

# The Benefits for Teacher Educators Participating in Pure Service-Learning

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the benefits realized when three teacher educators take on the role of “learner” in a “pure” service-learning context, where service to communities comprises the intellectual core of the course (Heffernan, 2001). The “pure” service-learning model focused on teaching a community writing workshop for students ranging from ages 12 to 21. The qualitative study interweaves the narratives of our personal journeys and evidence of professional impacts to demonstrate how engaging in service-learning as learners (rather than just facilitating the service-learning experience as faculty members) equipped us to support authentic and effective instruction of pre-service teachers. Collaborative autoethnographic methods were used to examine our daily journaling throughout the workshop experience and to analyze the transcripts of the self-conducted, post-workshop focus group. Critical examination of our experiences as learners in a service-learning experience enabled us to find our authentic teacher voices in a non-traditional classroom setting, inspired us to better prepare our pre-service teachers for civic engagement, and enabled us to make meaningful connections in our MotherScholar lives—a merging of our identities and responsibilities that span our personal and professional spaces.

*Keywords:* “pure” service-learning, pre-service teachers, MotherScholar, multicultural

## **Introduction**

Service-Learning is practiced at over 1,100 universities and by over two million college students nation-wide (Campus Compact, 2013). A growing number of case studies and anecdotal reports showcase the benefits of including service-learning in teacher education programs as part of or even in place of traditional field experiences (Cone, 2012; James & Iverson, 2009; Stringfellow & Edmonds-Behrend, 2013). This type of experiential education when paired with critical multiculturalism pedagogy

can potentially dispel stereotypes about student/community populations (O’Grady, 2000) and provide pre-service teachers with real relationships from which to build more accurate understanding of diversity and from which to construct more socially just practices for their future interactions with their community of learners (Baldwin, Buchanan, Rudisill, 2007).

Adding service-learning to pre-service teachers’ array of clinical field experiences enables teacher education programs to try out course knowledge

in the field in an authentic, innovative way that will “enable our graduates to address issues of change and to acquire a deep knowledge of what is needed to educate all of the children who will enter their classrooms” (AACTE, 2013, p. 3). Participating in purposefully partnered service-learning activities within the local community also can provide pre-service teachers the opportunity to construct meaning of their course content knowledge in a social setting (Dewey, 1938) through authentic practice of developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices. Much of the service-learning literature focuses on the learning outcomes for students (Borrero & Reed, 2016; Eylar, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001) and gives attention to the voices of the community partners (Boyle-Baise, Epler, & McCoy, 2001; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), but our search of the literature turned up no significant discussions of *faculty* completing service-learning work. Many articles include recommendations for facilitating service-learning (Bandy, n.d.; Honnet & Poulen, 1989), justifications for including it in coursework, and examples of how to present service-learning work for tenure and promotion portfolios (Colbeck & Michael, 2006; Franz, 2011; O’Neill, 2008), but there are few, if any, accounts of teacher educators actually engaging in service-learning experience *themselves*. So what happens when the *teacher educators* take on the role of “learner” rather than “facilitator” of the service-learning experience? Are the benefits common for *students* in service-learning still realized?

As faculty members responsible for teacher preparation, we examined these issues. We planned and taught a free, week-long community writing workshop for underserved youth from their local and surrounding rural community. The writing workshop was part of a model known as *Barrio Writers*. The initial goals in planning and implementing the writing workshop were service-oriented in nature. First, we wanted to serve our community’s need for free, meaningful summer experiences for underrepresented youth. Secondly, we wanted to provide a service to local youth who may not have opportunities to learn and practice creative writing in a non-traditional setting free from school-mandated writing expectations. *Barrio Writers* fits the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education description of the purpose of community engagement:

... purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good (para. 4).

In order to provide local youth a space dedicated to improving their writing skills with the added benefit of access to the scholarship and resources available from institutes of higher education, our *Barrio Writers* chapter took place in a classroom on our university campus, a space in close proximity to the participants’ local community but an otherwise unfamiliar/inaccessible space of learning to most of them. Additionally, our chapter committed to non-traditional classroom instruction in order to meet local youth’s need for non-judgmental, power-flattened spaces in which to explore and share in writing and in group discussion their developing identities as youth in and at-odds with society (Olson Beal, Burrow, and Cross, 2019).

Our initial research goals were to explore the benefits of *Barrio Writers* for the youth participants and then to analyze the applicability (or lack thereof) of this non-traditional pedagogy to traditional, school-based ELA classrooms; both of these studies have been chronicled in previous publications: Olson Beal, Burrow, and Cross (2019) and Olson Beal, Cross, Burrow, and Wagnon (2018). Concurrently, while analyzing data for these previous publications, critical review of the reflection journals that each of us kept during the instructional periods of *Barrio Writers* quickly revealed that there had been both professional and personal learning benefits that *we*, too, had realized as a result of our service commitments. The classroom-like space that was needed for the youth participants simultaneously provided us, as writing advisors, with a learning space in which to translate the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy into authentic practice. Additionally, the non-traditional instruction that encouraged “real talk” amongst/ from the youth participants also gave us the time to engage in informal relationships with local youth, which in turn better informed us about ongoing societal issues that impact the safety and success of rural

youth in our area. Essentially, we realized that our commitment to *Barrio Writers* was actually a commitment to a “pure” service-learning (Heffernan, 2001) experience in which “service” to local youth yielded “learning” for us. In short, we became the “learners” in the *Barrio Writers* service-learning experience.

Using a qualitative design and autoethnographic self-study (Samaras, 2010), we revisited our service commitment of teaching through the lens of “pure” service-learning. Given the personal nature of this study and in order to acknowledge the embedded role we as authors hold as study participants, autoethnographic researchers, and service-learners, we will continue to refer to ourselves in the first person and, when needed, will identify ourselves by our given names. The following narrative will describe the investigation we undertook to answer the retro-identified research question: *What were the realized learning outcomes for us, three teacher educators, engaging as “learners” in the “pure” service-learning experience of Barrio Writers?*

## **Background**

*Barrio Writers*, a free, one-week writing workshop, was designed by Sarah Rafael Garcia to “empower teens through creative writing, higher education, and cultural arts” (Garcia, 2016). The *Barrio Writers* curriculum focuses on collective readings of creative writing pieces by diverse authors in order to prompt discussion and reflection and then to inspire students to write creatively as a response to common uncreative expository writing assignments in public schools (Olson Beal, et.al., 2018). The preparation for the workshop included weekly meetings to plan for logistical issues and to shape the curriculum by (a) selecting creative writing pieces from diverse authors, (b) designing non-traditional instructional activities to inspire and empower the youth as they wrote creatively, (c) discussing ways to intentionally create a safe and social classroom space for youth to express themselves, and (d) constructing collaborative opportunities for diverse youth to support one another while pursuing their passion for writing and celebrating their unique voices. During the course of the one-week writing workshop, we acted as writing advisors for the youth; our responsibilities included building genuine and respectful group and individual relationships so that we could authentically give feedback to youth writing selections.

The *Barrio Writers* program participants included 22 youth ranging in age from 12 to 19, from five different rural school districts that were recruited via outreach to public school English language arts teachers, the city public library, and the *Barrio Writers* website. Participation in the workshop was voluntary. Youth who completed the workshop in its entirety included 12 females and 9 males; half of the participants identified as white, one-third as African American, and the remaining identified as either Hispanic or Asian heritage. These demographics are comparable to the rural community where the workshop was hosted, with white being overrepresented and African American being underrepresented. Within the rural area in which we work as teacher educators, we are acutely aware of the disparity of out-of-school programs and services offered to underrepresented student populations and/or which do not acknowledge the multitude of ways in which local students differ in their experiences and world views based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, age, ability, language, or religion.

Evaluation of the youth’s post-survey responses and writings, completed for previously mentioned studies, and critical analysis of our own reflective journaling for this study indicates that the youth were inspired by our selected texts that were specifically chosen for their cultural and social relevance. The youth expressed appreciation for us, as writing advisors, because we positioned ourselves as equals within the workshop environment in order to provide a safe space for the creative expression of the youth. The youth also expressed their appreciation of a safe space as their working environment. They mentioned how they felt comfortable in the space because they were allowed to use their cell phones, to freely listen to their own music with headphones plugged in, and to talk to peers about what they were working on and as they were working, without fear of reprisal. We recognize the freedom that accrued to us from being in an out-of-school setting, but are confident that similar spaces can be re-constructed in traditional classrooms if attention is given to classroom environment set-up and youth voice.

The youth also expressed that the texts chosen for the workshop were relevant, thought-provoking, and authentic. This gave purpose to discussion and gave them something worth writing about. The youth were given plenty of opportunities to write, share

their writing, and support each other's writing during dedicated times of peer encouragement and critique. The youth's empowerment and self-advocacy were showcased in their final pieces, a sample of which is included here:

*... on my block gun shots is the alarms. My block isn't cared for isn't loved but spited on and drove on. On my block love is the key the key to immortality. On my block I wanna say thank you because I wouldn't be the fairly smart and driven kid I am today.* (Robertson, 2016, in *Barrio Writers*)

While the aforementioned publications focused on the *Barrio Writers youth*, this study focuses on our experience as teacher educator-learners in an immersive service-learning experience.

### Theoretical Framework

This study borrows the definition of service-learning published by The National and Community Service Act of 1990, summarizing it as a teaching method in which students learn through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the educational

transformative education, so that meaning is constructed from knowledge that requires us to reflect critically on how we think or act in order to recognize and analyze assumptions previously taken for granted (Brookfield, 2000). Kolb's (1984) update of Dewey's (1938) advocacy for a multi-step process of experiential logical inquiry into a four-stage experiential learning cycle involving concrete experiences, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation has helped guide service-learning practitioners into an awareness of the critical role of reflection to realize the benefits of experiential education. More recently, Cone and Harris (1996) use both Dewey and Kolb's experiential learning advocacy and incorporate Freire's (1970) call to "empower" communities in order to present a Lens Model for Service Learning educators (see Fig. 1).

In this research study we combined Cone and Harris's (1996) Lens Model with autoethnographic research methodology (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in order to allow us to construct learning in the *Barrio*

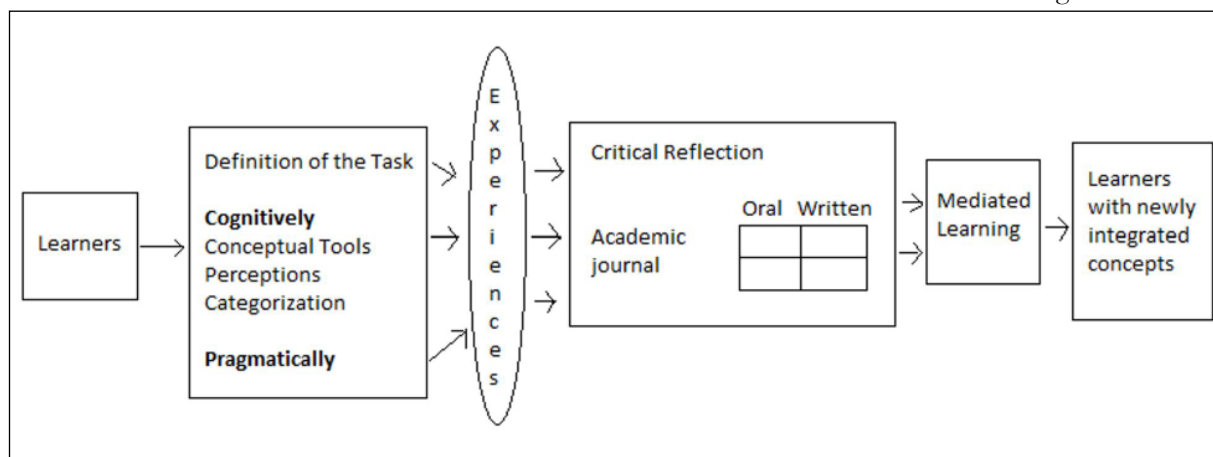


Figure 1. Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators (Cone & Harris, 1996, p. 34)

needs of a community service program, fosters civic responsibility, enhances the academic curriculum of the learners, and provides structured time for the learners to reflect on the service experience (p. 5). This study, therefore, is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of "pure" service-learning, applying both constructivism and experiential education to realize transformative learning for us as participants.

Service-Learning situates the construction of meaning from knowledge as explored in construc-

*Writers* space. The community we created, as writing advisors with and for the youth writers, was based on social constructivist principles (Vygotsky, 1978) in which the collaborative nature of learning is emphasized. Youth-led discussions, shared knowledge, and youth-writing advisor collaboration were cornerstones for creating a social space of diverse voices, ideas, and work. Additionally, constant self-reflection and critical response were encouraged through daily, dedicated writing time for both us (as study partic-

ipants and researchers) and the youth (as program participants) (Schön, 1983).

As teacher educators, we believe that we are responsible for seeking out authentic opportunities to familiarize ourselves, firsthand, with the diversity in and demands of K – 12 classrooms. By placing ourselves in a space similar to (yet intentionally different from) public school classrooms and by populating it with the same student types that our pre-service teachers will interact with during their field experiences in our rural community, we are better equipped to speak with authority and authenticity about the most effective responses to the academic, social, and emotional needs of local students.

Rooted in Dewey's (1938) petition for teacher educators to provide future teachers with experiences that are immediately valuable and which better enable the students to contribute to society, service-learning provides pre-service teachers with the opportunity to construct learning in the areas of civic engagement, social justice, community involvement, and/or academic knowledge through an experiential education setting that emphasizes authentic social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Past this common theoretical foundation, however, the definitions, purposes, and practices associated with service-learning appear to vary across courses, programs, and campuses. For example, the final learner outcome that is expected to result from participation in service-learning activities can alter its definition, as shown in Heffernan's (2001) description of six types of service-learning, including "pure" service-learning as a service-learning type in which service to communities comprises the intellectual core of the course. These courses are not typically housed in any one discipline; their purpose is to prepare students for active and responsible community participation. Given the focus on community-based service and commitment to reciprocally beneficial outcomes, we believe that the *Barrio Writers* program fits within the intentions of "pure" service-learning outcomes: service to community in order to accomplish learning for ourselves. For this experience, we, as teacher educators, accepted a role of "learner" so as to potentially extend the documented benefits of service-learning for pre-service teachers to our *own* transformative learning experience.

## Methodology

Because the research site was an educational setting and we were acting as both educators and learners within the setting, we used qualitative autoethnographic self-study to examine our experiences (Chang, 2016; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen, 1993). Reed-Danahay (1997) claims the following:

The purpose of co/autoethnography is to strengthen our identities as teachers, to improve our practice, to become meta-aware of our students, their learning experiences, to reflect on our teaching, to understand what we bring to the table for our students, and to practice a pedagogy of mutuality (p. 60).

This was indeed our goal for examining, through this research, how *Barrio Writers* as a service-learning experience impacted us as professors and as people.

## Data Sources

The participants of this self-study research were the faculty who organized and implemented the *Barrio Writers* workshop. Our dual role as researchers and writing advisors was ideal for an autoethnographic self-study to examine the influence the workshop experience as service-learning had on us, professionally and personally. Our research was designed around what Samaras (2010) describes as our "personal situated inquiry" (p. 73) and a "culture of critical collaborative inquiry" (p.75). Creswell and Miller (2000) state, "What governs our perspective about narratives is our historical situatedness of inquiry, a situatedness based on social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender antecedents of the studies situations" (p. 126). As such, within qualitative self-study research, each researcher has a "lens" through which to view, interpret, and experience the research; therefore, we have included a brief and transparent description of who we are as participant researchers to help the reader connect with the perspective of our lens.

All three of us are white, middle-aged, middle-class, cisgender women with former K-12 classroom experience and current teacher education faculty positions. Lauren is an associate professor of elementary education and, at the time of this study, had just completed her first year at the current university; both Heather and Chrissy are employed in the secondary education department at the same

university. Heather is an associate professor with, at the time, eight years of experience at the university, and Chrissy is an assistant professor with, at the time, three years of experience at the university. Heather taught public high school Spanish for six years; Chrissy taught middle school and high school science for seven years. Lauren taught for seven years in a variety of subject matters (K-12) and in a variety of educational settings. Each of us acted as “critical friends” (Samaras, 2010, p. 75) for each other during the self-study process as we worked to “mutually contribute to and enhance each other’s research” while also provoking “new ideas and interpretation, question assumptions, and participate in open, honest, and constructive feedback” (Samaras, 2010, p. 75).

### Data Collection

As researchers and as writing models for the youth participants, we kept reflective journals throughout the duration of the writing workshop in which we responded to the classroom experiences,

semi-structured focus group allowed us to probe each other’s written reflections to identify common categories and emergent themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Data Analysis

Initially, we independently used grounded theory and open coding to analyze each data source (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each of us used her own method of coding for each data source and created a document that listed primary codes and possible emergent themes. We then compared our individual analyses and collaboratively discussed our codes to compare, challenge, and crosscheck independent identifications of possible emergent themes, engaging in bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001) as a team of critical friends member checking each other (Samaras, 2010). Embracing the continual process of change, researchers then returned to the data sources to independently conduct more coding and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1993) to ensure theoretical saturation (Glaser

Shyla reading always makes me smile. Her enthusiasm when reading is contagious, not only to the other students, but to me Do we teach our pre-service teachers to draw out/ or piggy back on the energy of the students or are we teaching subduing pedagogy?? The teacher/student symbiotic relationship giving energy, taking energy. I don’t teach this pedagogy, now I will.

Student energy ← pedagogy → Teacher energy

↕

Student work

Figure 2. Journal entry from Chrissy (2016).

including reactions to and commentary on each others’ teaching styles and pedagogical strategies, observations about responses to the daily activities and workshop writing prompts, and reflections on the overall experience. Data sources and collection followed the guidelines for qualitative self-study research set forth by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Samaras (2010) and included personal experiences as primary data (Chang, 2016). After the conclusion of the *Barrio Writers* workshop, a self-conducted, reflec-

& Strauss, 1967). We identified the emergent themes collaboratively during a critical collaborative inquiry focus group (Samaras, 2010). As the findings were determined, frequent member checking was utilized to ensure dependability, transferability, and credibility of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

## Findings

We retroactively identified a research question in order to help us identify learning outcomes resulting from positioning ourselves in the “learner” role during this service-learning experience. The individual impacts of participating in the writing workshop as a “pure” service-learning experience varied for each of us, based on our personal contexts, backgrounds, and lenses; however, our evaluation of the data, independently and collaboratively, resulted in common overarching themes that mirror common benefits experienced by pre-service teachers that engage in service-learning in their teacher education courses, including an improvement of professional capabilities and an increased personal urgency to act on civic responsibilities that come to consciousness based on service-learning participants’ improved understanding of community needs.

### **Lessons in Professional Practicalities: Finding our Authentic Teacher Voices in a Non-Traditional Classroom**

The first emergent theme was that the writing workshop not only prompted the participating youths to seize an opportunity to celebrate and share their empowered voices through creative writing, but also resulted in each of us, as the “learners” in the service-learning experience, to feel similarly empowered by the opportunity to share our professor-teacher voice without externally-imposed constraints or expectations.

The writing workshop gave us the space to show off our “tricks of the trade,” to share “tried and true” lessons while also risking inspired, innovative ideas in instruction, and to explore content that can sometimes be inhibited by a traditional classroom setting, curriculum standards, and/or time constraints. In our written reflections and focus groups, we were all energized and refreshed by these moments of empowerment. In *Figure 2*, Chrissy’s journal (2016) entry captures the way in which a program participant’s energy prompted her to recognize and utilize student energy to spark teacher energy for overall better student engagement in traditional classrooms.

Collectively, we acknowledged that our professional selves were continuously re-energized and

inspired by the youth, by each other, and by the non-traditional setting which gave us all the opportunity to attempt new instruction informed and improved by constant, critical self-reflection and colleague critique. Heather expressed how the rejuvenation she experienced during our service-learning was something she believed was a necessary phenomenon for our pre-service teachers also to experience: “I would wish for our pre-service teachers also to get a light or fire in their bellies about those students in underrepresented populations” (Focus Group, 2016). In the years since serving in this space, we have all taken time to consider how we can facilitate for our pre-service teachers and in-service teachers the knowledge and confidence by which to create and benefit from a space like *Barrio Writers*. All three of us have since implemented lessons learned from, featured content used in, and incorporated pedagogy practiced during *Barrio Writers* in our teacher education courses, but based on the contexts of our differing departmental needs (i.e., secondary vs. elementary) and subject matter responsibilities (e.g., online, science methods, and general education) we have each done so in unique ways. The following section describes individual changes in each of our professional behaviors as a result of this service-learning experience.

**Professional growth for Chrissy.** As a former high school teacher, Chrissy attributed the transformative nature of the experience to the fact that she was connecting with youth that she no longer gets to interact with on a daily basis in her higher-education setting. She relished in the “cycle when the students are energized” (Focus Group, 2016), which energized her to give more to her instruction so that the youth continued to feel empowered and connected to the experience. The close and informal connections with the youth in the workshop allowed both her and the youth to develop respect, empathy, and enthusiasm for each other that is sometimes absent in a traditional classroom environment. These losses also occur as teacher educators have daily contact with only college-aged students and lose our connection with school-aged youth over the course of our careers.

As secondary education faculty, Chrissy focused her reflections on the plausibility of direct transferability and applicability to her pre-service teachers who major in their own disciplines—most of which do not use creative writing. Much of her focus

group ponderings centered on questions of how to “get my students involved in this” (2016). Chrissy is adamant that “getting to witness the amazing creativity that [*Barrio Writers* youth] used to produce the writing pieces” inspires her to prompt her pre-service teachers to “be flexible and to find a balance between the [state] standards and radical pedagogy” (Olson Beal, Cross, Burrow, and Wagnon (2018). Prioritizing pedagogy that respects youth through both the rigor and content of its curriculum creates a desire to learn among students who are typically underserved by the hyper-focus on white, patriarchal history, contributions, and accomplishments in all subject matters.

Olson Beal, et. al. (2019) encourage English/language arts/reading teachers to search out and frequently feature texts that focus on and are written by authors of color and LGBTQIA writers who are often excluded from the traditional English language arts classrooms, thus giving students a respite from the strictly expository writing they read and are expected to write in school so that they can read, openly discuss, and write about topics and experiences that more closely relate to and/or mirror their own diverse backgrounds. Chrissy believes this shift to prioritize learning that features people of color, people of non-hetero-normative lifestyles, and of varying physical abilities and neurodiversities also can be accomplished in science classrooms through the study of issues that have inequitably impacted non-dominant races, genders, ethnicities, and so on throughout American history, such as the following: (a) analyzing environmental inequities related to race, (b) researching about medical advancements made possible by the unethical treatment of populations of non-dominant genders and ethnicities, or (c) recognizing the many “firsts” that were achieved in technology by those who were not the “right” gender, sexual orientation, or race.

**Professional growth for Heather.** Since *Barrio Writers* explicitly celebrates and encourages the diversity of language as an integral element of youth’s empowered voice, for Heather, a former high school Spanish teacher, the workshop provided her a space to “find a connection to that part of my professional identity” (Focus Group, 2016) that she does not get to tap into in her current higher education teaching assignments. Additionally, as an online instructor in higher education, Heather admitted she often feels disconnected from her students and does not always

realize the joys of teaching like she once did. In one of her personal journal entries (2016), Heather shares the isolated feeling she often has as an online instructor: “I thought today went well. I miss teaching . . . online teaching doesn’t do it for me. It’s not filling; it’s draining . . .”

Heather claims that this “pure” service-learning experience helps her get her pre-service teachers thinking about all the traditional school rules and how they impact (positively or negatively) student learning. In other publications, we identified ways in which in-service teachers could achieve the “magic” that occurs at *Barrio Writers*; these publications urge teachers to embrace “classroom climate features [that] flatten the power dynamics that exist in many traditional classrooms” (Olson Beal, Burrow, and Cross, 2019) so that teachers can more frequently assume an identity of *learner* themselves in their own classrooms. Our previous studies support that teachers can replicate, to a degree, the construction of a *Barrio Writers*-like space that feels more inviting to students and thus more conducive to their engagement in learning by setting aside traditional classroom rules in favor of more freedom and autonomy (Olson Beal, et.al., 2018) so that students feel more ownership in their learning.

Two years after the “pure” service-learning experience Heather transitioned back to more face-to-face teaching after years of teaching solely online, when she and Lauren embarked on a unique community-based teacher education program track that co-enrolls pre-service teachers from both their secondary and elementary education departments and uses the *Barrio Writers* anthology as the primary course textbook.

**Professional growth for Lauren.** As a frequent user of service-learning as pedagogy in her university courses and as a frequent participant in service-learning as professional development for her own teaching and social justice learning, Lauren initially characterized her identified sources of rejuvenation as selfish ones that focused on those incidents that fed her “teaching-junkie” self and allowed her to keep company with respected and inspiring colleagues. One of Lauren’s personal journal entries (2016) shares her response to the first day writing workshop prompt – *Why are you here?* — with a plethora of reasons for her excitement at being part of *Barrio Writers*, including



## Benefits for Teacher Educators in Pure Service-Learning

### Walking Shadows by Milthon Torres (summer 2016)

Milthon Torres was born in Mexico City on December 27, 2000. He is currently enrolled at Nacogdoches High School as a sophomore.

I feel connected

“Seen but Not Seen”

A tribute to all Day Laborers

Welders

Mechanics

Jobs that may not seem important

Often low paying

High risk

Long Term Health Problems

High Heats

Toxic Chemicals

Unregulated

Unsanitary Work Places

Jobs as a necessity

Bring food to the table

Though their jobs seem useless

Welders help fuse metals

Day Laborers build houses, roads, and schools

Mechanics fix vehicles that without would be impossible to travel

They never really receive much gratitude from the general public

Frowned down upon

The backbone of America

Living in the shadows

They are seen

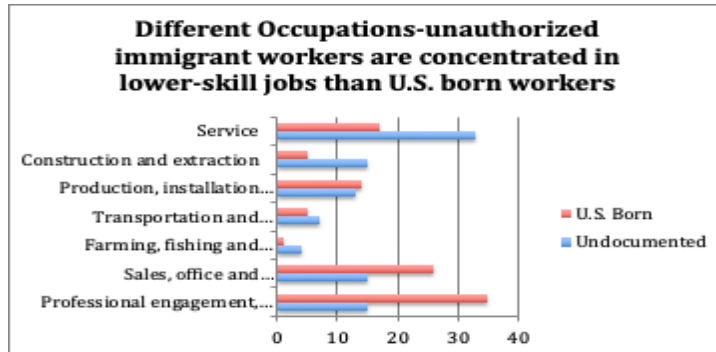


Figure 3. Poem from Torres, 2016 in *Barrio Writers*, with addition of “unauthorized immigrant workers are concentrated in more lower-skill jobs than U.S. born workers” chart.

her love for creative writing (both as a teacher and a writer), her tendency to say “yes” to new opportunities, her excitement about collaborating with new peers who seemed passionate and knowledgeable, and because she could already perceive this space as a unique teaching opportunity.

She admitted she was initially excited by any chance to teach:

I knew I was going to get to try out new cool things and learn some new things... teaching in the summer actually gets me more energized for the school year because I get to try out the lessons I didn't have time for during the school year. . . . I'm going to get inspired by what I see [my colleagues teaching] (personal journal, 2016).

By the time she participated in the focus group, though, Lauren also had identified the youth and their writings as an enormous tool for her own professional growth.

As an elementary education faculty member, Lauren determined that the pedagogical growth and development she experienced with *Barrio Writers* could not be directly applied to her pre-service teachers' use in their future classrooms, but that she could carry the messages and spirit of the *Barrio Writers* youth to her pre-service teachers in the form of young writers' final written pieces. For Lauren, engagement in this service-learning experience gave her the gift of "tangible pieces" that she could take back to her pre-service teachers in order to challenge their understanding of and ideas about race, class, and diversity as it impacts their future students and their families. As an example of Lauren's utilization of student writing pieces to add authentic voice and diverse perspectives to current events topics affecting schools, she paired a student writing piece from *Barrio Writers* with relevant statistics from a Bloomberg report to help give her pre-service teachers a perspective to the national #daywithoutanImmigrant that occurred February 2017 (see Fig. 3).

### **Lessons in Civic Responsibility: The Professional and the Personal**

As previously expressed, initial motivations for our volunteer commitments were a sense of *personal* responsibility to provide a community service for diverse youths in our own community—a responsibility that was made possible by our *professional* capital as faculty of higher education. As humans who are committed to social justice work and as professors who are committed to social justice pedagogy, we were all previously accustomed to advocating for/with/on behalf of underserved, undervalued, silenced, disenfranchised groups in our own various ways. For example, Heather is known throughout our small, conservative town for organizing and attending protests to bring attention to issues, policies, and practices that negatively impact and threaten the safety of marginalized populations both locally and nationally. Heather frequently partners with local organizers to call/email/write local and national law-makers on a variety of issues that are often ignored by those who enjoy the privileges of

of whiteness, and she has supported her spouse's commitment to running for public office. Chrissy uses her prowess in educational law and policy to both create better informed pre-service teachers and to advocate, directly, for families within our communities at the K-12 level in front of school boards and during private consultations.

So while there was never a question that we would wholeheartedly embrace the undertaking of serving groups of students often neglected, at large, by our local community, reflecting on the service taught us the enormous and more immediate impact of local advocacy. Throughout the focus group, there was consensus that *Barrio Writers* answers a community need, but our critical reflection as engaged scholars helped us better identify and understand that our compulsion to be part of the answer needed to go beyond personal "feel-good" motives as we accepted the privilege and civic responsibility we hold as faculty members at an institute of higher education within a small, rural community.

For Lauren, who is more apt to use her classrooms as spaces to ask her majority white, middle-class female pre-service teachers to examine and take steps to lessen their implicit biases and increase their awareness of the diverse experiences of their future students, this meant building in intentional assignments designed to improve her pre-service teachers' acceptance of LGBTQIA students and their families by planning to include more LGBTQIA-friendly children's literature in their "teacher libraries." As Lauren has seen throughout her service in *Barrio Writers* and as explained by Perez (2019), "including LGBTQ texts is a simple action compared to organizing an elaborate assembly or special month celebration; it's a normalizing, everyday action any educator can make to clearly communicate LGBTQ students belong" (n.p.).

Additionally, Lauren now asks that once her pre-service teachers *know* better, they must *do* better as she encourages them to engage in civic responsibilities that can improve the profession they have chosen to serve in even before they step foot in their classrooms. For example, Lauren became deputized in fall 2018 so she could register first-time voters in our college town. Additionally, she has designed a civic action activity that requires her pre-service teachers to research an education-related issue and call the appropriate

congressperson/senator to voice whether they expect their appointed representative(s) to support upcoming legislation that would protect their future students of underrepresented populations (e.g., transgendered students' bathroom rights at schools) or vote against policies that would threaten their future students' safety (e.g., protecting DREAMers and TPS holders with the Dream and Promise Act),

Collectively, our continued commitment to leverage our own social capital and access to resources and spaces in academia to support and lift the voices of our *Barrio Writers* youth has been realized as we enter our fifth year of offering the workshop (with attendance growing from 12 in 2014 to 30 youth in 2019). In addition to creating a much-needed space for the youth during the summer, we have extended our service to offer other year-round mini-*Barrio Writers* meet-ups at a local, independent bookstore; recommended their writings for publications in other professional magazines; and raised funds to take eight *Barrio Writers* to share their work in front of an audience of in-service teachers as presenters at the 2018 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual meeting in Houston, Texas. We continuously search out ways to ensure that our *Barrio Writers* youth know that there is a community that cares for, values, and wants them and their voices in our small town.

### **Lessons in Personal Identity: Collective Benefits as MotherScholars**

As working mothers, we share the struggle of so many women to achieve the ever-elusive work-life balance while also trying to approach our professional lives as models for our own children. We define this unique identity as “MotherScholarhood,” an intentional derivative of Matias’ (2011) “Mother-Scholar” and Lapayese’s (2012) “motherscholar”—both of which prompt female academicians who are also mothers to seek out creative ways to “insert [the] maternal identity, specifically in academic spaces and [into] scholarship” rather than to support the patriarchal binary that insists on an unnatural and unjustly “sharp divide between the intellect and the maternal, the public and the private.” As such, the impetus to coordinate a writing workshop that hinges on having youth examine and analyze social injustices through writing practices as a service to *other* people’s children was a deeply personal choice for all of us, which

allowed us to position ourselves to live out personal and maternal convictions in a professional space.

During the focus group, Heather explained that “I want for my kids to see me working on things that matter.” As a MotherScholar of older children/young adults, Heather recognizes that her children are at a point in their lives when they can choose to mimic her social justice practices within their own budding professional lives. As a MotherScholar of young children, Lauren often rationalizes her dedication to her work with statements that share Heather’s sentiments for seeking out meaningful work: “I love my job and I always tell myself that I need to be a good model for my children that you can love your job and do it really well” (Focus Group, 2016); however, the younger age of her children often leaves Lauren feeling the guilt of someone trying to do it all for everyone in her life: students, family, and colleagues.

Cognizant of the overlapping demands that can limit mothers who also scholar (i.e., MotherScholars), we unanimously supported each other by permitting several of our young children to attend much of the workshop so that we did not have to procure paid help to participate in a volunteer teaching experience. While both Chrissy and Lauren were thankful for the convenience of bringing their children to their workplace, at the time, Chrissy also expressed a larger benefit to our young children’s presence at the workshop with the following statement: “Dedicating a week to something like that and you bringing your kids as well, I mean, you know, it’s important for our kids to see that it’s not just about work.”

For us, the roots of our professional commitments to “things that matter” are often traced back to our personal motivations to create and be part of solutions towards better worlds for not only our own children, but for everyone’s children. The writing workshop gave us space to invite our children to witness their mothers’ dedication to working with and for brave, kind, intelligent diverse youths with the hope that our children will always appreciate the beautifully diverse world that their mothers work to preserve and enhance. In the years since this 2016 study, both Heather and Chrissy’s sons have reached an age where they could directly enroll in *Barrio Writers* as actual participants, not just passive observers or final reading night attendees. From Lauren’s perspective, from the writing they both produced

and the contributions they make to the community space, it is evident that they have not just been “listening” to what their moms choose to stand for, but are “living out loud” what they choose to stand for. Intrigued by the personal and professional practicability that a MotherScholar identity holds for teacher educators, we are currently completing a separate study about the ways our MotherScholarhood makes us better people *and* professors.

## Conclusions

Throughout the course of this study, our goal for this research was to share how service-learning not only transformed us as professors in our pre-service teacher education programs, but also deeply impacted our personal views of the culture within our community and our roles as advocates for youth within that culture. Reed-Danahay (1997) has purported:

We engage in self-study to examine the ways in which our beliefs are actualized with students and thereby to improve our practice. We also embrace self-study to strengthen our agency, whether that involves making changes in the classroom, advocating for a student, or making larger institutional changes. Agency cannot occur alone as we know from our own experiences, history, and the stories of our students (p. 59).

Among the findings of a 2016 national study from the Hope Street Group, over half of 2,000 teachers surveyed indicated they did “not receive any instruction in their pre-service programs related to serving in areas of high-need/persistently low-achieving populations” (p. 9). In order to best prepare teachers for the realities of their diverse classrooms, teacher educators must be willing to familiarize themselves with those same responsibilities. Engaging in service-learning opportunities, like this one, with underserved populations in their own communities can provide teacher educators with up-to-date knowledge and authentic understanding of the student populations they are training their pre-service teachers to someday serve. Furthermore, we recommend that educator preparation programs should provide support, space, personnel, time, and fiscal compensation (or other meaningful acknowledgement) for teacher education faculty who engage in such com-

munity-service events.

While our other studies highlighted the experiences and voices of the participating *Barrio Writers* youth, this study confirms that there was a reciprocal benefit from the workshop for us as faculty researchers and study participants. Our transformations were both personal and professional in nature and have continued to impact us in the years since this study as we continue to turn knowledge gained from this service-learning experience into actions that benefit a diverse community, grow our multifaceted professional-personal selves, and arm us with ideas, ideals, and examples for better teaching of our pre-service teachers. It is with enthusiasm and urgency that we urge other teacher educators to consider taking on the “learner” role in their own service-learning experience.

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