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Christine Beaudry
University of Houston

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Community Connections: Integrating Community-Based Field Experiences to Support Teacher Education for Diversity

Christine Beaudry

Christine Beaudry, EdD, is a visiting assistant professor in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Houston, and currently teaches courses on elementary social studies education and urban education. Her research interests include community education, culturally responsive and multicultural teaching, and democracy and social justice in education. She has published and presented on topics related to community and education, critical qualitative research, and critical constructivist approaches to teaching and learning social studies. She has several years of K-12 teaching experience in both social studies and outdoor education.

Introduction

In the United States, preservice teachers often graduate and go on to work with students whose backgrounds are different from their own and in communities in which they have limited lived experience (Sleeter 2000). This holds significant implications for teacher education programs given the importance of life and educational experiences in informing teaching and learning knowledge and practices and the subsequent impact of these practices in shaping the experiences and trajectories of students' lives. As Villegas (2007) observes, "given the salient role that schools play in shaping students' life chances and the obligation that teachers have to teach all students fairly, teacher education can ill-ignore the conspicuous pattern of disparities in the distribution of school benefits across groups" (371). This compels approaches to teacher education, including multicultural education (Banks and Banks 2009; Nieto and Bode 2011; Sleeter and Grant 2007) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2010; Villegas and Lucas 2002) that attends to issues related to diversity and equity, and that enables preservice teachers to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to develop responsive teaching and learning practices (Villegas 2007). Such approaches are often united by an emphasis on social justice. Though discussion and debate continue as to what constitutes teaching for social justice or social justice teacher education (McDonald and Zeichner 2009; Cochran-Smith et al. 2009), this concept can be understood broadly as an approach to education "that aims to have all students reach high levels of learning and to prepare them for active and full participation in a democracy" (Villegas 2007, 372).

While there remains a "lack of clarity in the field at large about what constitutes social justice teacher education" (McDonald and Zeichner 2009, 595), it is apparent that the development of responsive practices requires more than content knowledge, and that knowledge of students and their communities is central to these approaches (Sleeter 2008a; Wadell 2013). However, many preservice teachers enter and

graduate programs without opportunities to investigate the important role of community in education (Koerner and Abdul-Tawwab 2006). Community-based learning has been advocated as a potentially powerful approach to encourage preservice teachers to consider issues related to community, education, diversity, and equity by providing opportunities for personal experiences related to these issues (Boyle-Baise 2005; Murrell 2001; Sleeter, 2000), as well as to advance social justice goals by “helping student teachers learn about the funds of knowledge and structures and social networks that exist in the communities where their pupils live” (McDonald and Zeichner 2009, 604). The purpose of this article is to share “specific program practices” intended to prepare and support teachers to “teach from a social justice perspective” (McDonald and Zeichner 2009, 596) through the integration of community-based learning into teacher education. Specifically, it examines efforts to integrate community-based field experiences into a semester-long three-credit undergraduate teacher education course by inquiring into how participants interpreted their community-based field and course experiences, as well as how these interpretations influenced their teaching and learning knowledge and practices as reflected in subsequent semesters of student teaching. The intent is to add to the relatively small but growing body of research that investigates how community-based field experiences may be integrated into teacher education in ways that promote responsive practices, while simultaneously responding to calls to share specific program practices that support teaching for social justice.

Perspectives

Education remains a contested landscape in which opposing perspectives, purposes, and approaches often conflict with one another. Standardization, testing, accountability, and an emphasis on global and economic competitiveness currently dominate many discourses on education. Yet this often conflicts with an overwhelming and urgent need for teaching that effectively addresses increasingly diverse learning populations in ways that embrace and affirm students’ diverse identities, experiences, and interests. Multicultural education (Banks and Banks 2009; Nieto and Bode 2011; Sleeter and Grant 2007) and culturally-responsive teaching (Gay 2010; Villegas and Lucas 2002) have been advocated as approaches to education that promote and support strong teaching for diversity (Sleeter 2008b). Rationales for advocating multicultural education include: shifting demographics; discrepancies in achievement among different student demographics (“the achievement gap”); the need for countering legacies and systems of oppression such as assimilation, colonization, and cultural hegemony; and understanding multicultural education as a human right (Rios and Stanton 2011).

Only more progressive approaches to multicultural education that both affirm pluralism and work to promote social justice and change can address these reasons and improve education and life for all students (Sleeter and Grant 2007). Principles of social justice are central to these various approaches. Indeed, an increased emphasis on social justice

teacher education can be understood as emerging, in part, from the efforts in recent decades to include multicultural education in teacher education (McDonald and Zeichner 2009). This is especially visible in theories and approaches to multicultural education and culturally-responsive teaching that emphasize addressing social and institutional practices and structures that perpetuate injustice and inequity through activism to promote social change (Fransisco and Rios 2011). Building on these approaches that emphasize social action, social justice teacher education reflects perspectives in which “both celebrating diversity and attending to structural inequities are central themes” (McDonald and Zeichner 2009, 598). Understandings of justice related to these approaches transcend distributive conceptions of justice that emphasize equal distribution of resources to individuals (Rawls 1971) to focus awareness and attention on how broader social and institutional influences shape the opportunities, interactions, and experiences of individuals and groups (Young 1990). Such approaches emphasize that “what is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do, and be the person they want to be” (Robeyns 2005, 95).

Developing awareness and attention to these issues of justice and equity relies on a knowledge and understanding of students that extends well beyond the limited spaces of a classroom or school. Understanding of students’ experiences and lives beyond the classroom are vital to promote the knowledge and skills necessary to support responsive practices (Villegas and Lucas 2002). Teacher education programs do not always include consideration of aspects related to community in their programs, and existing research and literature does not often mention either the communities surrounding schools or the need to connect preservice teachers with them (Catapano and Huisman 2010; Koerner and Abdul-Tawwab 2006). Preservice teachers in teaching field placement experiences often spend little time in the communities surrounding their schools to understand how it might impact the identities and experiences of the children they will teach (Koerner and Abdul-Tawwab 2006). Most preservice teachers often “spend their entire teacher preparation program without experiencing a school setting beyond the ones that they are familiar with from their own K-12 experiences” (Catapano and Huisman 2010, 82). Yet they enter schools with beliefs about students, their families, and their communities (Koerner and Abdul-Tawwab 2006). As teachers, these beliefs inform their teaching and learning practices in ways that significantly impact the experiences and success of their students (Villegas and Lucas 2002). In order for teachers and students to be successful, teachers must learn about the communities and cultures of the students they teach (Ladson-Billings 2001). It is important that they understand and acknowledge the influences that shape students’ lives rather than perceiving the issues they face as community and family problems to be fixed (Ayers 1996).

Community-based field experiences can provide preservice teachers with opportunities to consider issues related to education, diversity, and equity in ways that promote and

support strong teaching for diversity (Sleeter 2008a). Sleeter (2000) asserts, “successful teachers are able to recognize and work with strengths and resources of the community. Doing this requires an ability to see other people’s communities in terms of their strengths and assets rather than their problems” (270). Such community-based learning is consistent with progressive multicultural and culturally-responsive approaches that emphasize the value of students’ identities and lived experiences, and that use them as resources to develop responsive teaching and learning practices.

However, research is limited as to how these experiences are interpreted by preservice teachers in relation to the goals of their teacher education programs (Catapano and Huisman 2010). Thoughtful planning and structuring is needed to promote awareness of cultural issues among students, rather than confirm and perpetuate existing stereotypical views. Sleeter (2008a) suggests that community-based learning experiences that are most beneficial to students’ growth are those that “are well-planned, linked directly to teacher education, and involve guided reflection” (565). She emphasizes the importance of providing preservice teachers with opportunities to learn about and discuss the history and current issues of a community before entering it, as well as to develop the skills such as active listening, careful observation, and interviewing necessary for investigation. Additionally, it is crucial that instructors serve as facilitators to guide students as they engage in making meaning of their experiences, and assist them in making connection between their learning and teaching.

Inquiry Context

One section of a semester-long three-credit course at a large public urban university located in a major city in a Southwest border state provided the context for this inquiry. The course was structured around a series of community-based field experiences that included visiting local community organizations, collaborating with students at a local high school for an interview project, and exploring the community surrounding both the high school and university. These field components provided students with opportunities for personal experiences that promoted understanding and appreciation of the connection between schools and communities, as well as the importance of teaching and learning knowledge and practices that acknowledge and affirm students’ diverse experiences, identities, and interests. Issues of justice and equity were embedded throughout the course, and students were encouraged to consider their implications for education with regard to both individuals as well as the greater sociopolitical context.

Inquiry centered on how three preservice teachers interpreted their community-based field experiences. By narratively inquiring (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), into participants’ lives, their community-based field experiences, and their later student teaching experiences, this inquiry considered how preservice teachers develop as they transition into teaching. Through adopting narrative understandings of experience, it explored how interpretations shaped participants’ personal practical knowledge (Connelly and

Clandinin 1988) and shifted their identities, their stories to live by, (Connelly and Clandinin 1999) as teachers. Following participants into their student teaching experiences provided additional insight into how the knowledge and understandings gained through their community-based and course experiences informed their practices as they transitioned to teaching. This approach provided layered and multiple perspectives on how community-based field experiences might encourage consideration of issues related to community, education, and diversity in ways that promote and support responsive teaching and learning practices. Field texts (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) in various forms drawn from multiple sources of the three participants and the researcher comprised the basis for this inquiry. These included archival texts from the course in the form of students’ autobiographical and reflective narratives, course syllabus and materials, and teaching journals, as well as texts from interactions with participants following the conclusion of the course, including: participant reflections, interview notes and transcripts, and a journal maintained by the researcher. Analysis of these texts focused on participants’ experiences and understandings related to education, community, diversity, and equity prior to entering the course, perspectives on community and education, community-based field and course experiences, and student teaching experiences. Exemplars from the field texts served as a basis for representing participants’ storied experiences and illuminating and illustrating themes from the inquiry. Analytic and interpretive tools included broadening and burrowing (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), restorying (Connelly and Clandinin 1990), and debriefing (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Throughout the inquiry, interim and research texts were shared with participants who acted as co-creators and co-constructors in meaning making. This promoted dialogue and reflection regarding participants’ perceptions and interpretations of their experiences alongside the researcher in an effort to engender resonance among participants in relation to representations in the research text.

All participants are referred to using pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity. Abby is a European American female. She was born and raised in the same state in which the university is located and has spent approximately half of her life living in a suburb west of the city, after moving from a suburb outside of another large city located in the same state. Hande is a Turkish female. She was born and raised in Turkey, and her husband’s career took them to Russia and the western U.S. prior to their move to the city, where they have been living for the past several years. Jackie is a European American female. She was born in a small Midwestern town and lived there through elementary school, when she moved with her family to a suburb south of the city.

Findings

Importance of Experience

Though interpretations and meaning making of these field experiences varied widely, reflecting the individual identities of participants, resonances also emerged among participants that provided insight into the valuation and impact of each. In our conversations, each participant expressed the importance of our community-based field experiences in enabling her to connect to issues and ideas related to community, education, and diversity in ways that solidified them and made them tangible. Abby expressed that it was primarily through these “real life” community-based field experiences that these issues became “real” and she “internalized” understandings related to them (interview excerpt). This was exemplified in Abby’s stories through her reflections on how factors such as school resources, nutrition, and testing could materially influence educational experiences, as well as in her emphasis on the importance of considering the unique identity and experiences of each student. Her teaching stories reflected how these understandings translated into practices that foregrounded student consideration, both personally and academically, as being a central aspect of teaching. Hande also reflected that our community-based field experiences provided opportunities that went beyond “dry information” that enabled her to “see, touch, and experience” for herself (interview excerpt). She interpreted them in ways that related to her previous experiences living and schooling in diverse contexts. This was reflected in her continued considerations of how identity and experience influence students’ learning, as well as how knowledge of these can be used as resources by teachers to effectively communicate and collaborate with students. From her stories of teaching, there seemed to be an increased focus on constructivist approaches to teaching and learning that emphasized student understandings and interests, as well as the importance of recognizing each student as an individual engaged in personal learning and development. Jackie similarly expressed how her community-based field experiences provided “hands-on experience” that she found more meaningful and relevant than other courses that focused primarily on theory (interview excerpt). This was reflected in how these experiences encouraged her to consider broader influences on student learning, as well as to connect to the communities we visited in ways that prompted her to view community as a resource. Her teaching stories demonstrated how she applied these understandings in her practice through learning about the local community and using her knowledge to connect with students, as well as to emphasize teaching and learning interactions based on discussion and collaboration. From their stories, it emerged how community-based field experiences enabled participants to connect to and internalize their learning in ways that they felt were distinct from other teacher education courses, and in ways that enabled them to translate their understandings into their teaching and learning practices.

While Abby, Hande, and Jackie all indicated that they derived meaning and value from these experiences, and how they shaped their knowledge related to community,

education, and diversity, these experiences were not equally educative. All participants discussed their experiences at a local high school and the communities surrounding it and the university at length in both their coursework and in conversations. That these were often what participants first referenced when discussing the course indicated that these were meaningful experiences that they continued to view as important in shaping their knowledge and understanding. Abby and Jackie both viewed their experiences in the community surrounding the university as a catalyst for rethinking their perspectives on the community and its residents in ways that also prompted them to consider broader sociopolitical contexts related to education and society. For Abby particularly, this experience seemed to promote critical reflection on how her own upbringing and socialization had resulted in biases that she recognized as detrimental and prompted her to become more conscious about recognizing and addressing personal dissonances regarding diversity. All participants expressed that they especially valued their experiences collaborating with local high school students, and each reflected how discussing educational issues with them had encouraged them to reconsider their own understandings, as well as prompted new considerations and insights related to education and diversity.

Responsive Teaching for Diversity and Equity

Abby, Hande, and Jackie, each interpreted their community-based field and course experiences in ways that added to and shifted their personal practical knowledge and stories to live by related to community, education, diversity, and equity. However, these changes were neither uniform nor pervasive, but occurred in unique and personal ways. This reflected the individualized understandings each had of these ideas, yet resonances emerged among these that provided insight into participants’ attitudes toward teaching for diversity. In the stories Abby, Hande, and Jackie told about their student teaching experiences that they felt reflected their learning from our course, there emerged a common emphasis on the importance of teaching and learning through caring relationships (Ayers 2004; Gay 2010; Noddings 2012). These relationships enabled students to acknowledge and address both academic and social needs in ways that supported personal growth. In this regard, each participant demonstrated aspects of culturally-responsive teaching related to learning about students (Villegas and Lucas 2002).

Abby shared how her experiences encouraged her to consider more carefully the unique identity and experience of each student. The stories she told of how her course experiences influenced her teaching were about building relationships with her students that acknowledged their need for a caring and empathetic teacher who encouraged them to share their life experiences, as well as how these relationships led to improved academic achievement. Hande expressed a desire to center her teaching on considerations of student understanding and interest, as well as to use her knowledge and relationships with individual students to promote their academic growth. However, her attempts to live this vision

of a caring and responsive educator were often dismissed as unachievable and largely unnecessary by her cooperating teacher, perhaps reflecting broader standardization trends and issues in education. Jackie used her knowledge of the community in which her school was located to connect with students, and also cultivated interactions with them that were based on mutually sharing and discussing experiences. These stories reflected the ways in which each participant acknowledged and addressed students' identities and experiences in responsive approaches to teaching and learning that reflected understandings that had emerged through their course experiences.

Additionally, Hande's and Jackie's stories reflected how this knowledge and care informed constructivist approaches to learning that built on student knowledge and interest (Sleeter 2008b; Villegas and Lucas 2002). In her stories of teaching, Hande appeared to emphasize the importance of promoting and supporting student understanding by approaching teaching and learning math through students' knowledge and perspectives. She continually encouraged students to share their reasoning, viewing their thought processes as the most important consideration in her teaching. Additionally, she sought to incorporate opportunities for students to move beyond rote learning to math that involved problem-based learning, and incorporated interdisciplinary connections with art to connect with students' interests. Jackie used her knowledge of students' lives and experiences to connect them with social studies concepts, and encouraged sharing and discussion of ideas as a basis for teaching and learning. These observations suggested both were shifting towards understandings of teachers as curriculum makers interested in co-constructing teaching and learning with their students (Craig and Ross 2008). This is necessary to and imbedded in response teaching because it acknowledges that curricula are neither static nor neutral, and acknowledges the active role both teachers and learners contribute to it (Ladson-Billings and Brown 2008). Emphasizing teachers as curriculum makers in teacher education can promote the development of strong teachers of diverse students. Community-based education can support this by emphasizing the importance of considering and incorporating knowledge of students' identities, experiences, and interests into approaches to teaching and learning, as well as provide teachers with resources for connecting education to students' lived experiences.

The stories shared by participants indicated that each desired to facilitate instruction at a generative model of learning that emphasizes collaboration among students and teachers (Wink 2010). However, there appeared to be less evidence of transformative models. Abby shared how she recognized the detrimental impact that stereotypical attitudes related to ethnicity and achievement had on students' images of themselves, as well as on overall classroom climate. She reflected that course experiences had prompted her to become more conscious of this and to encourage her own students' awareness as well. Jackie related how she hoped to use discussion and critical analysis to encourage students to move beyond assumptions based on outward appearances. Both shared how these emphases stemmed from community-

based field experiences that had encouraged them to rethink their own assumptions related to these issues.

Though these stories reflected greater recognition and attention to sociocultural awareness, these were limited to specific instances and more generalized concerns related to stereotypes and assumptions. While certainly encouraged, these practices did not reach transformative approaches to multicultural and culturally responsive teaching. This suggests a need to further extend opportunities to develop the knowledge and practices necessary for such approaches across courses and programs. These experiences affirm that teacher education oriented towards social justice cannot be limited to a single course or components across courses, but similar to multicultural and culturally-responsive teaching in schools, must be pervasive, and a philosophical basis for education (Sleeter, 2001). By more exposure to and different perspectives on ideas and issues related to teaching for diversity and equity, preservice teachers are more likely to develop the knowledge and commitment necessary to enact transformative teaching and learning. Community-based field experiences should be used to support infusion rather than additive approaches to teacher education for responsive teaching and should be part of a broader institutional focus on diversity and equity.

Supporting Meaningful Community-Based Field Experiences

The stories Abby, Hande, and Jackie told of and related to their experiences indicated how community-based learning can strengthen teacher education for preservice teachers to consider important ideas related to community, education, diversity, and equity (Sleeter, 2008a). Such experiences provide opportunities for promoting and developing strong teaching of diverse students. However, inclusion of field experiences alone is not enough to ensure this. This inquiry resonates with literature and research that indicates that sustained engagement, along with supportive theoretical learning and opportunities to analyze, discuss, and reflect on these experiences, strengthens the impact of community-based field experiences (Boyle-Baise, 2002, Sleeter, 2008a).

Each participant consistently referenced the structure and resources from the course as valuably supporting their interpretation and meaning making of their field experiences, reflecting that community-based field experiences could not be separated from broader course experiences. Resources such as course readings, websites, and media provided context to the field experiences as well as located them in a broader sociopolitical context that enabled connections that extended beyond the local. This appeared essential to offering ways to connect what were relatively limited experiences to larger issues. The incorporation of narrative and discussion provided opportunities for students to analyze and reflect on their personal experiences in ways that tied them to broader considerations, and participants expressed that these opportunities were valuable in enabling them to derive meaning from their experiences. Both class and field experiences contributed to the ways in which Abby, Hande, and Jackie added to and shifted their personal knowledge and stories to live by as teachers. The emphasis on the structure of

both field and course experiences highlights the importance of acknowledging that community-based education should be viewed as an ongoing and in-depth process that requires care, consideration, analysis, and reflection in order to facilitate experiences that promote new and critical understandings rather than stereotypes.

Experiences that provided greater opportunities for personal interaction with community members, such as those in the communities surrounding the university and a local high school, appeared to be viewed as most significant. These provided participants opportunities for direct dialog with community members that promoted a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and understanding. By touring the community surrounding the university with someone who lived there and was active in it, students were privileged to an insider perspective that could speak to the history and strengths of the community that enabled them to connect to it and view it as a resource. Similarly, dialoging with local students provided opportunities to directly share perspectives and experiences in ways that prompted new understandings and appreciation of students' identities and interests. Inquiry into what made these particular experiences memorable revealed the importance of facilitating community-based field experiences that promoted dialogue and reciprocal exchange among participants, and the ways in which these interactions made experiences meaningful.

Even within the constraints of a single course, it appeared that field experiences that positioned communities as resources and their members as knowledgeable, as well as provided opportunities for dialogue and discussion among participants could meaningfully impact understandings in ways that shaped teacher knowledge and practice. These findings reflect how more sustained and integrated approaches that focused on realistic, reflective, and reciprocal exchanges strengthened these community-based field experiences (Stachowski and Mahan 1998). Such emphases shifted understandings from savior mentalities towards communitarian and social change views (Boyle-Baise 2002), promoting experiences that moved beyond a service focus and provided opportunities for more in-depth learning.

Conclusion

Findings from this inquiry reflect how community-based education can serve as a basis for connecting classrooms and communities. While efforts towards strengthening social justice teacher education must go beyond course content and methods, these nevertheless remain a central component of many programs, and it is important to consider the potential for impact within the constraints of more traditional course formats. Each participant expressed that community-based field experiences shaped her teacher knowledge and identity in unique ways that went beyond traditional teacher education courses that did not offer opportunities to connect learning with personal experience. Often, these connections emerged directly related to the field experiences, such as how both local schools visited lacked full-time nurses prompted discussions related to education and equity, or how individual experiences shared by local high school students encouraged

consideration of multiple and varied issues related to education, diversity, and equity. It was only through these community-based field experiences that such localized and contextualized discussions became possible. Without the personal connection these experiences afforded, many of these perspectives and issues may have remained theoretical and intangible.

Through their community-based field experiences, Abby, Hande, and Jackie each expressed how they had shifted their knowledge and practices as teachers to reflect their understandings of the importance of students' identities and experiences beyond the classroom. For Abby, this meant personally connecting with students about lives and issues both inside and outside of school in ways that demonstrated care for them as individuals, as well as promoted an inclusive classroom community. Hande sought to use her knowledge of students' experiences and understandings to communicate and collaborate with them in ways that encouraged them to view their ideas and contributions as valuable, as well as to connect learning to personal and social interests. Jackie came to view community as a valuable resource in her teaching that prompted her to explore unfamiliar areas in an effort to better understand where her students came from and to use that knowledge to connect students with issues and one another. Each of these stories reflects how community-based field experiences encouraged participants to consider ways in which community and student knowledge could be transferred within the four walls of a classroom in ways that promoted and supported responsive teaching and learning practices.



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