments, especially regarding the diversity issue, compared with NSL. In the January interviews we did not find this difference between the two groups.

From the April FGI data set, we focused our analytic attention primarily on one key, two-part question:

How has your experience working one-on-one with children this semester affected your attitude about people from different backgrounds? Does anyone have an interesting example or anecdote about working with a child from a diverse background this semester?

Only two of twenty-two students in NSL (9%) responded to this key question, and their responses demonstrated that they had not identified their child as someone like themselves. The first NSL participant to respond, Meredith, commented:

One of the last few times I went to work with my case study student, she told me that she was going to move and her dad was fixing up this new house for them to move into, and I was like ‘okay.’ So I asked the teacher about it, and she told me that the little girl was going to move soon and that they’re currently living in a hotel and had been living in a hotel for the past two weeks. So this was just a complete shock because I had been working with this little girl, and *she seemed perfectly normal* [emphasis ours]. So you have to realize that if you want them to improve you have to take into consideration their background and what they are going through at home.

Meredith, though sympathetic, had not made the passage from “stranger” to “friend,” an important transition among people with differences described by Peshkin (1991); and she was only beginning to recognize the impact of poverty on students’ lives outside of school (Bennett, 2008). Jessica, the second NSL participant to respond to the key question, stated:

I just recently did a small project on ELL [English Language Learner] students. I had to interview one of the principals at my school; so I got all the statistics. It is pretty interesting at how many Hispanic children [are in the schools]. There are like [*sic*] 20% of the children at that school that are Hispanic and we constantly have parents come into the school. And there is no way of communication [*sic*] or even notes being sent home---maybe it is something that you do not want the child to read, but they have to read it because they have to translate to their mom.

Here Jessica focused on statistics about ELL students; the numbers and practical problems are what interested her, rather than the human elements of teaching ELL students.

In contrast to the two NSL participants, several students from the SL group responded to this key question with nuanced answers that showed they viewed their child as someone very much like themselves (a *friend*, as Peshkin [1991] would say); or at least they attempted to put themselves in their child's shoes. Below are responses to this key question from some of the SL students. For example, Linda replied:

The little boy that I worked with--he didn't have any books. As a matter of fact, he said that he had never been to a book store before. And he said basically that he watches the dogs and watches horror movies with his dad. *I think that we had a lot in common.* [Emphasis is ours.] I told him that I was a struggling reader as well; and he said ‘Well that’s all right, Mrs. Collins. Everybody makes mistakes.’ So he was ...he wanted to learn, and he was determined that he was going to be a good reader regardless of what he was struggling with. But he . . . *I think I saw a lot of where I come from because I was basically in the same situation.* [Emphasis is ours.] Just a lot of stuff surrounding my environment and not the things needed to help me read effectively.

Linda’s contribution included many ideas. While it began with a little pity, it moved on, more importantly, to show how Linda linked her life with that of her child, who was from a somewhat similar background to her own. She was so attuned to the child’s message that she was able to quote the child during the FGI.

Unlike Linda, Emma was assigned to work with a child whom she identified as coming from circumstances unlike her own:

My student was very different from my background. He was a different race and a different gender and the age difference. But the first day we went, we took an interest survey--like what they are interested in doing, like what their hobbies are and stuff. His hobbies are collecting cans with his dad. He said that after every football game, they go out and collect cans out of trashcans. By that I could tell that we are different in socioeconomic status.

At first I was kind of nervous, like what do I say to that. But I think after work that day we were similar; we both liked to read stuff. So it was really good to see our differences, but we also had interests. [Emphasis is ours.] I think it was good that we are different because we were able to learn from each other. He could learn things from me, and I could learn things from him [emphasis ours], like people do have to do stuff like that to get by. But it was, I don't know, I'm glad that we were different.

Emma's comments are remarkable for a couple of reasons. First of all, she remembered a great many details about her child—his hobby of collecting cans with his dad (to Emma a *hobby*, but to her child and his dad, no doubt, a source of income). This hobby clues her in to the reality of their different life experiences. But Emma moved beyond these disparities and actually concluded not only that this child could learn from her, but that she actually could learn from him—and be glad about it!

Kristen described a child who could not speak English. Unlike Jessica (previously quoted from the NSL group), Kristen explored beyond the statistics and problems of the English Language Learner (ELL) to include her role as a teacher in addressing his needs:

He was . . . it took me a while to . . . his teacher never said, you know, 'this is what's going on with him' until the second week. I went in the first week trying to do these surveys with him, and he would just look at me. If I asked him 'what type of books did he like?' he would just say 'books.' Because he knew I was there to help him with reading . . . but he didn't really understand what I was asking him. So it took me a while to learn how to work with him. And then I found out, he was a first grader. I found out that he had just started school in November. He was 8, and he didn't speak English at all at home . . . because his father won't speak English. I don't really know the whole situation, but most of his English is really bad at school. It was just a completely different situation, and it was kind of hard to adapt to at first. I had to. I mean how do you teach a student that can't understand what you are saying to him? So we just worked on really basic things, but things that I think really ended up helping him. And I could see him progressing, not in the way that probably . . . not anyone else's students were . . . but he was learning. He knew more than 2 letters of the alphabet when we were done. It was really nice to work with him.

Kristen struggled to find a way to work with this child and succeeded. She realized her success was not comparable to that of her classmates, but she was proud that her child "was learning" and recognized that it was "really nice to work with him."

Sasha brought a different perspective to the key question on diversity because her own disadvantaged background contrasted strikingly with that of her child's rather privileged one:

I think the opposite thing happened, because I guess when I was growing up, I was poor. So I just always thought . . . you hear a lot about, you know . . . poor children don't get read to and haven't experienced books before coming to school. And so you think, if they are struggling readers, they are

probably going to be from a poor background. But my student wasn't from that kind of background. He told me that his parents read to him a lot, and he has books everywhere. And he told me he loves to read, and he participates in reading programs over the summer. So it was interesting for me because he was struggling with reading, even though he has had experiences like that. So I was like, 'why is he in a program like this?' At first he didn't seem to be struggling, but I found out later on that he was struggling with fluency and comprehension. But I guess you have to look farther into it than just like initially, like, your first impression.

Sasha's initial impression was upended by her realization that reading problems can occur in any environment. She didn't let her own upbringing and assumptions influence her ability to connect with this child.

Phoebe, our final example from the SL group, encountered a child who had no experience in receiving presents.

[W]hen we were doing the survey in the beginning, one of the questions asked 'what would you do if you got a book as a present?' And he wasn't really getting it. So I said '*presents*--like what did you get for your last birthday?' And he said 'nothing.' And I was like . . . I didn't know what to say. He says little things, like about his family. And I can tell it's not like the best situation. So that was kind of hard to work around. So I just had to try to not say anything that would upset him. But then he said, 'My reading teacher once gave me a present, and it was book.' So I just tried to work off that. It taught me that you can't just assume that every kid gets a present for their birthday. So it just made me aware of that.

Phoebe doesn't quite make the journey from *stranger* to *friend* (Peshkin, 1991), but her eyes are definitely opened about people from that world that Harrington (1962) describes in his classic study of poverty, *The Other America*. These moments of self-reflection are essential in the professional development of preservice teachers. As Hall (2007) notes, "Learning to be a teaching professional involves learning to think in divergent ways, to perform complex tasks with ease, and to develop a professional identity that integrates one's values, attitudes, and skills" (p. 29). These preservice teachers gained real world experience that caused them to face some "disorienting moments" (Goulet & Owen-Smith, 2005, p. 70) that required a careful examination of their feelings about what they believed to be true. It became readily apparent to us in listening to the voices of these preservice teachers that the service learning experience was an important factor in sensitizing them to the culture of children from diverse backgrounds.

Discussion

Alan Peshkin's study of Riverview and its high school (1991) provided a helpful framework for our understanding of diversity and perceptions of *otherness*. At the multi-ethnic Riverview High School, Peshkin describes how "students [made] a passage [from the status of stranger] to the status of friend" (p. 211), a passage that we discovered among our SL preservice teachers. Again, we discovered that Peshkin's argument that the designation of "friend . . . diminishes one's otherness, one's object-ness, and demands us to accept the burdens (and joys!) of

compassion, support, and caring” (p. x) was a helpful perspective with which to view our data. Peshkin reports that teachers in his study claimed to be color blind and said that “kids are just kids, but he pointedly asks “does student ethnicity constitute a fact with instructional consequences?”” (p. 264). This is a question that is worth pursuing, both in our study and in subsequent studies.

Examining the impact of a service learning program on students’ attitudes towards diversity can focus on the extent to which preservice teachers see children from diverse populations, *using Peshkin’s terminology, as friends versus strangers, .* The impact on attitudes is even more important because of the subtle link between student/teacher ethnicity and instructional consequences. According to Al-Fadhli and Singh (2006), “[r]esearch confirms that students of color and low socioeconomic status (LSES) are frequently misperceived and teachers are less likely to have high expectations of them” (p. 52).

Results from our study, including the data from the focus group interviews, observation logs kept by the instructor, and course assignments related to the field experiences, all indicate that the service learning experience increased preservice teachers’ awareness of diverse populations of students in the public school setting and helped them identify commonalities as well as differences between themselves and their students. The service learning experience also resulted in the preservice teachers’ relating to their case study student on a more personal level and becoming more invested in the child’s life inside and outside of school. In fact, the preservice teachers demonstrated a new understanding of the lives their case study children lead outside of school. This new understanding allowed them to be more sensitive to the needs, both cognitive and affective, of the students. An interesting finding was that because of the differences between them and their case study students, the SL preservice teachers found—in fact were pleased—that they could learn from their students. As Emma said: “I think it was good that we are different because we were able to learn from each other. He could learn things from me, and I could learn things from him.” On a broader level, the preservice teachers from the SL group came to a greater understanding about their role as future teachers of children from diverse populations.

Finally, we would like to discuss our methodology. Two of us have a research background: one, quantitative research; the other, qualitative. The other two researcher/authors come from a reading education background. In analyzing our data, we found that an interdisciplinary, team-based approach using N Vivo 8 provided us with many benefits. We also had an incentive and the resource of N Vivo 8 to document our methods, as we never wanted to forget what we did and how we did it. Most of us came to this study primarily with experience in working on projects by ourselves; accordingly, it took some time and attitude adjustment to learn how to work together, as a team. Nevertheless, we found that the advantage of working as a team, capitalizing on each other’s talents and unique perspectives, was an important undertaking. A synergistic effect developed during coding: investing the time and labor required for developing a codebook helped us boost intercoder agreement and improved the quality of our analysis. The same team-enhancing effect materialized as we prepared our paper. We readily conclude that the advantages for qualitative researchers in working as a team far outweigh the disadvantages. Finally, we are pleased to have perfected the techniques involved in a team-based data analysis approach using N Vivo 8, as we look forward to transferring these skills to future qualitative research projects.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

Although we followed the best practices in conducting focus group interviews and analyzing data, we want to caution readers about certain limitations that may affect how the research findings should be interpreted. One factor to consider when interpreting these findings is the Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) that could potentially be generated by the use of the service learning designation. Specifically, the participants in the service learning group may have felt especially proud of being in the group that provided service to others and receiving special attention and recognition for doing so. Even though caution was taken by the instructor to treat the service learning group and the non-service learning group as equally as possible, the service learning group may still have been intrinsically motivated and more inclined to be positive about service and people from diverse backgrounds. Further, it is important to note that these focus group interviews were conducted immediately after the service learning experience; as such, we do not know whether the observed outcomes represent permanent effects. In other words, we do not know how long the observed changes in the participants will endure.

Future Research

In the past, much of the research being conducted in the area of service learning focused on students in the K-12 system (see the *2007 Annual Meeting* program of the American Educational Research Association, April 9-13); thus in 2007 and prior years, the main population studied consisted primarily of high school students and their teachers. More recently, educational researchers have expanded their attention on the application of service learning in preparing preservice teachers; for example, 40 percent of the presentations on service learning at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (April 13-17) focused on preservice teachers. Consequently, more research needs to be conducted to determine methods and activities that are effective in these courses, to document the valuable dynamics that are involved, and to identify ways in which preservice teachers are being changed by their participation in courses with service learning components.

Our study begins to provide data from a uniquely rural and culturally and geographically diverse population, data not readily available from other sources. Such data are of particular importance in addressing equity and excellence in education. But more research needs to be carried out. Like most qualitative researchers, we did not intend to generalize our findings to other populations, geographic areas, or educational settings. However, we now conclude that it might be useful to replicate our study in an urban or suburban area—and, perhaps, involving a different postsecondary, preservice teacher education setting, such as that found at a private four-year college or with an online teacher education program. In doing so, we may uncover fresh answers to our question about the relationship between service learning embedded in preservice teacher education and preservice teachers' attitudes about individuals from backgrounds dissimilar to their own.

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