

Strengthening the Case for Community-Based Learning in Teacher Education

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Abstract:

Knowledge of learners' assets beyond the traditional structure of school can provide preservice teachers with essential gateways to connecting learners with the content to be studied, and with forming beneficial social relationships that can enhance learning. This article describes ways that preservice teachers responded to community-based activities located in the home communities of their learners. Analysis of work samples, interviews, and observations indicated that revelations about the preservice teachers themselves were confronted, stereotypical beliefs about their learners' communities were challenged, and new discoveries about community's strengths were acknowledged. Evidence suggests that community cultural-immersion activities incorporated in teacher- preparation programs can not only help preservice teachers correct misperceptions about, but also build relationships with their learners that can potentially impact student achievement.

Keywords: equity education; community-based learning; teacher education

Article:

Cultural disconnections between teachers and their students have led, in some cases, to teachers and administrators communicating poorly with students. Particularly in high-poverty schools, lack of effective communication has translated to teachers teaching students with a deficit model in mind.

We have evidence from previous studies (i.e., Cabello & Burstein, 1995; Wiest, 1998; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996) that community- based experiences are effective in creating in middle-class preservice teachers an awareness of the cultural strengths of students and their families. However, such home/community experiences are not yet a part of most teacher education programs. Consequently, this article is designed to demonstrate that activities can be developed to engage preservice teachers in the home communities of their learners. Furthermore, such activities can encourage a change in preservice teachers' conceptions and dispositions about students and their families, which further substantiates the need for teacher educators to incorporate such practices as a routine part of teacher education programs.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Researchers remind us of what we already see—that White middle-class females will most likely teach our nation's growing number of native-born ethnic majority, ethnic minority, and immigrant children (Banks, 2000; Cabello & Burstein, 1995; Hodgkinson, 2002; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 1996). Therefore, we need to transform how we prepare our preservice teachers (Garibaldi, 1992). Those ways include understanding and learning about other cultures.

Three major reasons support the need for such an understanding. First, both in-service and preservice teachers hold stereotypic views of certain ethnic groups based on media representations, interpretations of history, and previously held beliefs passed down by family members and significant others (Gollnick & Chinn, 2001; McIntyre, 1997). For example, pre- service teachers of diverse learners in Terrill and Mark's (2000) study indicated that they were afraid to visit the homes of culturally diverse students, expected more discipline

problems, saw their students as victims of abuse, perceived that they were rarely gifted or talented, and believed that they lacked motivation and parental support.

Second, many in-service and preservice teachers may not consider themselves to be cultural beings, and do not often understand discrimination (Gay, 2001; King, 1991; Tatum, 1997; Wright, 2004). Therefore, they may not comprehend discriminatory practices as perceived by culturally diverse persons, chiefly because they have not explored their own ethnic identities (McIntyre, 1997). In her study, McIntyre discovered that because preservice teachers did not consider themselves to be as a significant part of a culture, they believed culturally diverse students were deficient. The preservice teachers' "innocent ignorance" or "conscious avoidance" (my terms) became a form of "dysconscious racism" (King, 1991), that may or may not be understood by those who do not have the power (Delpit, 1995).

Third, preservice teachers may engage in avoidance and choose to teach in less-challenging settings. In the Terrill and Mark (2000) study, preservice teachers were questioned about their preferences for student teaching placements. Many of them provided socially acceptable answers and stated that they would willingly teach in schools with high enrollments of children of color—in this case, Hispanic children. However, when these same preservice teachers realized that their preferences would determine placement, they recanted and requested placement in suburban schools where White students were in the majority.

In an effort to better prepare preservice teachers to teach culturally diverse student populations, multicultural education courses have been added to teacher education programs. They have included topics such as the recognition and acknowledgment of White privilege (Jordan & Rice, 1995, Lawrence & Bunche, 1996; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001; Pewewardy, 2005). These courses have been met, at times, with resistance by students (Brown, 2004), but changes in attitudes can occur (VanGunten & Martin, 2001).

Community-Based Learning

Community-based learning has also been advocated as a powerful way to teach preservice teachers about other cultures (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1998; Sleeter, 2000). In her review of the literature, Sleeter (2001) noted that there is value in cultural-immersion programs (those where preservice teachers live/actively participate in the communities in which they student teach and/or volunteer). Further, cultural-immersion experiences allow preservice teachers to view, experience, reflect upon, and change perspectives of how others respond to and make sense of their worlds (Cabello & Burstein, 1995; Wiest, 1998; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). Sleeter, however, recognized that convincing teacher educators to include such programs and activities in teacher-preparation programs is "difficult without a stronger research base" (p. 4).

It is not that we totally lack evidence in the effectiveness of community-based learning experiences. In fact, field experiences in culturally diverse schools have been cited as being most beneficial and having great potential to influence the choices of where preservice teachers ultimately desire to teach (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Colville-Hall, McDonald, & Smolen, 1995; Grant & Secada, 1990; LadsonBillings, 2000, 2001; Olmedo, 1997; Zeichner, 1996). Not only do these experiences allow pre-service teachers to acquire experience being with diverse learners in the classroom before and while they student teach, but they also provide opportunities to change ways of thinking about their learners. For instance, the prospective teachers in Olmedo's (1997) study found out that inner-city children did want to learn, that good teaching could take place, that there was diversity within diversity, and that purporting to be "colorblind" was disadvantageous to their teaching.

The purpose of this study is intended to strengthen that research base in two ways: (a) By demonstrating that carefully staged community experiences, structured developmentally and sequentially, can be incorporated in teacher education programs; and (b) by providing evidence that cultural-immersion experiences can challenge preservice teachers' preconceived beliefs about students who are very different from themselves.

WHAT WE DID

Context

The study took place at a southeastern public university that has approximately 14,300 students. The university is 1 of 14 campuses that house a state Teaching Fellows Program. This statewide program awards scholarship loans to outstanding high school seniors who are committed to teaching in K-12 state public schools after they graduate. In addition to acceptance of the scholarship loan, Teaching Fellows (TFs) have to attend weekly seminars every year during their tenure at the university, among other required activities. Each seminar has an established theme. The theme for the junior-year seminar is “Diversity.”

Development of the Community-Based Program for Preservice Teacher Education

When I first began to teach the junior-year seminar, I recognized that when the topic of diversity arose, TFs commonly said, “we hear diversity to death.” Their repeated statements caused me to question their conscious recognition of their places among diverse populations. Considering their responses and reactions to earlier activities, as well as mandates of accrediting bodies for teacher education candidate preparation, the TFs’ campus director and I decided to develop and implement a diversity- awareness program component of the teacher education program in the junior TF seminar. The three goals of the seminar became (a) to help TFs experience diversity or “otherness” themselves; (b) to provide sequentially connected experiences for cultural engagement that went beyond the schools where TFs were completing internships; and (c) to discover community/human assets in each community explored. Over the course of an academic year, the TFs’ director and I planned six activities. Note that the first four activities took place during the Fall semester; the last two activities took place during the Spring semester. The activities are as follows:

Written autobiography—The autobiography included important events that led up to the TFs’ decision to teach. This served as initial fact statements of themselves, the “factual me.” At least five written pages were required; however, students in this study turned in between 5 and 22 pages.

Bio-Poem—In contrast to the autobiography, this exercise allowed TFs to be “the me I want others to see.” A 10-line formula poetry strategy, the Bio-Poem, includes the following directions: Person’s First Name, Title, Four adjectives that describe the person, Lover of three or more things or ideas, Who believes (one or more ideas), Who wanted (three things), Who used (three things or methods), Who gave (three things), Who said (a quote), and Person’s Last Name.

Privilege Walk—The purpose of this identity-based sequenced activity was for students to discover the diversity within themselves, as well as to experience how preconceived notions and beliefs about people, particularly their friends, affected how they view them. Two examples of the directions for this “step forward–step back” activity are: “If there were people of color who worked in your household as servants, gardeners, etc., take one step forward” and “If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward.” Additionally, this activity gave definition to “the me I am but don’t want others to see.” More information about this activity can be found at http://www.msu.edu/~bailey22/Privilege_Exercise.htm.

Camera Safari—In groups of two or three, TFs were provided with a disposable camera, and when they visited one of their school feeder communities, one from which ethnic minority students were bussed or walked, they took pictures to answer 10 questions related to the community: something historical that you weren’t aware of; something that shows the natural beauty of the area; a scenic or panoramic view; something that shows the area is changing; something that could be used in a tourism brochure to advertise this part of the school community to entice people to come to the community; something that shows growth in the area; something that is “kid-friendly”; something that you or your group feels could be improved about the area; something that surprised you or your group about the area; and other scenes that you would like to add. These pictures were then presented by the groups and discussed with the entire class. This activity was originally created by an area leadership organization and was used with permission. We tailored it to better meet our needs.

Walking a Mile in Another's Shoes—This activity included real-life scenarios for TFs to enact that involved experiences in which their students' families might engage. Each student was given a scenario that included experiences such as using public transportation to apply for an hourly wage job, applying for subsidized childcare and subsidized housing, eating at a homeless shelter, applying for food stamps, taking a police ride, having physical disabilities, enrolling a child in school as a gay couple, being low income and seeking health care, attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, seeking services as an immigrant, and seeking resources while living in public housing. It is important to note here that I assigned TFs to each activity. Each written scenario included a set of reflective questions that related to it. Of course, we contacted officials of the agencies that the TFs would be visiting so that they (the officials) would not actually allocate the resources to them; however, we requested that TFs receive the same kind of treatment that actual applicants received. These activities were also used with permission from the leadership organization and adapted accordingly.

Debunking the Community—TFs were required to attend at least two different services at the predominant center of worship in their school community, make purchases and spend time in the community grocery store at least twice, but not in the same week, and participate in at least one recreational experience with community members, etc. TFs were also required to make a home visit, accompanied by their cooperating teacher, if possible, or make a telephone call to the parent or guardian of a struggling student with whom they had been working. Explicit instructions were given on how to make home visits. For 6 weeks, TFs participated in the school feeder community in which the "Camera Safari" took place, or they could choose the neighborhood or community from which their students came to complete these last two activities.

Sequencing the activities was imperative, for I purposely arranged the order of the activities so that the TFs would journey from self-interrogation within themselves and discovery to outside of themselves by engagement in the communities where their students lived.

Participants

Forty-two junior-level TFs participated in these six diversity activities. Thirty-seven were White (27 female, 10 male), four were African American (3 female, 1 male), and one was Puerto-Rican (female). One student was hearing impaired. More specifically, among these were prospective teachers from the following disciplines: birth-K (1), elementary (15), middle grades (2), and high school—English (2), math (1), social studies (6), biology (1). Among the class, K-12 disciplines were also represented: art (2), music (4), theatre (1), speech (2), psychology (1), health (2), and foreign language (2). Before this diversity seminar, none of the students had taken a course specifically directed toward diversity. However, diversity had been included as a topic in previous coursework.

Data Sources and Collection

I functioned as both seminar leader and as participant observer, recording notes immediately after discussing /processing each event throughout the year. Across the junior-year experience, I collected data from five writing sources: TFs' autobiographies (AB), Bio-Poems (BP), fast writes (FW)—written immediately after activities were completed, responses to reflection wheels completed after the "Privilege Walk" (PW), and anonymous "Blackboard reflections" of TFs' experiences (BB). My field notes (FN) and group visual representations of the activity, "Walking a Mile in Another's Shoes," (VR) that were shared and discussed with the class served as another source for data collection. One year later, at an end-of-year senior retreat, I was provided an opportunity for a follow-up group interview (GI) that was audiotaped and transcribed. TFs reflected globally on the activities of the junior year, and how the knowledge constructed from those activities might have affected their year-long senior field-based experience.

DATA ANALYSIS

I inductively analyzed these data in three phases. First, I analyzed data received from each writing source. For example, in the fast writes from the "Privilege Walk," I noted words and phrases such as "nervous," "fear," and "isolation," and counted the number of times such words or related words were mentioned. Second, I began to identify patterns across each of the data sources. For instance, safety and fear of the unknown—more specifi-

cally, how TFs felt they would be received— were written as concerns 21 times in their various writings. In the third phase of analysis, I began to generate categories that were formed from clusters of patterns. Examples of those emerging categories were emotions, fear, resistance, surprise, and transformation. Just as the activities were sequentially arranged and completed, the revelation of categories also emerged in a sequential fashion that seemed related to the activities experienced. Finally, I renamed the categories as themes. They became: (a) “I second that emotion” of privilege, (b) fear and resistance, (c) surprise patrol, and (d) “was blind but now I see”—transformations in the making. My field notes and data from the senior retreat assisted me in triangulating these data as TFs reiterated these themes when reflecting on their experiences. Based on the categories, I selected quotations that demonstrated the themes to provide illustrations. In the text that follows, these quotations are noted as to the TF, data source, and date. For example, the first citation (JEC, FN, 10/01) shows that the quote was taken from my (JEC) field notes (FN) dated October, 2001.

FINDINGS

The first two activities, the personal autobiography and the Bio-Poem, served as activities that allowed the preservice teachers to investigate the person they knew best—themselves. The four remaining activities were revealed by themes as students moved from intrapersonal to transformational perspectives.

As revealed through their autobiographies, all 42 TFs acknowledged that they were from suburban and rural backgrounds. They lived in two-parent and single-parent homes, and had endured the aftermath of divorce, transience, and survival on minimal amounts of money. Although TFs admitted experiencing family hardship at times, they also recognized the power to overcome difficult and even “impossible circumstances” through the strong work ethic of their parents. Overwhelmingly, 29 TFs described themselves as “being blessed” (AB, 8/01). Those “blessings” were also expressed in their Bio-Poems (BP, 9/01). Only 3 of the 42 students identified themselves ethnically.

Theme 1: “I Second That Emotion” of Privilege

All of the activities conjured up emotions in the TFs, particularly the “Privilege Walk.” This activity required that participants should stand shoulder to shoulder in a straight line without talking and take steps forward or backward in response to statements related to privilege or disadvantage. Thirty-five such directives were given and students moved accordingly, resulting in a wide distribution of positions across the room. I documented the emotional responses in my field notes.

Immediately after the completion of the activity, the group returned to the class to process the event. Blank stares confronted me; some students’ eyes could not meet mine. Water-glazed eyes filled. One student broke down in tears. (JEC, FN, 10/01)

In fast writes following this activity, students wrote that the “Privilege Walk” was “very cathartic,” made them “nervous,” “confused,” “isolated,” “distanced,” and that it “evoked bad memories” (PW, FW, 10/01). The activity aroused feelings of positionality, isolation, and marginalization. Three students echoed the thoughts of others in this way:

Consistently I felt nervous and confused throughout the privilege activity. As many of my classmates began to move ahead of me, I felt isolated and distanced by their lack of shared experiences. At times, as I stepped further and further back, I felt guilty and wished to be in the middle (not the front, as guilt would also result from extreme privilege). Ultimately I left sad and angry at the visual representation of my isolation and marginalization. Perhaps I feel cheated that some part of me results in such a multitude of negative experiences. (AN, FW, 10/01)

This activity was hard for me to participate in. . . . I must admit that this activity made me ashamed and I did not want others to know things about me. Even as I sit here now I feel like others think differently about me. I feel like the way I have built up has crumbled and I am not very comfortable with that. (JM, FW, 10/01)

The privilege activity made me feel upset and awkward. I was at the back of the group and felt bad with everyone looking at me. . . . Also, answering those questions brought up a lot of bad memories for me. (EW, FW 10/01)

Seminar members reflected on how different they were from others in the class. Some of those differences had not been anticipated; in fact, the person in the back of the group astounded everyone, including me. Field notes stated:

the *Town and Country* [name of an upscale fashion magazine] girl stood out noticeably like a lone ranger far from the others in the front or in the middle. She was actually standing in the back alone. When I looked at her, the tears began to stream down her face. She murmured that she did not want to remember what she had tried so hard to mask and forget. (JEC, FN, 10/01)

After I engaged them in dialogue about the definition of White privilege, its daily enactments, the possible responses to these enactments from those on the receiving end, and the lenses through which their students and their families may view them as teachers, “the entire class was left speechless after the revelation of ‘the me I am but don’t want others to see’.” (JEC, FN, 10/01)

Theme 2: Fear and Resistance

Thirty-seven students did not want to complete or were hesitant about completing the “Camera Safari” and “Walking a Mile in Another’s Shoes.” From excuses about not having the time to commit to such activities to being apprehensive about going into unfamiliar territory, TFs repeatedly mentioned their fear of the unknown. For one particular TF, the “Camera Safari” process was one that “I hated. Getting together with people I didn’t know, going somewhere I didn’t want to go seemed worthless” (DC, FW, 11/01). Safety remained a central issue. One TF was “very nervous about getting out of the car to talk to people. I was scared to walk down the street” (SO, FW, 11 /01). Another “thanked God I brought along my friend. I figured I’d be safe” (JH, FW, 11/01). Still other TFs were quite concerned about how they would be received in the communities that they visited. One voiced:

As we walked into the community to complete the project, I wondered what the people of the community would think of us—four White student teachers wandering around the local projects with a disposable camera. I wondered if we would be asked to leave or even approached by the community leader or police officer. I was not afraid to be there, but I was a little self-conscious about our conspicuousness. (AB1, BB, 11/01)

Three TFs echoed concern about how their group would be received by others in the community. However, fear did not stop participants from being inquisitive and wanting to know about community members’ lives.

Actually, going into ——— [name of public housing community] had me really scared. I remember myself and my group members discussing leaving on our internship tags so maybe people wouldn’t think we were being nosy and intrusive. I was scared of the people I’d come across and the reactions we would receive. (RM, BB, 11/01)

I felt entirely out of place. I walked the street with camera in hand. I was terrified that some half-drunk man would come stumbling out of his home yelling at me to get the Hell out of his neighborhood. Would the people be afraid of me? Would they feel different, like lab rats up for inspection? (AN, BB, 11/01)

I felt like an outsider. I felt dressed-up, even though I wasn’t. I felt a little uncomfortable, like an animal on edge in another’s turf. Would anyone ask me to leave or inquire about my reasons for taking the pictures? Would they be offended? There sure weren’t many people outside. I wanted to see what it was like inside the homes, but I was scared to knock on any doors. (MG, BB, 11/01)

In response to a “Walking a Mile in Another’s Shoes” scenario, one TF wrote that “I didn’t want to do the food stamps activity. . . . I didn’t know what to expect. While I was completing the activity I just kept thinking, I hope I don’t have to ever go through this” (AM, FW, 03/02). Other TFs who applied for subsidized housing did not understand why they were chosen for the activity. Fear and confusion consumed them for a while. Although the police ride excited three of four of the TFs assigned to do it, one did not want to take the excursion because “it would be a waste of my time, to be honest” (AB1, FW, 03/02). Going to the Department of Social Services (DSS) made another TF feel “frustrated.” It would be a “waste of my time and a waste of DSS’s time as well” (MG, VR, 03/02). Even to a TF of color, thinking about taking public transportation—riding the bus to apply for a job—was not exciting:

Buses to me have always been . . . icky . . . I didn’t want to get on. I didn’t want all those people staring at me. Applying for a job as a single mom in need of daycare wasn’t my idea of fun either. I had always had less patience for “those kinds of people.” (AB3, BB, 03/02)

Though begun with resistance, the two previous activities paved the way for students to participate in “Debunking the Community” with less fear and opposition. In class discussions, they related their increasing comfort in doing the assignment because they had been with their classrooms or tutored students for a longer period of time. In fact, 10 of the TFs talked with their tutees and students about community playgrounds, grocery stores, and churches in the area, and were invited to attend.

Theme 3: Surprise Patrol

Even with the aforementioned resistance and fear of initially beginning the activities, once students were engaged in the explorations, new experiences yielded surprise revelations from them. The residents and appearances of the communities astonished the TFs most, especially while they were doing the “Camera Safari” and “Debunking the Community.” Thirty-seven of 42 TFs were surprised at what they found in the communities in which they interacted. A neighborhood with a welcoming atmosphere was definitely not expected. One TF “was surprised by how friendly the people were to me. I expected them to shun me” (AT, FW, 11/01). Two others described their group’s experience:

As we walked through the neighborhood, we were welcomed by some of our students and their parents. Before getting too far into the project, we visited the main office of the housing community and got some information from the woman there, who was only too happy to tell us everything we wanted to know. (JG, FW, 11/01)

I was shocked at this point, at the sense of pride I felt swelling up in the community. The more time I spent there, the more it seemed that this was a good place to live. (AB2, FW, 11/01)

Once TFs were comfortable enough in the communities to “let my guard down” (JEC, FN, 11/01), they were surprised at “how cultural and religious these people are. They are anything but lazy” (JEC, FN, 11/01). They were also surprised to find historic sites near public housing and “attempts of the community to improve their environment” (JEC, FN, 11/01). Expecting media representations of public housing as unkempt and boisterous, one TF was “shocked by how small but neat the yards were” (JH1, FW, 11/01). “The neighborhood was pretty quiet even though there were several people out in the yards” (JH2, FW, 11/01). Nonetheless, the reality of school busing and the face of segregation were observed. One TF questioned, “Why are these children being bused so far from home to go to school? That is ridiculous! Why are they traveling so far?” (RM1, FW, 11/01). Another TF’s expectation was shattered by some students going one way and others going another:

I was definitely surprised about the area! I expected to see that stereotypical Mayberry, middle-class neighborhood. I did not expect to see a particular race of people dominating the area because of the highly diverse population of the school. When I saw White children get off a bus and exit to the right,

and all others exit to the left, I was stunned! I thought the fight against segregation had gone further than that. (AM, FW, 11/01)

Theme 4: “Was Blind but now I See”—Transformations in the Making

All of the activities allowed TFs to “step outside my comfort zone” (DM, FW, 04/02) and see and experience how “the other” lives. In class discussions, members shared that they feared the African American population most, and generally held the most negative stereotypical beliefs about them. These beliefs were chiefly based on media portrayals, both print and electronic, and word-of-mouth descriptions expressed in personal encounters. Twenty TFs thought that African American parents more often than White parents did not respond to academic inquiries from teachers or other school personnel concerning their children. After engaging in these activities, TFs shared discoveries about themselves, some of which shattered long-held predispositions. After making two telephone calls with her cooperating teacher to two students, one TF acknowledged that one parent requested advisement about managing her son’s school attendance. The other parent was on the defensive about the teacher calling regarding her son. Later, the parent apologized for her behavior. The cooperating teacher explicitly instructed the preservice teacher on how to make a telephone call to parents (JEC, FN, 04/09). From those telephone interactions, the TF learned that:

. . . Students’ backgrounds have a great deal to do with their habits. As teachers, we need to be the model for them through our actions. Students learn so much more by our actions than just what they hear us say. There is an endless amount of nonverbal communication present that teachers need to be aware of. We can’t give up on their parents, though, and think that they don’t care about their children. (KC, BB, 04/02)

The “Debunking the Community” activity encouraged some TFs to appreciate students’ backgrounds more. Home visits allowed TFs to personally learn more about students they were teaching. However, two TFs found out that their cooperating teachers refused to visit some of the neighborhoods of their students. Undaunted, the TFs were determined to complete their assignment so they went anyway. When they got lost, they asked the police patrolman for directions. He questioned their presence in the community and told them that “that is not a neighborhood for them to go in” (JG, CC/ JEC, FN, 04/02). The TFs were appalled at his reaction. They went anyway.

Ten TFs recognized that more vocal methods of praise are demonstrated by some religious denominations practiced by African Americans. Specifically, one TF linked this lively style of worship with schooling and noted that:

. . . I enjoyed joining in on the enthusiastic praises of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Students who attend these churches are accustomed to services that are more active and, therefore, they will become bored in classes that they do not feel a part of. Teachers should remember to keep the students involved and active to keep their attention. No matter what belief a person holds, whom they worship, or where and when, their background and attitudes are shaped by these beliefs. Teachers need to be aware of the strong attachments that students have to their houses of worship to understand where their students come from. (JH1, BB, 04/02)

Another recognized the sense of community that the church offers to the African American ethnic group.

At first I was SO frustrated that I had been sitting in a pew for three hours. How do these people do it every week and then some, I wondered? As we sang and hollered and clapped and HUGGED—I have never been hugged by so many strangers in my life—I realized that the church is really a place of safety for its members. See if you are struggling to make it and you are faced with classism and racism combined into so much struggle, you need a place to go where you can let go, feel energized, be loved, and be encouraged to keep on keepin’ on. And, this place needs to be SAFE—physically and

spiritually . . . And there is community amongst these people. This church is a place where people can express themselves without fear of ridicule and where they can truly BELONG. (AH, BB, 04/02)

Admitting those predispositions became a powerful step forward. The risk was worthwhile. Admitted one TF, “I took a risk going. I never would have gone unless required or if I knew someone in the vicinity. I learned I live behind a pale veil, being downtown and privileged” (TW, BB, 04/02). Two others discovered that:

The more time I spent there, the more it seemed that this was a good place to live. As I adopted this philosophy, I began to see the hurt of injustice— powers’ view of the community, windowless homes, and threatening signs from city government. I became sad and angry. Through this activity, I found that I have prejudices. As much as I try to value all people, I have deep-seeded prejudices. (JM2, BB, 04/02)

I found out that although I like to say that I am an openminded, unbiased individual I fell right into being judgmental and maybe even prejudiced. Such a strong word but it really opened up my eyes, and although hard to say about oneself but if you judge others on stereotypes—that’s what being prejudiced is. (JN, BB, 04/02)

Thirty-five TFs expressed a stronger commitment to understanding and helping their students. Among their reflections, one “found out that I CAN go wherever I need to go for the sake of my students. I can feel okay, if not comfortable, anywhere they are because I know it means so much to them that I came” (AT, BB, 04/02). Another gained new vision. “Now I see that I need to go a little further if I want to really know how my students live day to day. Going into their communities is a good way to do that” (CC, BB, 04/02).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that activities can be incorporated into teacher education to move preservice teachers from their assigned schools into the communities of their learners. In doing so, it provides more evidence that cultural-immersion experiences can challenge preservice teachers’ prior beliefs and stereotypes about the students they teach, their students’ families, and the locations of their home communities.

Through seminar requirements, TFs were able to engage in connected, sequential activities that first allowed them to learn (a) who they are, (b) who they want to appear to be, and (c) who they are but do not want others to see. The last three activities all involved cultural immersion through community-based experiences. Fear of the unknown led to strong resistance initially, which has been cited by other researchers (Brown, 2004; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). However, in this case, as the TFs engaged in the community-based activities, their perceptions about their students began to change. One year later at the senior retreat, one TF revealed:

I’m more sensitive to people’s environments. I taught at a “White flight” high school. I hear, “that’s so ghetto,” or “that’s so gay.” I take time to explain [to the class] what they’re really saying and that it is not acceptable to me. (JN, GI, 04/02)

In addition, there appears to be a case for the developmental sequencing of such activities. Allowing TFs to explore themselves first and then slowly engaging them in community activities they had never encountered before was effective. As a result, they saw themselves, their students, and their students’ families through a lens of strength instead of one filled with deficits.

Therefore, I recommend that other teacher educators include such activities in their courses. Three points are important. First, although the “Privilege Walk” was uncomfortable and even unsettling for some, completing this activity or a similar one was vital to prepare TFs for the community-based learning activities that followed. Second, I knew that the TFs would resist going into the communities of their learners with the “Camera Safari” activity; it became my greatest challenge (Gallavan, 2000). Therefore, for those groups most resistant and/or afraid, I accompanied them. I investigated and became familiar with the neighborhoods the TFs chose to visit.

After all, how could I ask my students to do something that I would not do myself! But doing the “Camera Safari” first made it easier to complete the “Debunking the Community” exercise. Except for the time commitment involved, I detected much less resistance in completing the final activity because, as one TF stated, “I’ve already been there. I am not afraid” (SO, BB 04/02). Third, I had no apprehensions about including the activities in their seminar course. In the days of forced integration of the South’s public schools, I often wondered why we, as students, had to be bussed into other neighborhoods. If we were brave enough to face such a challenge, then it is about time that others came to see the strengths of who we were, of who we are.

Finally, if institutions of teacher education want preservice teachers to teach all children, they should consider incorporating community-based learning into the formal preparation process. To do so would not only help preservice teachers know how to most effectively deliver their content because they know their students better, but it would also assist them in correcting misperceptions about and in building relationships with students, their families, and members of the greater school community.

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