Reflections on Student Learning and Discernment in a Service-Learning Course

Stephanie Burrell Storms
Fairfield University

Patricia Calderwood
Fairfield University

Melissa Quan
Fairfield University

Abstract

This study focuses on short-term learning outcomes for university students across multiple sections of one pre-professional service-learning course, foregrounding their immediate experience within the complex ecology of the partnership. Findings inform ongoing adjustments to the partnership design, and influence design of developmental outcomes in a five year teacher education program in elementary and secondary education, with regard to reflective practice, sense of self in relation to diversity, civic and social awareness and engagement, and struggling with and reconciling emerging conceptions of social justice.

Keywords: teacher education; service-learning; social justice education

There is growing evidence that partnerships between universities and communities, whether merely transactional or sublimely transformational, offer significant benefits. For example, campus-community partnerships support student learning through community-based service-learning placements. Community groups are assisted in their endeavors, gaining access to multiple resources. Partnerships that are democratic and that allow for transformation facilitate university and community partner engagement in scholarship for the public good. Student learning becomes more authentic, and local community groups are supported in critical reflection and renewal. Together, universities and community partners can attend to issues-based endeavors, build political capital, share resources effectively, and move toward a shared, values-defined identity (Bringle, Clayton & Price, 2009; Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq & Morrison, 2010; Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2010).

In this paper, we discuss several short-term student outcomes from one service-learning course. The course is a signature element of a multi-year partnership between a New England urban school serving 1200 students from 800 families from a multilingual, multiethnic community in a low-income neighborhood, and its university neighbor, which attracts undergraduate and graduate students with little personal firsthand experience with racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity, or of poverty and its challenges. Our analysis focuses on short-term learning outcomes for the university students across multiple sections of one course, foregrounding their immediate experience within the complex ecology of the partnership. In addition to informing our ongoing adjustments to the partnership design, this examination informs programmatic design for longer-term learning outcomes within a five year teacher education program in elementary and secondary education, with regard to reflective practice, sense of self in relation to diversity, civic and social awareness and engagement, and struggling with and reconciling emerging conceptions of social justice.

Perspectives

As we make sense of the student learning, we draw on the notion of a "contact zone" (Pratt, 1991) a space where the intersections of interculturality prompt new understandings, personal and institutional transformations, and upon an anthropologically informed notion of liminality, a fluid movement

among past, current and future realities (Calderwood, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006) where multiple identities are tried on and enacted. This perspective supports our understanding of the reciprocity, transactional and transformational aspects of community engagement among partners (Clayton et al., 2010).

We use critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008, 2014a) as a lens to explore students learning and to assess the nature of our partnership. Service-learning courses or programs that incorporate a critical approach strive to develop authentic relationships with their partners based on "mutuality, respect, and trust" and expect all involved to "learn from and teach one another" (Mitchell, 2008). A critical service-learning approach helps students reflect on their own bias about diversity, encourages students to question and reflect on the causes of inequality in schools and communities, and promotes social action to work toward equity for all its citizens (Mitchell, 2008, 2014a; Lucas, 2005). These principles protect against reifying students' stereotypes of diverse social groups and reproducing the impact of social inequality that marginalized communities' experience (Wade, 2000).

Finally, the Jesuit ideology of service, "men and women for and with others" (Kolvenbach, 2000) has strongly influenced our pedagogical decisions with regard to the service-learning aspect of the course. Jesuit education posits that teaching and learning are relational; teachers and students are formed in and through their interactions with one another in community (Kolvenbach, 2000). Ignatian pedagogy is notably student-centered, constructivist, and activist, emphasizing a recursive learning process comprised of five interrelated elements (i.e., context, experience, reflection, action & evaluation). The attention to the whole learner, in her multiple *contexts*, is considered, so that the learning opportunities are appropriate and accessible. Learning activities are *experiential,* indicating that the learner is not passive, but an active constructor of her learning. Critical *reflection* on one's self development and one's learning experience is an element of the learning, resulting in consequent *action* to implement that learning or to push it further. *Evaluation* of the quality and value of the learning lays the groundwork for next steps in the learning process.

Service-learning, a form of experiential learning that integrates academic learning, purposeful community service, and critical reflection is a nat-

ural expression of this mission and has become an integral teaching practice in Jesuit higher education. Service-learning is recognized as a high-impact practice that maps to essential learning outcomes deemed necessary for preparing students for success in the twenty-first century such as civic engagement, social responsibility, intercultural knowledge and competence, and global learning. (AAC&U, 2007; 2011; Kuh, 2008). Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2001) conducted a review of the literature on service-learning outcomes over the course of seven years, from 1993 to 2000, and found that service-learning has demonstrated its potential for positive impact on students' academic, civic, and personal growth. Among many outcomes examined, service-learning was found to lead to an increased sense of personal efficacy, enhanced moral development, and the ability to solve complex problems (Eyler et al., 2001).

Pre-Professional Service-Learning Courses

There are many similarities between the values and practices of service-learning and teacher education, but also important distinctions to be made. For example, components of teacher education such as internships, student teaching and practicum often emphasize student learning while community outcomes are secondary; high quality service-learning, on the other hand, balances student learning with community outcomes and relationships. When service-learning partnerships and pre-professional field experiences are integrated, student learning outcomes for service-learning are influenced by expectations for professional development, and vice versa. This illustrates a tension that is ever present for us as teacher educators. For example, we and the students in our course confront and struggle with the nuances of their thickly integrated service and professional learning goals, making visible the liminality of their identities (Calderwood, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Hale, 2008; Lucas, 2005; Lund, Bragg, Kaipainen & Lee, 2014) as they serve the students in our partner school, engage in authentic teaching practices (tutoring elementary students to develop competence in reading, writing and math), and consider their potential roles as citizens and educators. We, too, find that the service and professional learning goals are challengingly fused, and have consequently situated this course as a gatekeeper to continued professional study, rather than as evidence of professional competence. This difference is signif-

icant, for we do not assess the professional quality of our students' literacies interventions as an element of their grades, but rather seek evidence of developing professional dispositions. The school partner keeps track of the children's progress, comparing it to reading assessment scores of children who do not learn with our students.

Outcomes in Service-Learning Courses

Brammer and Morton (2014) studied their students' understanding of their learning outcomes during a single semester service-learning course. As with our study, their students reported an increase in their knowledge of how to engage in civic advocacy and in their appreciation of expert knowledge and skills, expressed uncertainty about their own competence and noted that collaboration, sense of responsibility and effort were important, along with passion and a sense of empowerment (see Chart 1). Similarly, in their 2011 study, Jacobson, Oravecz, Falk and Osteen noted that civic responsibility and empowerment improved due to a service-learning experience, and they also found that students developed empathy, leadership skills and improved their approach to group work required as an element of service-learning.

Fitch, Steinke and Hudson (2013) suggested ways to improve students' short-term cognitive outcomes in a service-learning course through guided reflection, scaffolding for cognitive development by making incremental adjustments, providing critical feedback to students, and using critical reflection tools. They advocate a constructivist approach, utilizing active learning (problem based, service-learning, collaborative learning) to shift focus from teaching to student learning. Structuring the experience with more developmental scaffolding can assist students who are overwhelmed with the complexities of real time immersion in an authentic site and support students to take responsibility for their learning.

Tryon et al. (2008) explored some of the challenges of short-term service-learning scenarios (one-semester-long or briefer, with few hours of weekly service) for community partners, offering suggested solutions to address the needs of partnerships. Among other suggestions, they recommended establishing a stable partnership and project(s) that transcend a single semester, and allowing for successive waves of students to enter and exit the partner-

ship, picking up and leaving off their contributions in turn. It is encouraging to learn that Jones & Abes (2004), interviewing eight students who had completed a service-learning experience between two - four years prior to the interviews, found that these students reported growth in their open-mindedness about people, new ideas and experiences, changes in the ways that they related to others, and commitment to future plans that included service to others.

We have managed to partially address our own short-term challenges by scheduling the course during the same 2.5 hour time block each semester, keeping the same two professors as course instructors, and by careful calibration and recalibration of some of the logistics of the project to insure continuity for a full school year. Although the logistics of the tutoring sessions have been tweaked, the literacy lesson template has been reasonably predictable, and we are able to scaffold support for the undergraduates so that they understand the long-range objectives of the tutoring. One continuing challenge we face is how to incorporate up to forty-five undergraduates, two service-learning associates, a graduate assistant and their two professors into the Wednesday morning routines of the school without undue disruption. Our partners have been very accommodating, as they have come to believe that we are "for real" (Harrison & Clayton, 2012). As an aside to the focus of this paper, we have evidence that the learning outcomes for the elementary students are encouraging. Pre-and post data on the interventions show modest gains in reading proficiency (Storms & Calderwood, 2013). Collaboratively produced books written by the university and elementary students indicate that the children identify their own learning, and indicate positive attitudes toward learning in partnership, expectations of life-long learning, and insights into the role of pedagogy in learning.

Critical Service-Learning in Our Course

Critical service-learning has a social change orientation toward community engagement, works to foster authentic relationships/partnerships that are long-term, and redistributes power among key stakeholders involved in the service-learning project (Hatcher & Studer, 2014; Mitchell, 2014b). We prepare our students for this type of work by illustrating these principles in the classroom. First and foremost, to promote social change students must understand the structural inequality that has precipitated the need

for service. For example, one of the main texts in our course focuses on a landmark civil rights case in Connecticut known as *Sheff v. O'Neill*. Through this reading and others our students learn about how racial and class segregation can impede the ability of students (mainly black, Latino, and poor) to receive an equitable education in the state where they live and where the school we serve is located. We are committed to developing a reciprocal, long-term relationship with our partners that is authentic and mutually beneficial (Hatcher & Studer, 2014; Mitchell, 2014b). To foster this type of relationship in the classroom we engage in dialogue and critical reflection to help students increase their self-awareness about civic engagement, social justice, and teacher education (Mitchell, 2008). For example, we openly discuss the successes and challenges of developing our partnership, our experiences with racism and classism in schools, and how we have tried to take action to work for equity in schools. Being authentic with students and sharing our personal histories, we believe, develops trust and encourages them to share their journeys with the issues discussed in class. Knowledge is co-constructed and students take on the role of "teacher" to share power in our classroom. For example, on the first day of class students are asked to conduct research as a homework assignment and develop graphic organizers to learn background information about the city and school in which they engage in service. Afterward, they share their findings in class and discuss how their privilege and bias may have influenced the information shared. Also, our service-learning associates (i.e., undergraduate students assigned to each section of the course, available to assist us as needed with logistics, guided reflections and other activities) conduct exercises that promote critical reflection. We find that our students are especially engaged when "one of their own" is facilitating the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Inquiry

It is important to note that, at the outset, we had not deliberately designed this service-learning course as a research project. Over time, however, as we conferred about the quality of the course and about its contribution to an emerging partnership, we gradually systematized our end of semester reflective conversations into more focused inquiry. As participant observers, we engaged more deeply in critical self-study of our practice as engaged educators and began to unpack the underlying meanings of what our students wrote about their own learning, attitudes and perspectives. We embraced grounded theory as an inquiry tool, and leaned upon the principles of action research, a collaborative and participatory approach to engaged community-based research that highlights the importance of incorporating the voices of those who are affected by the issue examined or who can affect the outcome of the process to empower and enhance the lives of individual persons and communities (Storms, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Stringer, 2008).

We are convinced that the embedding of the service-learning into what, to our students, seemed like authentic professional work, influenced faculty teaching, learning outcomes for the undergraduates, outcomes for our community partners, and for the partnership overall. We are mindful of caveats against claiming long-term outcomes for university students engaged in a single, short-term service-learning experience (Lund et al., 2014; Tryon et al., 2008). Given the caveats, narrowing and holding our focus steady, just for the moment, we provide description and interpretation of what we see as early moments in a set of developmental trajectories for our students.

Using critical service-learning as a lens provided us with a framework (i.e., social change orientation, redistribution of power, authentic relationships) to analyze students papers and discussion posts to identify when they did or did not see themselves as change agents (during the project or in the future), critically analyze or question how power and privilege played a role in structural inequality, and discuss their relationships with the elementary students they tutored as transactional rather than a potentially transformational one for both.

The university-community partnership is a good fit. Our mid-sized Jesuit comprehensive university on the northeast coast of the USA has committed to enacting its mission to pursue social justice in numerous ways, including the partnership in which ED 200, our service-learning course, is embedded. Our school partner, XX School, has committed deeply to the partnership as well, in its hiring of teaching interns and new teachers, in its welcoming of our service-learning students from across the university, and in particular, pre-professional students in nursing and education.

Storms & Calderwood, the teaching faculty, are both teacher educators who share a commitment to participatory work with local communities. Author 1 is a middle class African American woman who identifies as both a teacher educator and social justice educator who holds the belief that through education, collaboration, and action, citizens can reduce structural inequality and increase equity in schools. Author 2 is a middle class white woman bidding goodbye to her middle years, a tenured full professor and teacher educator who has enthusiastically embraced the participatory, reciprocal and activist nature of community engagement and service-learning as essential components of the professional preparation of teachers. Author 3, is an energetic white woman and director of the Center for Faith and Public Life (which facilitates service-learning) at our university, deeply committed to community engaged partnerships as the enactment of our university's Jesuit mission of outreach and advocacy for social justice. In that role, Author 3 was approached by a contact in the city in which our partner school is located, subsequently making the match for the ED 200 course and our partnership school. Since that time, she has been instrumental in nurturing the partnership. In particular, she has made it possible for a service-learning associate (i.e., a trained undergraduate student) to participate in and assist with logistics for every section of ED 200. She has also provided a graduate assistant to be onsite at the partner school for 20 hours a week during the academic year. The graduate assistant during the time of this study worked closely with the school's literacy and math coaches to organize and facilitate the tutoring sessions. Our students were all sophomore, junior or senior undergraduates in the College of Arts & Sciences (CAS), representing majors across all disciplines in the arts and sciences. About 75% were declared educational studies minors. None yet had been admitted to the teacher education program, which has additional enrollment requirements to that of the educational studies minor. Our student profile approximately mirrored the collective CAS student profile with regard to race/ethnicity (approximately 75% White, 11% Hispanic, 8% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2.5% African American/Black) and SES, but was far more dramatically skewed as to gender (Fairfield University Institutional Research, 2014). Two-thirds of the students in CAS were women, but women outnumbered men in our classes at a ratio of 9-1. About 1/3 of the students had previously taken a service-learning course.

Our service-learning associates overwhelmingly have been white women, with one Hispanic and one white male among the group. All of the service-learning associates had previously taken one or more service-learning courses, including ours.

Data

As of June 2013, the course had cumulatively enrolled approximately 180 undergraduates. As an element of our collaborative approach to the self-study of our teaching practices, we engaged in ongoing reflective conversation about the course's daily events (planned and spontaneous) with our service-learning associates and partner school teachers. A variety of data sources specific to student learning, attitudes and perspectives include course syllabi and required readings, service-learning surveys (see Figure 1), student self-assessments of their experiences in service-learning reflections led by the service-learning associates, approximately 400 discussion postings, and 100 final exam papers. Additionally, informal interviews and conversations with partner school faculty, and partner school-based data such as tutoring protocols and materials, pre and post testing of Developmental Reading Assessment scores, reading levels, and math proficiency that were generated for a larger study of the partnership within which the course is nested provide triangulation of data. The data is generated by 100 students. Taken together, the data for five sections of the course offer an integrated perspective on the overall outcomes of the partnership, providing background and context for the detailed information.

For this study, we draw primarily upon students' anonymously completed reflective surveys (tabulated by the Center for Faith and Public Life), 400 responses to discussion post prompts (each student, on average provided 4 discussion posts), and final exams generated by the 100 students who completed the 5 sections of the course that were included within the university-school partnership between September 2011 and June 2013. The faculty-generated discussion posts were tailored to generate critical reflection and personal discernment, drawing upon the experiences of the students in each section of the course, necessarily reflecting unique events (such as Hurricane Sandy, when the school became a community shelter for a week) and presentations by school personnel (such as a security guard and the director of the Family Resource Center).

The patterns and themes discussed later in this paper were apparent during end of semester reviews of the students' writings, appearing with consistency across the sections. The discussion posts and final reflective paper for each student were read as sets, so that consistencies, inconsistencies, and development of perspectives could be seen over time for each student. The final exam format and content was consistent across all five sections of the course, consisting of this prompt, provided to the students within the course syllabus on the first day of class, along with an explicit rubric that included additional guidance for providing grounded examples to support their reflection:

> *Please consider all your experiences, readings, and assignments for this course in order to answer the following questions:*
>
> *1. What have you learned about teaching, learning and schooling?*
>
> > *a. What is the difference between education and schooling?*
> >
> > *b. Who is a teacher?*
> >
> > *c. Who is a learner?*
>
> *2. What has disconcerted or surprised you?*
>
> *3. What has reinforced your previous understandings of schooling, learning and teaching?*
>
> o *What has changed your previous understandings of schooling, learning and teaching?*
>
> o *What do you still need to learn?*
>
> o *What is (are) your potential role(s) as a teacher, learner or other worker in education and/or schooling? Why?*

About the Course

The course supports undergraduate students to understand the social construction of teaching and learning. Through participant observation, service-learning, reflections, assigned readings, class discussions and collaboration, students contribute positively to student learning, understand the complexities of schooling from multiple insider perspectives, and engage in the process of discerning whether to pursue a career in education. Open to all undergraduates at the university, regardless of their professional aspirations, the course is also a required course in a five-year teacher certification program. Although many of the students indicate interest in exploring

education as a career, the service-learning component of the course also holds appeal for students with career aspirations other than teaching. Service-learning immersions are scheduled during class time, accounting for almost half of the course hours. The special subject coaches in the school designed small group tutoring sessions in literacy and math for first, second and fifth graders, and coached our undergraduates to tutor the children. We accompany our students during their service time at the school, observing and coaching them as part of our instruction.

Guided online discussion and reflective final papers allow the students to document and critically reflect on their learning during the course (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006; Polin & Keene, 2010; Sturgill & Motley, 2014). Although we assume that our students seek to please us, their professors, by providing responses that are "correct" enough to earn high grades, the requirement to use their own experiences (and to mine their feelings about these experiences) interrupts some of the mimicry or parroting (Clayton and Ash, 2004) that might otherwise occur. As participant observers, we discovered that sharing the service-learning experience as engaged partners with our students provides insights beyond those available from written reflections only. Our authenticity as engaged citizens and agents for social justice is laid open to our students' observations and critique, and we build in opportunity to model the recursive process of situated, caring, reflective learning and practice that comprise Ignatian pedagogy. Our approach builds trust as well, so that students, for the most part, believe us when we promise that we are invested in the course as an opportunity for them to honestly explore schooling, education and their own possible trajectories without worry that they would be penalized for their honesty. Further, the public aspect of the online discussions, particularly when we joined one or more of the discussions, encouraged students to evoke a sense of common engagement in authentic activity, and to explore their own contributions to the commons in their posts. Examples of discussion post prompts and responses are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Sample Discussion Prompts and Responses

Discussion Prompt, 12/16/2012.	MC: ... I think that it is extremely important for a school and a community to help out when the other finds itself in need. Local communities and the schools that are within these communities both play huge roles in people's everyday lives. I think that they are interdependent and necessarily linked. If one is having a hard time, the other one is probably struggling too. The fact that () stepped up and made a real effort to aid its community after a crisis shows how special it is. This school is clearly doing much more than educating many of the community's children. The faculty genuinely care about their students and their families and really want them to know that they are always there for them, in good times and in bad. They are setting an amazing example to their students about the value of helping others...
This storm (Hurricane Sandy) has given us an opportunity to think deeply about community and schools. (The) school is now operating as a shelter for its' local community who have been displaced by the storm. Please share your thoughts about the school/community relationships, and why/how they are important.	
Discussion Prompt, 3/24/2012.	KN: I think that "belong" would be the wrong word to describe how I feel at the () school. The teachers, students, faculty, and administration welcome us and give us a sense of purpose and importance. While we are welcomed, it is evident that we are still guests in this community ... I view my role as an undergraduate student playing a small part in the learning process of these children. It's an opportunity for the students to receive personalized attention to help them in their literacy skills. As we know, the Bridgeport school districts have a difficult time getting the resources they need, and we have become important to their system. The most rewarding part of this role is seeing my students understand something and watching the light click on in their head. Also, the fact that they remember me and are excited to see me makes me happy. The impact that you can have on children even when you are spending one day a week with them can be great.
Do you think that you "belong" at (the) school? If so, tell me what you see as your role? What has been the most rewarding part of your role, and what has been the most challenging?	

As a final exam, we ask our students to reflect on their learning and experiences in the course to answer these questions: What have you learned about teaching, learning and schooling? What is (are) your potential role(s) as a teacher, learner or other worker in education and/or schooling? As with the guided discussion posts, students are encouraged to be forthright rather than "right" in their responses to the prompts. Asking the students to tell us not only what they learned, but to locate this learning's influence on their own identity is more than a subtle difference from the more typical final exam our undergraduates encounter. It explicitly positions our students as agents in their learning, and requires them to blend theory and practice in their reflections and self-assessments. The students come to understand that their self-assessment and critique of their own learning, and their expectations for how this learning is shaping their trajectories, is highly valued and important in this course, given the primacy of the final exam (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Clayton & Ash, 2004; Hale, 2008).

Findings

The evidence tells a complicated tale. It illuminates the nature of our partnership as democratic, deeply reciprocal, and transformative. For example, the relationships between the university and elementary students transformed how they visualized their beckoning futures. Several of the undergrads expressed commitment to teaching in high needs urban schools, and the elementary students saw themselves on a college-prep trajectory. Our partnership space now includes the school children and their teachers within the campus community. The math coach teaches a course for elementary education certification candidates, the principal of the school is on the teacher education advisory board, and the young students have spent days exploring our campus. School administrators & faculty have partnered with university faculty and students on conference presentations about the impacts of the partnership, contributing to the larger community-engaged research community.

The service-learning significantly influenced teaching design and implementation. For example, the service-learning became the living "text" of the course, necessitating changes in the course design, scheduling, assignments, learning activities, and assessments. The locale of teaching expanded as faculty ventured off-campus and moved into the school with the undergraduates, and as online discussions became essential teaching tools (Clayton & Ash, 2004).

Learning outcomes for the university students indicate patterns in their identity and values development, influenced significantly by their service-learning immersion. As many of the university students initially believed the local community was dangerous, and its children indifferent to learning, the service-learning experience, fraught with perceived risk, prompted the university students into extended critical reflection. As they struggled to teach, the university students constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed their understandings of self and the elementary students as they developed a more nuanced understanding of teaching and learning, of human diversity, and of the value of community engagement. For some, a career as an educator grew in appeal, and a vocation to work in communities and with students like those in the school was expressed. Some students, however, ended the experience knowing that this was not their path.

Rather than a single, fairly straightforward progression toward decreased stereotyping and prejudice reduction mediated by the service-learning, we find several developmental paths in interplay among our undergraduates. The lens of critical service-learning demonstrates that the service-learning in some cases reinforced, and in others decreased, stereotyping and prejudice. Our students regularly *romanticized* complex issues related to social justice and the realities of urban schools, softening some elements, heightening others so as to build a more comprehensible, manageable and appealing storyline for their engagement and learning. The romanticization, a development of a storyline with heroic protagonists, operated as cooperation and as resistance with regard to students' understanding of their experience, new threshold concepts about civic engagement and responsibility, social justice, and their sense of self in relation to others. It shaded their attainment of course goals.

Meyer and Land (2005) discuss how the assimilation of threshold concepts can be challenging. Threshold concepts, or conceptual gateways to new, likely transformative ways of understanding or interpreting prior and emerging knowledge, are suggested to be irreversible, and can be generative of a change in perspective or stance (Harrison & Clayton, 2012). Engaging with the conceptual development triggered by reflection on a threshold concept (for example, social justice in education) thrusts our ED 200 student into the liminal space (Cook-Sather, 2006)

within which she is, at least, student, teacher, and citizen, and within which she struggles to hold and reconcile the alignments and contradictions among the multiplicity of meanings generated by tumbling of identities and responsibilities. As Cook-Sather and Alter note, understanding "liminality as a threshold between and among clearly established roles at which one can linger, from which one can depart, and to which one can return (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011, p. 38)," implies that liminality holds an openness of resolution, where crossing a conceptual threshold limits one's options. This limitation, the irreversibility of the newly acquired concepts, might provoke a rejection of approaching or considering in depth the threshold concept rather than an embrace. Oversimplification or making a threshold concept more digestible or palatable might trigger misconceptions that will resist remediation (Harrison & Clayton, 2012; Meyer & Shanahan, 2003).

Service-learning mediated how students experienced and processed relevant threshold concepts. Some conceptions were reinforced through selective critique and analysis of only confirming evidence, coupled with disregard of disconfirming evidence. Other conceptions changed through critical reflection about all evidence. Reinforcement or decrease in prejudice and stereotyping resulted.

Frequently, our students employed a tension-relieving cognitive strategy to deal with challenging threshold concepts: a *romanticization* of both confirming and disconfirming evidence. We see that the experience either supported previous conceptions, contributing to an intensified romanticized framework, or was romanticized and consequently their end of term reflections identified the school, and their experiences, as exceptions that stood apart, neither disconfirming nor affirming previous conceptualizations. For example, one student writes in her fall 2012 discussion post (following Hurricane Sandy) that

> *. . . The fact that (the school) stepped up and made a real effort to aid its community after a crisis shows how special it is. This school is clearly doing much more than educating many of the community's children. The faculty genuinely care about their students and their families and really want them to know that they are always there for them, in good times and in bad. They are setting an amazing example to their students about the value of helping others . . . "*

The faculty of the school are heroic to this undergraduate, "*always there*". This is special to her, and sets the school and its people apart from other school communities. By the end of the term, this student had made a commitment to teacher education, so that she too could be like those teachers, and work in a school community that was always there for its students. When we meet her again in her capstone course, we hopefully will find that her romantic notions have continued to develop a disposition for advocacy and agency, and that she has developed knowledge and skills enough to weather the challenges of such an educator's stance.

Civic Awareness and Engagement as an Educator and Learner

All students identified general civic responsibilities of the school and its community. Most (90%) of these noted their specific and generally modest civic engagement as tutors. Over 60% expressed commitment to becoming educators. Approximately 20% students committed to pursuing an alternate role as a school professional. 15% of the students committed to civic engagement in non-school based careers. About 5 percent of students expressed uncertainty about their commitment to civic engagement.

In her 2008 essay, Knefelkamp outlined four essential characteristics of civic identity. She notes that it is developed through engagement with a diverse population, connected to "complex intellectual and ethical development, is holistic, requiring " integration of critical thinking and the capacity for empathy" and requires " multiple experiences and opportunities for learning. These experiences should include time to reflect with others, active discussion about choices and their possible consequences, and imaginative exercises that help students commit to a better and more just society (p.2)." In the following example, one of our students reflects:

> *This class has taught me that even in times when I feel most confident in what I am teaching someone else I am always learning from others as well. Just as this is so it is important to recognize that other individuals are learning from who I am simultaneously. Therefore I have the potential to make a change in another person's life just through my very actions. This thought is both comforting and intimidating. Realizing that I am constantly giving and taking from my interactions is really interesting and gives*

> *me motivation to be as impactful as possible in my words and actions. Though I will not be pursuing elementary education I have a deep desire to be of aid to those who are dealing with the injustices that are associated with the education system. I hope to perhaps look into school counseling in the future for high school students and to offer guidance during years that are integral to students' futures. I have recently started looking into programs that work with students in inner city schools to give them exposure to college. I think it is really important that students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds have mentors that can guide them through processes that they perhaps cannot manage on their own. I know that if I did not have spectacular guidance counselors and mentors in high school I would not have been as motivated to be as involved in the college process as I was. I see myself as an informed member of society one who understands the injustices that come with one of the greatest justices of all—the right to an education. With this said I hope to take this newfound appreciation for education with me wherever I go in life and value a right that I once took for granted* (Final paper, spring 2013).

Another of our students, romanticizing the glow of civic engagement, reflects:

> *. . . Being at (school name) gave me more of an open mind of how schools are run here in the United States. I became an even prouder American that day when I saw that even in a low-income city like (city name) can have a beautiful school such as this one, so that every child can have the same opportunity to learn and grow. The reflections, readings, and classes have also broadened my view, but I feel like the work I put into this class at (the school) will make a real difference in someone's life and that is a priceless gift. It was a great feeling to be finally giving back to a different community besides my own at home* (Final paper, fall 2011).

In another example of a dawning sense of civic engagement as responsibility, an undergraduate *romanticizes as noble* and accepts the burden of the teacher's civic responsibilities, noting that she can only "*be the best teacher and role model to my students as I can be."* She explains:

> *. . . Teachers practice the role of the architect and construction worker of society yet don't get the recognition for it. This is something teachers have to live with and don't necessarily mind since our job is to*

do the best we can to generate a positive impact on the future of our society. I am completely sure that I want to attempt to make a difference in many students' lives in one way or another, regardless of how the school system is constructed. I, as well as teachers I encountered in (the school), will do my best to set aside all of the burdens that the school system in the United States carries and just be the best teacher and role model to my students as I can be (Discussion post, spring, 2012).

Struggling with Social Justice: Emerging Conceptions

Mitchell (2014a), analyzing students' sense-making of social justice issues as they engaged in a service-learning experience, identified signature elements of the process of sense-making of social justice employed (grounded in identity; retrospective; referencing; contradiction; social; driven by plausibility). The design of our course was influenced by critical service-learning tenets (Mitchell, 2008), and required our students to process and make sense of their service-learning experiences by including each of those elements into their course assignments, and most of our students' work demonstrated that they did engage at least some of the critical thinking strategies as they reflected. But as Mitchell notes, scaffolding their sense-making processes did not always bring forth a more complex or more sophisticated understanding of the social justice issues they encountered, for a variety of reasons. Resistance to contradictions, or discomfort with ambiguity, for example, may have cut short the recursive balancing of self-awareness, engagement with other voices (peers, faculty, schoolchildren, staff, scholars . . .), weighing and testing the fit of their prior experiences and conceptions with the service-learning encounters. Similarly, misunderstanding or misrecognition may have won out over accuracy of understanding. Many of our students were inexperienced in sustained critical reflection of their own actions in the world, and within the short space of a semester, we could not read, in their words or other actions, growth in their critical reasoning skills. It is a challenge for us to admit that the implicit single-minded march along the long-term developmental trajectory we desire for our students in this course (to become by the end of their teacher education program reflective practitioners and change agents for equity and social justice through education) may not be securely in place for

some of our students by the end of this introductory course. There are multiple trajectories, as we are learning from our students.

We learned from some of our undergraduates that they believed that this school and community were exempt from social injustice, utopian in contrast to the city's other schools, in a circular reasoning approach that noted that this school was unique because it was special. Others of our students romanticized that the school and community likely overcame social injustice through a process of struggle and triumphant transformation, often citing the 1989 *Sheff v. O'Neill* lawsuit as the vehicle of the transformation (Eaton, 2009). For many, this school and community interrupted social injustice for the K-8 students offering a refuge from social injustice, while not quite overcoming it. This last conceptualization most closely matches the reality of the school's organization and standing, and of its continuing struggle to escape the label of a failing school (as measured by its standardized test scores). For example, one student reflects:

> *In the beginning of the semester, I was surprised by the unpleasant facts about poverty in (city name). That being said, I was also surprised by the beautiful facilities of (school name). The school was much nicer than the public middle school of my small suburban town. In addition to the facilities, I was very surprised by the overall atmosphere of the school. Teachers and staff members were beyond pleasant and the students I worked with were excited to learn each Wednesday. Eaton describes urban schools as "racially isolated" or "disadvantaged". Although this did not seem to be the case because with (the school name), it was easy to get this feeling whenever we discussed (city name) schools during class* (Final paper, fall 2012).

In a second example, another student, again romanticizing the exceptionality of the school writes:

> *The main difference between my previous understandings of schooling, learning and teaching and the changes made to these understandings is that of the concern of educational inequality throughout America. (school name) is a prevalent example of a school that gives children an opportunity for an education with teachers who immensely care for the better of their futures, an education they would not receive elsewhere. However, there are still troubling statistics that counteract with this ideal situation of a school,*

as living in a poor area may lead to children not performing to their best. Students' home lives were often discussed in class, and even with my students. One of my students, Kevin, says that his mom does not practice reading with him because she does not have time and gets home late from working. I compared this information with his DRA level and reading abilities, and noticed that he could be performing much better if he had the chance to utilize his skills at home (Final paper, Spring, 2013).

The Emergence of Reflective Practice

Some undergraduates reflected with sophistication about their own practices, noting choices and/or strategies they employed. Most (95%) of these reflections included a sense of their responsibility for the children's learning. Of these, a subset (approximately 75%) was critically reflective, weaving awareness of their personal civic responsibility and/or social justice commitment into their critical reflections of their pedagogical work. Some tutors (about 25%) recounted their work with the children, but did not critically reflect on their own practice. Their reflections noted the influence of children's behaviors on the learning environment. A subset of these (40%, or about 25 students) noted resistant actions of the children as due to inadequate civic responsibility of the families and community. Other students (45-50% or between 35-40 students) noted that social inequities contributed to the "failings" or characteristics of the families and community. As one of the students contextualized her connections with the children and the school community, she recounts:

> *A good teacher provides an education rather than schooling, as she makes sure her students learn the material by creating an environment where it is possible. I experienced this at (school name). I know how to say and spell all the site (sic) words, but this does not necessarily mean that I am able to educate my students on how to spell and say them. If I only provided my students with schooling I would have just had them write down the site words over and over again. Instead I provided them with an education as I found ways where the individuals would best learn the words. This has reinforced my belief that a teacher must show her students she cares about their success. When I showed my students at (the school) that I cared, they worked harder to learn the information. I could tell they wanted to please me because they would always look at my facial expression*

after they spelled out one of the site words. (Final paper, fall 2012)

We see a young woman struggle with her emerging sense of self as teacher, as she confesses:

> *. . . When I was younger the thought of being a teacher almost sickened me. A teacher in my eyes was not someone I would get along with. Even those that I did favor, I knew I did not want to be like that when I was older. I wondered, why would someone want to torture kids like this? I then took a turn and realized that I wanted to be a teacher to prove other students wrong, that learning was actually an enjoyable experience. The aggressive and cross teachers would then encourage me even more to be a teacher. I wanted to be the exception. Ever since that realization I have had this image of a being beloved teacher in my future. Little did I realize, being a teacher is just as difficult as being a student. Reality gave me a nice slap in the face as I struggled to teach the students at (the school). Instead of being super teacher, my goal then became to just be someone these students could look up to and learn from. Reflecting back on my own schooling experience, I knew that having someone to talk to was just as important as anything else. Especially with the high rate of bullying, and now cyber bullying, I know that a school can even be a dangerous place for young, impressionable minds . . .* (Final paper, fall 2011)

Implications

Our study's limitations are multiple, but instructive for further research. For example, the course under study was designed to be the introductory course in our educational studies minor, which includes students moving forward within that minor toward teaching certification in a five-year preparation program. As such, the course served a gatekeeping function for admission to teacher education. Unlike most introductory courses, including those in teacher education, the primary outcome for our course was dispositional rather than content knowledge or skills development. The content knowledge that students developed was secondary to the development of their attitudes and values. Thus, what we were able to assess in our students is not easily comparable to introductory course outcomes in any discipline, including teacher education. We designed a course for ourselves and our candidates that allowed us to prioritize the service-learning experience and privilege it as the

primary, essential learning experience of the course. We eschewed testing and other anxiety-provoking exhibitions of student competence, reduced required readings and other assignments, and mostly asked the students to make the best sense they could of what they were learning about learning and teaching and, most importantly, about their own development as citizens and possible educators. This is a difficult design to replicate because of its divergence in design and outcomes from more traditional teacher education introductory courses.

The course unintentionally prompted much anxiety among our students, who almost unanimously have told us in their evaluations that they were not sufficiently prepared to tutor (Tice & Nelson, 2015). They, quite accurately, noted that they did not have a deep or sound understanding of the pedagogies used in literacy and math instruction, and were very concerned that they consequently were not doing a good job of teaching. We do not know how this pervasive anxiety about being effective tutors affected their learning outcomes, although we are very pleased that they wanted to perform their tutoring tasks conscientiously and well. We also are not certain about how a series of traumatic events in fall 2012 (Hurricane Sandy, an extensive norovirus outbreak on campus, the school-based murders in nearby Newtown) impacted teacher education and/or service-learning course learning outcomes for our students, as they occurred in rapid sequence in a concentrated period of time.

Another limitation is the tangling of service-learning and professional learning. Even though the learning outcomes we had identified for the students were traits of the dispositional learning outcome of the teacher education program (candidates would become reflective educators who think and act as change agents for equity and social justice through education), we had not designed them as service-learning outcomes. It was fortuitous that the teacher education learning outcomes were compatible with those for service-learning, but we haven't yet learned if the differences between service-learning outcomes and teacher education outcomes work in tandem or against each other, even though we have been able to note some positive synergistic outcomes, noted below. Further, we did not include community partners in the design of the course in which the service-learning was embedded; consequently, the service-learning that was available was designed more to accommodate university scheduling convenience than the needs of our partners. We would not recommend this degree of self-interest to others considering a similar endeavor.

This last limitation has been addressed as the partnership has continued. The service-learning immersion has acquired a more authentic feel and a more partner-friendly fit. We find ourselves in the partner school at 8 am rather than 10:30am, and our students are integrated into the morning literacies block in 13 different classrooms. This serves our partner well. It is a closer fit to teacher education professional fieldwork, particularly in its situated activity in everyday learning routines. Because we are not assessing professional knowledge and skills, our students and we still have the luxury of attending to the dispositional outcomes at the intersection of service-learning and teacher preparation.

Our study does offer a gentle nuance to critical service-learning theory and practice, pointing to the influence of romanticization of experience and liminal identity (Calderwood, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011) as a factor intersecting with, and sometimes derailing, the critical reflection (Clayton & Ash, 2004; both Mitchell, 2014 a and b) we aim to support as process and outcome of undergraduate learning. Examination of the resonance of this finding in other settings, school-based or not, would offer additional insights as to its generalizability as a phenomenon, and could prompt changes in how, across universities, we conceptualize our organization of and expectations for service-learning outcomes for undergraduates. For example, acknowledging that single semester experiences might not be as effective as a long-term cohort-based engagement within a single partnership, may lead to extended faculty and student service-learning commitments, multi-semester courses, or other cutting-edge innovations in university curricula that are anchored in a well-tended, long-term community partnership. For prospective teachers and their faculty, especially, the long-term partnership commitment can not only build individual capacity, but can build institutional capacity in partnership with local, high needs, school based partners to improve educational outcomes for marginalized students and communities.

The synergy of toggling teacher preparation and service-learning together can be quite valuable. For

example, service-learning outcomes can be enhanced when a teacher preparation focus adds a critical lens about schooling, teaching and learning to the service experience. Teacher candidates and non-teacher candidates experience theory as lived practice through engagement in authentic teaching that becomes an element of the school's assessment and intervention schema, magnifying the significance of their service. We caution that preconceptions about educational inequities, and of education as a civic and social responsibility, may be reified as well as transformed as a consequence of the struggle to reconcile the challenging threshold concepts about educational equity and inequities that underlie a commitment to work in schools.

Similarly, service-learning partnerships can radicalize, transform or offer multiple trajectories for teacher preparation as the reflective focus shifts from becoming competent (in literacy or math teaching) toward critical engagement with social justice and civic engagement. Shared engagement, rather than solo performance, is foregrounded, and as the college students discern multiple possible roles for themselves that may not include classroom teaching.

Overall, we believe the benefits of the service-learning immersion for pre-service teachers outweigh the challenges described above. However, we know the course will continue to change based on the needs of all key stakeholders involved. This a challenge we are willing to take; especially if we can develop pre-service teachers who view themselves as reflective practitioners and change agents for social justice through education.

Communications regarding this article should be directed to Stephanie Storms at sstorms@fairfield.edu, Patricia Calderwood at pcalderwood@fairfield.edu, or Melissa Quan at mquan@fairfield.edu.

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Figure 1. Student responses to selected service learning survey questions for ED 200

- This service-learning course has increased my knowledge about the needs of diverse populations
- This service-learning course has made me more sensitive to diverse populations than ever before.
- This course made me realize that it is very important that I help others through my lifetime.
- In this course I felt I made a worthwhile contribution to the community partner organization.
- The community service was relevant to the academic course materials and content.