

# “Labels Don’t Define Schools!”: Developing Justice-Oriented Teaching Dispositions through Service-Learning Opportunities

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## Abstract

This project presents findings from a study that combined service-learning with a university course on democracy and education, which is part of the liberal studies curriculum. The authors present a rationale for offering a service-learning partnership with a high-poverty, urban middle school in order to facilitate the development of justice-oriented teaching dispositions in first year university students who demonstrated a predilection for education-related academic majors (i.e., teaching, counseling, administration). Drawing on extant literature in the fields of justice-oriented teacher education and service-learning, the authors propose this model has potential for preparing preservice teachers for working in urban school settings. Through analysis of surveys and weekly reflections, the authors discuss how a liberal studies course with an embedded service-learning component with an emphasis on major issues in urban public school education has the potential to transform how first year university students think about schooling. Key findings indicate that upon completion of course readings, assignments, and service experience in a large urban middle school, many students began to develop justice-oriented dispositions, which is promising for an increasingly diverse socio-economic, ethnic, and language minority student population in the United States.

*Keywords:* service-learning, social justice, preservice teachers, teacher education.

As justice-oriented teacher educators, we strive to encourage behaviors and dispositions in pre-service teachers that might ensure they appreciate all students. We hope to engage pre-service teachers in learning experiences that engender an understanding of equity and facilitate the development of teaching dispositions that inspire justice-oriented teaching. Essentially, our mission becomes helping future teachers understand the educational playing field is not level and that there are forces beyond our control affecting how students experience schooling. Despite the limitations we know these teachers will face in an urban schooling environment (e.g., lack of resources, high poverty rates, lowered expectations, etc.), we challenge future teachers to be aware and critical of the social and political inequities that exist, to advocate for those students who are marginalized, and to

better understand the needs and lived experiences of students. As we propose a pedagogy and practice that facilitate the development of social justice among pre-service teachers, we are in good company (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1991; 1999; 2008; Cochran-Smith, Gleeson, & Mitchell, 2010; Gore, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Villegas, 2007; Zeichner, 1993).

We contend that this work is dispositional, demands a transformative understanding of students, schooling, and communities, and might be accomplished through intentional service-learning experiences in particular educational settings. Thus, in this paper, we develop a frame for how participants in a citizenship and education-focused service-learning course might develop a justice-oriented lens for viewing urban school settings and students.

## **Context**

This study was conducted in a large city in the southeastern United States. Over the past twenty years, this city has become a major player in the banking industry, which has increased the diversity of the population both financially and culturally. This economic shift significantly diversified the population, making it one of a handful of cities in the US with a majority-minority population with the African American, Hispanic, and Asian residents combining for more than 50% of the total population. This overall change in the city's population also altered the demographics of the public school system; currently, non-White groups combine for a 66% majority (Education First, 2013).

This partnership developed between a large southeastern urban university and Governor's Middle School (GMS), one of the largest Title I middle schools in the state. The student population at GMS is minority-majority with a student demographic of African American (70%), Hispanic (18%), White (6%), and Asian (5%). In 2013, less than 40% of students met proficiency requirements on End-of-Grade reading and math exams, and the teacher turnover rate was 28%, which is 9% higher than the district average and 12% higher than the state average.

Undergraduate students at a large, public university volunteered 30+ hours with a team of 90 sixth graders one day a week for two hours at GMS. Building on the work of Deering and Stanutz (1995) who found that "attitudes formed through experience tend to be more stable than those arrived at in other ways (p. 390)," the course instructor selected course readings on issues related to urban schooling and the practice of service-learning. The course focused on issues of social justice, service-learning, characteristics of urban schools, successful practices for engaging urban students, budgeting and planning in a school district, and how volunteers may play an important role in providing services to underserved populations of school-aged children.

In addition to tutoring and planning community-building activities with participating middle-school students for 12 weeks, service-learning participants (SLPs) engaged these students in conversations about issues that concerned them most about the world and developed opportunities to talk more about these concerns (i.e., bullying and poverty). They also discussed middle-school students' future interests,

which culminated in a field trip to the university campus, where they learned more about academic majors and minors and experienced college student life.

Initially, we hoped to learn more about how first year university students' perceptions of the urban public school environment were influenced by participation in a semester-long service-learning experience. However, as we collected data in the form of university student written reflections, we soon learned that these first year students were developing the types of cultural competence (Richardson & Villenas, 2000; Whipp, 2013) and dispositions associated with justice-oriented teaching (Cochran-Smith, 1991; 1999, 2009; Cochran-Smith, Shakman, & Barnatt, 2009; Westheimer & Suurtamm, (2009); Zeichner, 1993), which has been defined as an approach in teacher preparation that encourages practices for "social transformation in order to increase justice and equality in society" (Conklin, 2008 p. 655).

Our overall goal was to promote engagement among SLPs in support of achieving a more meaningful and purposeful learning experience and to assist in the development of an understanding of education and the concept of social justice.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Research suggests that pre-service educators are the very people who can make a difference in the world (Conklin, 2008), but without contextual understanding of the students they will teach one day, they cannot develop the types of dispositions necessary to be justice-oriented teachers of urban youth. In 2008, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defined teaching dispositions as:

the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors towards students, families, colleagues, and communities, and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional development. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice (p. 53).

NCATE (2008) mandates that all accredited teacher education programs develop a system for teaching and coaching teacher candidates on these dispositions in order to become educators who demonstrate understanding of the importance of

teaching across racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. These efforts to monitor pre-service teachers' dispositions support the theory (Schussler 2006; Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007; Burant, Chubbuck, & Whipp, 2007; and Villegas 2007) that these behaviors and values will result in the development of practices and beliefs that will facilitate learning for all students when pre-service teachers enter their own classrooms.

Villegas (2007) suggests that assessing teacher dispositions in relation to issues of social justice is necessary, but not enough; a key component in teacher education programs should be the inclusion of "a broad approach to education that aims to have all students reach high levels of learning and to prepare them all for active and full participation in a democracy" (p. 372).

The goals of this project closely align with Villegas's (2007) suggestions about how to prepare pre-service teachers for teaching in multicultural environments by helping them realize they will hold a powerful role in society and must learn how to challenge belief systems that may facilitate the marginalization of many groups of people. In order to prepare justice-oriented teachers, Villegas (2007) provides a list of dispositions that includes the following components: a "comprehensive grasp of content knowledge" (p. 372); responsiveness to diverse populations, which includes understanding the cultural factors that influence the ways in which children learn and communicate; "sophisticated pedagogical expertise" (p. 372) that engages learners from diverse backgrounds using their best learning styles and cultural understandings; "ability to diagnose sources of difficulty in students' learning and strengths on which to build instruction," strategies for developing inclusive classrooms that feel like communities; and a deep understanding of the barriers children from poor and minority backgrounds face in their learning environments. Furthermore, Villegas (2007) proposes that teacher educators must present opportunities early in teacher preparation programs for candidates to critically examine stereotypes and beliefs about classroom observations and interactions.

In this paper, we argue that a service-learning experience in an urban public school tied to a course titled Citizenship and Education has the potential to facilitate the development of some of these characteristics in first year college students in

ways that encourage a desire to do work with high needs populations in the future. Participants in this research study were second semester, first-year university students who had not declared a major; thus, we began this research hoping to help students develop dispositions that might encourage an interest in teaching or working with high needs populations. We suggest that engaging first year university students in a service-learning opportunity at Governor's Middle School<sup>ii</sup>, a large, high poverty, urban middle school serves as an introduction to the following components in Villegas's (2007) comprehensive list of teaching dispositions: responsiveness to diverse populations; engagement with learners from diverse backgrounds; development of initial understanding of learning styles and cultural understandings; strategies for developing inclusive classrooms that feel like communities; and an introduction to the barriers children from poor and minority backgrounds face in their learning environments.

### **Service-Learning and Teaching Dispositions**

According to The National and Community Service Trust Act (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2003), service-learning is a method of engaging students or other participants in learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community. Often, service-learning develops out of a partnership between K-12 schools and institutions of higher learning with the community; the overarching goal of service-learning is to facilitate the development of civic responsibility, while being integrated into and enriching the academic curriculum.

Service-learning has become increasingly popular in colleges and universities around the country as an experiential learning pedagogy that engages students in authentic ways to understand curriculum and to develop a more in-depth understanding of the communities in which they live. In fact, Learn and Serve America (2012) explains that service-learning has the potential to "engage students in the educational process by encouraging them to apply their learning to solve real-life problems. . . . And, by seeing the work they do benefit those around them, they become actively contributing citizens and community members" (para 1.). This pedagogical approach enables SLPs to use knowledge gained to make

better-informed decisions, have greater meaning for opinions, and become more versed on issues that exist outside the walls of the university.

### **Considerations for Appropriate Engagement.**

Despite the possible benefits of using a pedagogy that includes service-learning with university students, researchers caution against the ill-informed use of service-learning as a pedagogical practice (Butin, 2007; Eby, 1998; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Kahne and Westheimer (1996) point out that engaging in service-learning often promotes a variety of ideological, political, and social agendas if instructors and participants are not careful in their practice, which requires examination of the conditions that exist within society that create the need for service organizations, and in this case, the societal structures that limit the experiences of urban public school students.

Butin (2007) advises that those interested in developing service-learning partnerships must be weary of the types of programs that engage in the service just for the sake of providing a novel pedagogical approach. Like Kahne and Westheimer (1996), Butin (2003, 2005, 2007) recommends that university students engaged in service-learning must also be challenged to reconsider the “taken-for granted” (p. 179) quality of the structures and practices that, beforehand, seemed all too normal and understand a need for a more justice-oriented education. Hence, service-oriented learning moves beyond the status quo of putting students in disadvantaged communities, and becomes as a framework that critically questions, views, and analyzes how we think about society and our relationship with these social inequalities and barriers.

### **Developing Justice-Oriented Teachers**

Cochran-Smith (2009) theorizes that teacher education for social justice must include three integral concepts that underlie education: equitable learning opportunities for all; recognition and respect for all social/racial/cultural groups; and an acknowledgement of “tensions and contradictions” (p. 13) that exist concerning the concept of justice. The lessons students learn while participating in service-learning courses (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Darling-Hammond et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005) are similar to

those necessary to become justice-oriented teachers. Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Schofield, & Stephan, (2005) argue that to encourage equitable opportunities to learn, students need to interact with students from other racial, cultural, ethnic, and language groups to recognize and overcome bias. We contend that this introduction to context might assist in the development of justice-oriented teaching dispositions that countermand the deficit perspective of students from minority and impoverished backgrounds.

Much is said of the possibilities service-learning holds in improving the understandings and experiences of novice teachers. As an example, Wade (1995) surveyed a group of teachers-in-training and found several outcomes produced by service-learning. The majority of participants (82%) reported increased self-efficacy and almost 50% reported increased self-esteem. Among the service outcomes, the study revealed 67% of the candidates increased their knowledge of others (usually not like them). These findings are encouraging and would be considered worthwhile in most educational circles. Other research echoes Wade’s (1995) call to implement service in teacher training courses (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Vadeboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, & LeCompte, 1996; Coffey, 2010).

Throughout the literature, there are references to support the call for service in teacher education programs. Swick (1999) points out that for both teacher education candidates and experienced teachers, service-learning provides a structure for several important realizations: 1) S-L supports professional growth. Through it, teacher education candidates gain a more comprehensive understanding of the “persona” of being a teacher, including the significant influence of teachers in the lives of children and families (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). 2) S-L allows interaction with professional role models, such as community leaders and teacher leaders (Waterman, 1997), which fosters leadership skill development. 3) S-L engages teachers in roles that encourage them to re-think how they respond to the totality of the lives of children and families (Alt, 1997). 4) S-L helps teachers reflect on the importance of serving all children (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). Swick (1999) further argues that candidate teachers learn meaningful approaches through the experiential and reflective service-learning activities in which they participate.

## **Justice-Oriented Teaching Dispositions**

Villegas (2007) proposes that teacher dispositions are "tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs" (p. 73). Additionally, research suggests that dispositions closely align with one's personal beliefs and value systems (Burant et al., 2007; Villegas, 2007) and certain beliefs about specific knowledge (Welch, Pitts, Tenini, Kuenlen, & Wood, 2010). Borko et al., (2007) suggests dispositions can be simply described as "an individual's tendencies to act in a particular manner" and thus can be manifested as patterns of observable behaviors that become predictable (Borko et al., 2007). Schussler (2006) proposed that dispositions are not simply important constructs to possess, but are at the very core of "teachers' decisions to think and act."

In relation to justice-oriented teaching dispositions, Villegas (2007) suggests that personal beliefs and perspectives can be evidenced in actions within the classroom (i.e., demonstrating lowered academic expectations for poor and minority students). According to Villegas (2007), dispositions associated with a justice-oriented approach to teaching include a variety of practices that encourage and support all learners to take educational risks and develop an inclusive classroom community. Like Villegas (2007), we argue that observing and participating in a service experience in classrooms where pedagogical decision making such as using culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2000; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and recognizing and appreciating diversity (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Zeichner, 1993) have the potential to assist pre-service teachers in the development of justice-oriented teaching dispositions.

Other studies (Banks & Diem, 2008; Coffey, 2010, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Webster & Coffey, 2011) suggest service-learning experiences that engage pre-service teachers in working with diverse populations have the potential to help future educators develop a sense of cultural competence that does not always emerge with regular student teaching experiences. Hill-Jackson & Lewis (2011) recommend that teachers must learn to ask critical questions about the population they are teaching and understanding how to better value their lived experiences within the classroom.

Additionally, the most recent report of the

National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, and Public Agenda (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble, & Johnson, 2008) suggests that, "large numbers of new teachers describe themselves as distinctly underprepared for the challenges of dealing with the ethnic and racial diversity that they find in the classroom at a time when many schools have increasingly varied populations" (p. 11). Thus, there appears to be connections between service-learning and developing justice-oriented dispositions in teacher education. Engaging in service-learning opportunities with embedded opportunities for discussion and reflection with diverse populations, might have the potential to prepare pre-service teachers for working with students from diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds (Coffey, 2010; Webster & Coffey, 2011).

## **Challenging the Deficit Model—a Necessity for Justice-Oriented Teaching.**

There are concerns about the proper preparation of justice-oriented teachers; some (Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Gorski, 2006) multicultural teacher educators advise that occasionally efforts to engage pre-service teachers in the development of dispositions appropriate for teaching result in deficit model thinking. An example of this mindset is Payne's (1997) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, in which she provides a method for teachers, most of whom come from middle class backgrounds, to "fix" impoverished students' challenging behavior, underperformance on standardized tests and lack of understanding of the "hidden rules" (p. 11) of school. This type of deficit model thinking places the responsibility for change on the students, while other models (Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Gorski, 2006; Sato & Lensmire, 2009) challenge pre-service teachers to question how society often places the blame on poor and minority families instead of viewing their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and abilities as detrimental to society. The alternative to deficit model of thinking would require that teachers observe and reflect on how they interact with students living in poverty in order to break the cycle of judgment and lowered expectations. Pre- and in-service teachers should "be encouraged to focus instead on children's competence as cultural and intellectual people" (Sato & Lensmire, 2009 p. 366), while embracing a new and different set of cultural norms

that might benefit these students in the classroom. This focus on the use of students' culture often results in the implementation of culturally responsive teaching methods (Gay, 2000), which places an emphasis on understandings, skills, and realities of students. If done properly, service-learning provides the opportunity for future teachers to learn more about the community in which students and families live and to develop a more socially just and responsible approach to teaching (Wade, 2008), while observing these types of teaching.

### **Method**

This study used qualitative methods research design with the purpose of examining how first year university students enrolled in an education-focused service-learning course gained a better understanding of the issues encountered by urban public school students in the southeastern United States.

We selected the explanatory case study (Yin, 2009) as a method of inquiry and analytic approach in the hopes of being able to explicate the potential causal links between purposeful field experiences and developing a justice-oriented attitude about urban students. Because of the complexities that exist in urban schools and the unique relationship which exists between urban students and their environment, the case study method gives us the opportunity to test our theory that pre-service teachers might develop the type of cultural understanding necessary to appreciate urban school settings. Additionally, this method provides a more complex interpretation of patterns and themes that emerged across cases. In this study, there were nineteen participants who assisted in developing our conclusions about the relationship between service-learning in an urban school setting and the development of justice-oriented teaching dispositions.

### **Participants**

A convenience sample of nineteen first-year college students was initially involved in the study; however, two students withdrew from the class due to health issues. Of the remaining participants, six identified as White females, two as White males, six African American males, one African American female and two Latino females. The majority of participants were second semester freshmen; however, two students were graduating seniors. All but one participant were between the ages of 19- and 22-years-old

and were raised in the same state in which they attended college. The course required participating university students to perform 30 hours of service over sixteen weeks at one urban middle school, which was selected by the instructor based both on the proximity of the school to the university and on the principal's request for more college mentors and tutors for students. The relationship between the participating teachers and course instructor was developed in the previous year when the instructor initially selected this service site.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the possible role service-learning has in influencing students' choices about careers paths in education and to determine how first year college students' understandings of urban public schools might be affected by a semester-long service-learning experience in an urban middle school. We sought to answer the following questions:

1. How might first year university students' perspectives on public school education change as a result of participation in an education-based service-learning course and partnership?
2. How might a service-learning course with a focus on educational issues serve as a recruitment tool for teacher education programs?

### **Procedure**

Participants provided narrative data in the form of written service-learning dialogue journals during the service experience, which they shared with the instructor via the online course management system, Moodle. All journals were collected as regular course assignments. The following questions were the reflective journal prompts:

1. What are your initial impressions of Governor's Middle School? What did you learn from our visit today? What, specifically, did you notice about the students, teachers, and environment that you might not have experienced as a middle school student?
2. What did you find surprising or interesting about your research on the school system?

3. Think more about your interactions and observations of the teachers at Governor's Middle School. Who are these people and what do you see as their responsibilities as teachers? What surprised you about the expectations that are placed upon them for performance on a daily basis?
4. Through your readings, class discussions, and interactions with middle school students at Governor's Middle School, how have your views of education changed? More specifically, have any of your original thoughts about schooling, teachers, poverty, urban settings, children, administration changed during the time you have been in this course. If so, how have they changed and what specific event (reading, discussion, interaction) prompted that change? Think about the texts we have read thus far this semester: Dimitriadis (2007), Kozol (2007), and Ayers & Alexander-Turner, (2000).
5. Student self-evaluation on the learning, service, and process of the experience.

All dialogue journals were evaluated upon the conclusion of the course using the qualitative constant comparative analysis by Glaser & Strauss (1967). The authors examined qualitative data in an effort to identify emerging themes related to the guiding research questions. For the purposes of this study, we examined all five prompted reflection assignments for themes that related to development of both social justice-oriented dispositions as addressed by Villegas (2007), and an understanding of social justice through service. We used an inductive approach to analysis generating codes and themes across data sources and developing hypotheses. Whenever possible, we used participant language to develop codes and concepts, which were later compiled according to theme.

### **Findings**

While coding the data, which in this case was a series of course assigned journal entries, the research team noted the emergence of several themes that related to Villegas's (2007) framework: responsiveness to diverse populations, engagement of university students with learners of diverse backgrounds, development of initial understanding of their best learning styles and cultural understandings, strategies for

developing inclusive community-like classrooms, and a realization of the barriers that poor and minority children face in schools.

We used the participants' in vivo (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) comments to create the themes for the qualitative analysis. The major themes related to development of a social justice orientation to education that emerged from our coding analysis included: positive initial impressions of diverse student population, a heightened awareness of personal stereotypes and expectations of poor and urban students, and recognition of the importance of culturally relevant teaching practices and curriculum for all students. All of these concepts, identified by participants in this study closely relate to the behaviors identified by Villegas (2007) for developing social-justice oriented teaching dispositions.

### **Positive Initial Impressions of Diverse Student Population**

I felt like it was a nicely constructed school, with positive attitude and supporting staff who cared about the students. This visit today taught me that labels don't define a school. A lot of people have labeled this as a bad school, but I didn't see bad children present here. The thing I noticed about the students and teachers were the fact that they all had a connection. I seen the way the adult staff was able to connect with these kids and it was amazing. (Brian, 19, African American Male)

The quote above from Brian, embodies the initial impressions developed by (SLPs) of the service site. Throughout the semester, from the first class meeting to the final day we visited the middle school, SLPs reflected on their impressions and experiences and shared how their understandings developed over time. After our first visit, they were asked to reflect on their initial impressions of the school and how those were either reinforced or debunked by their observations. SLPs described their opinions of volunteering in an urban school setting, and many acknowledged their fear and associated urban schools with fighting, poverty, and crumbling buildings, all of which align with the images portrayed in popular television, news media, and movies. In fact, Amy, a 19-year-old White female wrote, "I had no idea what to expect and I pictured this Title I school to be a

school with the most troublesome children in it.”

SLPs also reflect on how the reality matched the reading for the course—*Studying Urban Youth Culture* (Dimitriadis, 2007). Fifty-five percent of all SLPs in the course used the word “positive” to describe the experience. SLPs mentioned that the principal appeared to genuinely care about the students; Eliza, a 19-year-old White female described his, “wonderful enthusiastic demeanor,” which set the tone for a positive environment. Additionally, SLPs noted that the entire staff and faculty were friendly and welcoming.

### **Heightened Awareness of Personal Stereotypes and Expectations of Poor and Urban Students**

Although the first reflection indicated positive first impressions, it also revealed negative stereotypes that SLPs had regarding impoverished schools and minority students. The sixth grade team with whom we were working was 90 percent African American, eight percent Latino and two percent White. Lily, a White female SLP admitted that she was expecting them to all have “attitudes and not really care that college students were there.” She confessed disbelief that “everyone there was so happy and so excited that we were there.” Similarly, Lynn, a first year White female SLP explained that she experienced culture shock that “every child in the school was Hispanic or African American” and said that she wanted to “help improve the education of these children and let them know that they have people here to help them no matter what it is about, school, home, friends anything.”

When describing early interactions with the students, SLPs admitted they were surprised that these sixth graders were “intelligent” and “knowledgeable.” Amy remarked, “I was blown away by these children and how pumped they are about their academics.”

Aaron, a 19-year-old African American male wrote:

. . . I still am highly upset that kids at Title I are automatically considered under achievers. This construal has to be torn down. Not only did the students I talked with show enthusiasm, they are teachable and have as much potential to be successful as the rest. (Journal 5, Aaron, 19, African American Male)

Soon after their first visit and delving into Kozol’s

(2007) *Letters to a young teacher*, SLPs began to identify the more disconcerting issues that this urban school was facing. In fact, the data revealed that there were 72 instances where SLPs mentioned a heightened awareness of the characteristics of urban schools, which were actually discussed in class while reading Kozol—the teachers looked extremely young, the large class sizes, and the majority African American, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino students. When the principal explained that this was a Title I school, the SLPs wrote they were surprised to learn that this meant that 78 percent of students were on free and reduced lunch.

In addition to evidence that suggests an overall heightened awareness of the conditions of urban public schools, there were 51 instances of recognition of deficit and 55 comments relating to the influence poverty has on educational experiences of students at the participating middle school. Brian wrote in Journal 1:

I think urban settings and poverty contribute to a lot of unsuccessfulness of students but it should not be labeled as the number one cause of failure in education...that is because I have met some students who look like they have a rough background due to their lack of clothing and hygiene but yet they still seemed focus in school.

Later in the semester, in Journal 5, Brian also wrote: I always felt that those parents’ unresponsiveness stemmed from a variety of personal reasons, and *Letters to a Young Teacher* (Kozol, 2007) confirmed that by stating some parents suffer a language barrier or embarrassment of their poverty keeps them from coming into schools and meeting with teachers.

In Journal 5, Aaron suggested, “The schools with better funding get better resources and faculty member, is this fair? I think in a perfect world all schools should receive equal amount of funding.”

Overwhelmingly, initial reflections from SLPs carried a tone of concern for the students with whom they would be working. While some SLPs noted that these middle school students did not seem prepared to be in the sixth grade, their comments revealed that they were beginning to understand how society views these students from the deficit perspective. In fact, Brian explained that he thought these



students showed promise despite their families' economic situations.

### **Recognition of Importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices and Curriculum for All Students**

. . . When I look up Title I schools the most shocking is the verbiage of students who are behind the curve academically in performance. This is simply not the case in a lot of instances; it does no good for our education system to be promoting this negative thinking. It can lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy in which there is a actual difference in quality of education depending on what district you live in. --Journal 5, Aaron

Journal entries from SLPs also indicated an increased understanding of the role and responsibility of teachers in urban schools; there were 52 instances where students mentioned the realities of teaching and learning and 64 comments about the "overwhelming" nature of teaching in general. Over the course of the semester, SLPs demonstrated a heightened awareness of the structures that prevent urban middle schools from providing an equitable education to all students. This new awareness can be conceived as the beginning stages of developing cultural competence.

SLPs in Citizenship and Education began to see classrooms, students, and teachers in a new light through their weekly observations of teaching. In Journal 3, Lisa, a 19-year-old Latina female wrote:

For the first time I got to see a teacher in her class give instruction to her students from a third point of view. Yes I have been a student my whole life but I was never in a class where all of the students were labeled "at risk" or behind on most subjects like those students.

Although they had been students for the majority of their lives, many of them experienced success in the educational system and had not been exposed to the realities of labeling or tracking.

Amy, a 19-year-old White female also explained that the experience "has opened my eyes personally to how difficult teaching can be and that it is not all smooth and easy."

In some instances, SLPs began to describe what

they eventually learned were examples of culturally responsive teaching practices. Kyra, an African American career woman and mom (who was returning to earn a bachelor's in English) noted:

If teachers are permitted to teach in a way that they deem most appropriate for their students as an individual, I think that test scores, reading levels, and mathematical skills in urban schools would increase drastically, and the knowledge that they gained would not be ephemeral- what they learned would be carried on to the next grade level and throughout their lives.

SLPs also recognized several necessary characteristics for being "effective" teachers of urban students and using culturally responsive teaching practices to support the learning needs of all students. There were 35 instances where SLPs mentioned the importance of setting high expectations and 35 instances where SLPs mentioned the need for advocacy for urban students. Amy, wrote:

Today taught me that the students at Governor's Middle should not be beat down or criticized based on their backgrounds and lack of financial security but instead built up to learn that these years are only the beginning of something great in their lives and that even though they might come from a poor family, they can do great things in this world.

Additionally, Lisa, a 19-year-old White female majoring in elementary education admitted,

Also, I thought about the disadvantageous position they were without their consent because of the decisions taken for them by adults who may or may not care about them. Those kids deserve the preparation they need to face the untamed chaos the real world has to offer them.

Some, SLPs began to criticize the system that labels ethnic and linguistic minority students and tracks them into lower level courses, which inevitably will determine their journey through the rest of the schooling experience. In Journal 5, Tony, a 22-year-old Black male summarizes his thoughts about the urban students

. . . I think that it's absurd to think that these children are unaware of the lowered bar

placed on their lives, but if there isn't anyone there to push them they will do what they need to do to 'get by'.

### **Discussion**

In this section, we discuss our findings from the data, relate it to the suggested dispositions described by Villegas (2007) for justice-oriented teaching, and suggest the potential field experiences and coursework with a service-learning component might have for helping university students develop a justice-oriented approach to teaching and viewing the community.

### **Service-Learning as an Introduction to the Needs and Experiences of Diverse Populations**

Although we do not suggest that SLPs engaged in this course and service experience developed the "comprehensive grasp of content knowledge" (p. 372) Villegas (2007) proposes is required for a justice-oriented approach to teaching, the data points to a development of a prerequisite understanding of the need and experiences of diverse populations, more specifically poor and minority youths. For some of these SLPs, this was a first experience being the minority in any setting; thus, the discomfort or "culture shock" they felt challenged them to re-consider their pre-conceived notions of poor and minority youths. Our analysis of the data from this qualitative study suggests a need for more work to be done in the "learning" part of a course like this so that students have more time prior to service to consider the implications of thinking in the deficit paradigm. In some cases, SLPs reported being surprised that poor and minority students were intelligent and excited about learning, which indicates negative stereotyping. In order for pre-service teachers or any engaged citizen, for that matter, to develop a socially-just view of the world, they must learn to challenge pre-conceived notions of people different than themselves (Cochran-Smith, Gleason, & Mitchell (2010); Villegas, 2007). Regardless of the career path selected by these SLPs, analysis of data suggests that this opportunity gave them access to a diverse population, which in turn, challenged their belief systems and encouraged them to think more about stereotypes with which they entered the course. These SLPs might have benefited from having read about the differences between the deficit model (Payne, 2006) and culturally

responsive teaching (Gay, 2000).

Although, SLP comments did not reflect the transformative thinking anticipated, responses proved to be an initial step in unraveling university students' conceptual understanding of the varying levels of access and opportunity (educationally and professionally) among diverse sixth grade students within this high poverty school.

By creating an open dialogue with SLPs through these journal entries, the instructor was able to see how their interpretations of observations and experiences were becoming less deficit-oriented and more justice-oriented. The conversations that developed around the experience promoted a contextual understanding of diverse students and schools rather than allowing personal judgments to overshadow initial interactions. By explicitly focusing on overcoming biases, SLPs can be given the opportunity to recognize and acknowledge the funds of knowledge with which each middle school student arrives (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

### **Orienting Perceptions of Community Necessary for Promoting Social Justice**

Villegas (2007) suggests that teachers need to understand the communities in which students live in order to develop an appreciation of the types of experiences that shape them. Hill-Jackson and Lewis (2011) propose that teacher candidates must engage in the community as "servants, not as saviors or spectators" (p. 303) in order to develop the ability to critically self-assess their own stereotypes and positionalities when working with people from different ethnic, language, cultural, or socio-economic backgrounds. During the initial journal responses, SLPs demonstrated that their notions of poor and minority youths were challenged, but some, like Lynn, still exhibited a 'white savior' (Giroux, 1997) mentality that people like her could potentially solve all these students' "problems". After several visits, the journal entries of these SLPs reveal that they began to develop an appreciation for both the middle school students with whom they were working and for the teachers who demonstrated care and concern for these children. Instead of blaming the parents for the way the students performed on tests and acted in schools, which was the case in the beginning of the service experience, SLPs began to realize that these

behaviors might be products of negative schooling experiences for the parents.

These early journal entries prompted the instructor to engage students in discussions about why these stereotypes and the mentality that they must be "saved" is detrimental to the entire profession of teaching and to the learners involved. SLPs need to confront their own privilege and benefit in a system where power structures are replicated and one in which their hierarchical notions of deficit thinking are conceived. Learning to confront ethnocentrism (Borden, 2007) is a central outcome of service-oriented education.

Upon realizing how the SLPs viewed the students with whom they were working, the instructor designed several reflective activities that challenged SLPs to analyze the lived experiences of these youths. SLPs did a virtual community mapping activity, whereby they documented the types of businesses, resources, and housing located within the school attendance zone. SLPs noticed the prevalence of low-income apartment homes, fast-food restaurants, discount food and clothing stores, and major highways that surrounded Governor's Middle School. They began to question why there were not more grocery stores or restaurants with healthier food options and why there were no neighborhoods within walking distance of the school, which was built in a business park.

The comments pulled from SLP reflections indicate that they began to recognize that these students did not grow up in suburban sub-divisions; this challenged their frames of reference. In fact, one student who had actually attended the school for a year commented on how much it had changed since he went there. It is important to note that Governor's Middle School was built in close proximity to a business park that houses one of the largest software companies in the world. Initially developed as a model for business/community/school partnerships, this relationship has since dissolved, leaving teachers and students without the valuable resources and community volunteers it once had.

Through conversations with middle school students, SLPs learned that these youths were highly aware of society's lowered expectations of them, which was a powerful lesson. Upon developing relationships with these students in a mentor-like capacity, the theme of advocacy emerged as SLPs began

planning their service project, which brought middle school students to the college environment so that they could become familiar with the opportunities of higher education.

We suggest that learning more about the community in which the school was located and having in-depth conversations with the middle school students enabled the SLPs to begin to develop the types of dispositions that lead to the creation of inclusive classrooms for those SLPs who enter the teaching profession. For those who do not choose to enter the teaching profession, they have still gained a sense of responsiveness to the needs and experiences, which Villegas (2007) recommends are essential components of a social-justice oriented perspective of society.

### **Recognition of Need for Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices**

Much has been written about the relationship between culturally responsive teaching and a social-justice orientation to teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Cochran-Smith, et al, (2010); Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 2007). Villegas explains that historically, factors such as social class, race, and ethnicity have proven to be pre-determinants of the experiences that students will have in schools and highlights the research that suggests students from low-income and racial/ethnic minority groups tend to score lower on achievement tests (Lee, 2002), experience a higher representation in special education classes (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000), are often tracked into lower academic courses (Lucas, 2001), repeat grades more often (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000), have higher drop-out rates (Swanson, 2003), and attend colleges and universities at much lower rates than their white counterparts (Havey & Anderson, 2005), which underscores the need for curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally responsive.

An analysis of the data from this study suggests that a service-learning experience, coupled with reflective journaling has the potential to make SLPs aware of culturally responsive teaching practices. In Journal three, Kyra suggests that if teachers were able to prepare lessons using what they know about their students instead of always teaching to a standardized test, then they might spark a greater interest in education for students. Further, SLPs recognized that although teachers were tough on some students,

they realized they were holding these students to high expectations and demonstrating that they cared for their educational success, which are components of culturally responsive teaching.

We posit that service-learning, if done well, has the potential to enable college students to see the world from a different perspective, one that sees the difference between a dominant educational model and one that is culturally responsive. An example of the possibilities associated with service-learning can be found in this quote from Lisa:

Prior to this experience I would hear by word of mouth or by the news about educational decisions that schools across the nation were making but I had never sat down and observed a classroom. It is silly to me how my views have become impacted by this experience because as student my whole life and I had never opened my eyes to see how discriminatory educational decisions could be on minority students in schools that have more adversities to face.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Early education courses often lack the intentional clinical experiences and critical discussions associated with developing teaching dispositions required for engendering a socially just perspective on education. As the majority of SLPs in this course were first-year college students, they still had a recent schooling experience with which to connect; however, because they mostly attended suburban or rural schools, they had very little context for understanding the specific issues of urban educational spaces. For many, the service site provided them the first opportunity to be a minority and to feel the disempowerment that comes with that experience. Additionally, getting to know these minority middle school students from impoverished backgrounds appears to have developed a sort of community between college students and middle school students, which enabled SLPs to better understand the needs and experiences of these adolescents.

We suggest that engaging first year students in a service-learning opportunity at a large, high poverty, urban middle school serves as an introduction to the following components in Villegas's (2007) dispositional framework: responsiveness to diverse popula-

tions; engagement of university students with learners from diverse backgrounds; development of initial understanding of best learning styles and cultural understandings; and an introduction to the barriers children from poor and minority backgrounds face in their learning environments.

Not only did SLPs have the opportunity to work with a diverse group of students, they learned more about the needs of people living in poverty from these students. Journal responses indicate that, based on this experience, these university students were more likely to major in human services fields like education, social work, nursing, etc. One even noted that because of this opportunity, he planned to major in Pre-Law and serve the needs of disenfranchised youth, which indicates that he realized his role in a democracy.

This project encouraged SLPs to think beyond the over-simplification of issues faced by impoverished urban students and challenged them to critically analyze how stereotypes of cultures different from their own may lead to deficit model teaching. While middle school students likely benefitted from mentoring and tutoring, SLPs, regardless of their decision to major in a human services related field, began to develop the types of dispositions associated with a social-justice-oriented way to view society. This initial demonstration of these types of dispositions aligns with Conklin's (2008) recommendation that teacher education programs must focus on the types of experiences that encourage practices for "social transformation in order to increase justice and equality in society" (p.655).

Essentially, using a justice-oriented approach promotes an appreciation for diversity (Liston & Zeichner, 1991; Zeichner & Gore, 1990), while also identifying the social structures that enable and perpetuate discrimination and inequity in society (McDonald & Zeichner, 2008). Regardless of their intended majors, upon conclusion of this semester-long experience, these SLPs demonstrated an understanding of the barriers faced by sixth graders in a high poverty, ethnically diverse, urban middle school setting and suggested that this experience opened their eyes to the realities of schooling that, for the most part, they had never before observed.

Although replication of this study would have to confirm this data, this experience serves as a potential model that for institutions that education is

more than a degree and that it is a transformative process (Schulman, 1987). Therefore, it is imperative that we prepare students for the role of justice-oriented citizens and potentially teachers who will engage and interact with individuals whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Banks, 2000). Unless pre-service teachers become aware of how their own preconceptions and affect their notion of education and learning, they are unlikely to be able to construct a new vision that includes a justice-oriented approach to teaching and advocacy for marginalized and oppressed student populations.

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### **Footnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Place and participant names have been changed to protect the integrity of the study.

<sup>ii</sup> Place and participant names have been changed to protect the integrity of the study