What really happens in service-learning, particularly when it is utilized in conjunction with a multicultural education course for preservice teachers? In this paper, we investigate the extent to which service-learning provides the kind of experiences preservice teachers need to become multicultural people and educators. According to Nieto (1996), most prospective teachers, regardless of cultural or social backgrounds, were raised and educated in pervasively monocultural, Eurocentric, English-speaking environments. Often, they know little about (and hold biases against) the primary constituents for multicultural education: people marginalized in U.S. society, “parents and children of color and/or of low-income backgrounds, children who are disabled, gay or lesbian, and their parents or adult supporters, and girls” (Sleeter, 1996, p. 231). Multicultural education seeks to prepare teachers as educational allies and advocates for youth from these groups. Nieto argues that “becoming a multicultural teacher, means first becoming a multicultural person” (p. 353) and that this process depends upon self-reflection and re-education. Preservice teachers need to question their own racism and biases, learn more about cultural diversity and pluralism, and grapple with realities from multiple perspectives. Otherwise, their approach to multicultural education will be shallow and superficial.

Community-based learning, or learning experiences situated within diverse and low-income neighborhoods and organizations, can prod preservice teachers to step outside their life experiences, identify children as community members, regard communities as educational resources, and adapt learning to children’s life experiences (e.g., Mahan, Fortney, & Garcia, 1983; Sleeter, 2000). Yet, community-based experiences are rarely part of teacher education programs (Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). A “field” experience usually refers to placement in a school, not in a neighborhood context. Even if the school has a culturally diverse and/or low-income student population, it does not follow that preservice teachers become attuned to community views and concerns. Unless preservice teachers work with teachers and principals who view communities as educational resources—as significant learning places for youth—school experiences alone are unlikely to foster cultural awareness, or support alliance and advocacy (e.g., Tellez, Hlebowitsh, Cohen, & Norwood, 1995; Zeichner, 1992).

Service-learning pedagogy, with its real-world focus, emphasis on critical reflection, and impetus for reciprocity, can structure community-based learning. Good service-learning balances service with learning: it deepens academic curriculum, responds to real community needs, and equally benefits all participants (Sigmon, 1994). This framework offers a viable, affirmative way to connect teacher educators and prospective teachers with youth and families from constituent groups for multicultural education.

Service-learning can provide experiences that inform preservice teachers about communities— their issues, strengths, problems, and resources—and that empower community people as participants in teacher education. For parents and communities who often feel distanced from schools, service-learning can offer opportunities to help shape future teachers for their children. For teacher educators and preservice teachers, involvement in real-life, everyday circumstances characterized by cultural diversity, poverty, and inequity can prompt and undergird classroom-based inquiries about race, culture, and power (O’Grady & Chappell, 2000).

A small body of literature indicates that the utilization of service-learning, as an aspect of multicultural or social foundation courses, assists preservice teachers’ processes of self-reflection and re-educat-
tion. Most of this literature describes approaches to service-learning in education courses, not actual encounters during service-learning, and relies upon self reports (i.e., journals, reflective essays, and interviews) of preservice teachers. This literature suggests that service-learning: increases awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity (e.g., Boyle-Baise, 1998; Hones, 1997; Sleeter, 1995; Tellez, H. Lebowitsh, Cohen & Norwood, 1995); challenges prejudicial, stereotypical beliefs (e.g., Fuller, 1998; O’Grady, 1997; Seigel, cited in Wade, 1998); develops more complex understandings of institutional racism (O’Grady & Chappell, 2000; Vadenboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, & Le Compte, 1996); and heightens commitment to teach diverse youth—particularly for European American preservice teachers (e.g., Fuller, 1998; Tellez, H. Lebowitsh, Cohen & Norwood, 1995). Sleeter (1995) claimed that service-learning yielded data fruitful for a “structural analysis of oppression” (p. 425), but other teacher educators found it difficult to spur structural critique based upon service-learning (e.g., Boyle-Baise, 1998; O’Grady & Chappell, 2000; Vadenboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, & Le Compte, 1996). O’Grady and Chappell (2000) worried that service-learning can reinforce “we-they” divisiveness between white college students and communities of color, especially when there is a “lack of true partnership between the college and the community of color” (p. 214).

Missing from this research are field reports—observations, interviews, and collections of documents—that allow interested parties to see “inside” actual service-learning experiences. What really happens “out there” in service-learning experiences, particularly that is pertinent to multicultural teacher education? What do preservice teachers do that supports or limits reconsideration of their monocultural, Eurocentric worldviews? Do certain experiences spur self-examination and realization? Are there constraints to the learning process? Are there ways that experiences can be altered to motivate cultural and social insights and critique? These questions are explored in relation to the study detailed here. This study, then, describes what happened within the field aspect of service-learning, and it considers the meanings prospective teachers made of their experiences.

**The Course and The Service**

A few clarifications are in order. Service-learning was a companion, field experience for the course—Multicultural Education—intended to strengthen and deepen the course, but not the whole of it. It is a three-credit bearing class, and the service-learning component earned one additional credit hour as a field experience. For the course, multicultural education was defined as the development of cultural knowledge and insights as well as the examination of social and cultural dynamics of power (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Course goals included: to understand one’s cultural identity and social location, to learn about historically-oppressed groups, to examine educational inequality, and to gain strategies to promote educational excellence for all youth. Service-learning was utilized as a vehicle to connect preservice teachers with minority communities and to learn from them. Aims for the service-learning included: to interact with culturally-diverse and low-income groups, to disrupt stereotypes, to gain awareness of community problems and resources, and to learn to work positively with diverse youth.

Prior to the fall semester, six community organizations which served culturally diverse and/or low-income youth were invited to participate in the service-learning component of the course. Service sites included an historically black church, mixed by race and social class, two community centers, two girl scout troops for “at-risk” girls, and a Head Start program. Sites were chosen because they fostered a self-help, rather than a compensatory, ethic. Only one of these organizations had not worked before with the instructor. Leaders/directors of these organizations attended an orientation lunch in August. They discussed: community-based learning as part of multicultural teacher education; service-learning as a vehicle for community connections; findings from the previous service-learning project; and possibilities for current involvement. Community leaders were asked to explain local contexts to preservice teachers, to define ways in which they could serve and learn, to monitor their learning, and to challenge their stereotypes. Leaders’ requests for service included tutoring, teaching small groups, and assisting recreational programs. They agreed to encourage preservice teachers to attend and/or help organize site events and to foster acquaintance with youth, adults, and families at their sites. Mixed race inquiry teams of three to five preservice teachers worked together at each site.

In-class reflection about community experiences occurred biweekly. Preservice teachers wrote four reflective essays, and, often, in-class discussion questions were drawn from them. Topics were selected because of their general significance to multicultural education and their reiteration across essays. Topics included: problems parents face in selecting after-school care, assumptions underlying the “at-risk” label, the social construction of poverty, and discipline norms across race or ethnic groups. The essays and discussions served as “windows” to preservice teachers’ perceptions of the field, and they provided key opportunities to debunk stereotypes and question social conditions. In cases where
questions were linked intimately to particular sites, participants were asked to seek further information from their organization’s leaders. An African-American parent, active in local community affairs and a liaison for one of the service sites, participated in two reflective sessions and contributed her unique points of view.

Other class activities were intended to correlate service-learning and multicultural education in ways that strengthened both. As examples, preservice teachers participated in Bafa Bafa, a simulation of cross-cultural differences and misunderstandings. They read *There Are No Children Here* (Kotlowitz, 1991), analyzed the book in terms of themes pertinent to community life, and then considered implications for service-learning. They conducted ethnographic, mini-inquiries called “Why?” Studies (based on Sleeter, 1995), which probed site-based questions of interest to the team; mini-inquiries included, Why is the Black church important for Black children? and Why is Girl Scouts important to the “at risk” girls of our county? An alternative project was the development of mini-curriculum units pertinent to youth at sites served. As examples, one site team read fairy tales, then helped children at a community center analyze the stories for racism and sexism. Another team helped youth learn numbers and colors in Spanish, utilizing the bilingualism of one team member.

**Methodology**

This study is a qualitative, interpretive case study that utilized ethnographic techniques.

It took place at a large, Midwestern, research university with a predominately white student population. The city was fairly small and dominated by the university. Town and gown distinctions existed, especially between citizens who struggled economically and citizens who were highly educated and financially comfortable. Over a three-year period, one author developed partnerships with community organizations that served youth and adults of color and/or from low-income backgrounds. Preservice teachers offered their service and time to these organizations. In return, adults and children in the community welcomed, befriended, and taught preservice teachers about themselves. The study was completed during the academic year of 1998 and 1999; however, most data collection took place during the fall semester of 1998.

**Participants**

Twenty four preservice teachers were studied as one case. Of the group, twenty preservice teachers were white: seven were male, thirteen were female. Four women were of color: two were Latinas, two were African American. According to a demographic survey, all but two preservice teachers were in-state students, most from small or middle-size towns. Most described their neighborhoods as middle-income, but five were from high-income and three were from low-income backgrounds. Most preservice teachers had minimal direct experience with cultural diversity or poverty, but several had traveled internationally with the armed forces, and a few others had worked in summer camps for low-income youth or for children with disabilities.

**Data Collection**

One of us was a participant observer and collected the data. The other was a complete participant and taught the multicultural course (Gold, cited in LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The participation of the instructor in the research was disclosed fully, but approached as secondary to the teaching role. We practiced a “hands-off” orientation to the field; once the service-learning commenced, community directors had complete discretion over activities and supervision. We intervened only on two occasions, when our data alerted us to on-site situations contrary to course goals. On these occasions, we shared our information with community leaders, and they determined appropriate responses to our concerns. The two of us met weekly to discuss field data and to consider the content of reflective essays. We shared what we “saw” as participant observers and developed questions for small group interviews.

Each site was observed from four to twelve times, depending upon the number of inquiry teams placed there. Overall, thirty-three site visits were made. Field notes were taken and an observation schedule was used. Observations lasted one to three hours, contingent upon the activities underway. The field observer stayed until a cycle of activities was completed and until he “got a feel” for the repetitive nature of what happened.

Preservice teachers were interviewed as site-based teams three times—at the beginning, the middle, and at the end of the service-learning experience. Organization directors were interviewed after the service experience. In order to safeguard the privacy rights of youth, we did not interview children without explicit permission of their parent(s) or caregivers.

Reflective sessions were audio-taped and field notes were taken as well. Also, completed written assignments were included in our data.

**Data Analysis**

We studied multiple forms of data (e.g., interviews, observations, and reflective essays) from var-
ied sources (i.e., preservice teachers, organization directors). Reference to varied sources triangulated our interpretations. Interviews and reflective essays were read to determine recurrent ideographic themes (Spindler & Spindler, 1997). While we looked for the frequency in which ideas were mentioned, this was not entirely helpful. It was possible for respondents to answer questions or raise concerns in a myriad of ways. If an idea was reiterated by several respondents, it was considered influential (Youniss & Yates, 1997). Constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to search for diversity within reflective papers and discussions. Attention was paid to site-based differences and influences of race and gender. For observation data, we searched for repeated forms of and reasons behind behavior, then, we contrasted norms with “critical” incidents that stood apart as unusual.

We read the data separately, then, we cross-checked our interpretations. For the most part, we identified similar trends. Meanings and actions often were restated and repeated across sites, which served as an internal check for our interpretations. When we differed, we rechecked the data. Usually, from our alternate standpoints, one of us “saw” or “heard” something the other did not, and we were able to amplify our categorizations. Most puzzling were differences between preservice teachers’ expressions of serious self-assessment and seemingly limited field activities. This potential disjuncture or gap became a focal point for our deliberations.

Limitations

As one of the researchers was the course instructor, issues of power might have influenced the investigation. Care was taken to reduce potential feelings of coercion. The instructor did not interview or observe respondents. Preservice teachers could opt out of the study after the assignment of grades for the course, although none did. Names were used on reflective essays, and frankness could have been impacted. For this reason, essays were counted as completed assignments, but not graded.

The constraints of space always challenge a descriptive, interpretive work. Every attempt was made to include expressions and actions of all of the key “players.” Community directors read an early draft of this paper, and some thought their perspectives were underplayed. More data was included and their views were detailed more fully.

Roles/Perspectives

The roles and perspectives of preservice teachers related to service-learning fell into several categories. These groupings are described separately, although their borders were fuzzy and overlapping. Factors that influenced preservice teachers’ views and actions are discussed in relation to the several roles and perspectives.

Playing It Safe

To their credit, most preservice teachers did not hesitate to become involved. They did not sit back and observe, but jumped right in, eager for the experience. Yet, overwhelmingly, they were concerned with “fitting in.” Early on, service was marked by accommodation to site routines. Preservice teachers played it “safe;” they did not stand out, they were timely, polite, and obliging. Involvement at the multiracial church exemplified safe interaction. Preservice teachers clapped and swayed during the service, but did not sing or call back to the pastor’s remarks with the rest of the congregation. Preservice teachers participated just enough to fit in.

There seemed to be several “safe” types of interactions. One safe interaction was to stay focused on the task at hand. For example, when pre-service teachers tutored at the Boys and Girls Club, they kept the children focused on doing homework. The focusing was evident across gender, but was more pronounced with the male at the site. The females were more apt to talk casually with students before returning to homework. “Task talk” extended to mentoring situations where preservice teachers played the role of big brother or sister. The conversation centered on the activity at hand: a discussion about plays in a touch-football game; a question about the design of an art project. Conversation about homes, families, and life outside the center occurred, but it was uncommon. Task talk constrained chances for cross-cultural learning.

A second “safe” interaction was to keep comments to the students positive. As examples, during the reading program at the community center a preservice teacher coaxed a young man to read by saying, “You read better than I” (J.K., 11/11/98). At the Head Start program, praise was a common response for almost everything children did—sitting nicely at the lunch table or picking up toys. At Girl Scouts, a preservice teacher told scouts who worked on a badge, “You guys got your stuff done really fast, that’s great” (E.W., 10/19/98), although the scouts were done early because they had not done as much as expected. Negative comments were rare, except when physical safety was a concern. Then, preservice teachers restrained children from unsafe actions.

A third safe interaction was to respond to youth, rather than to initiate interactions. Preservice teachers listened actively to children; rarely, however, did they probe for further information. Over time, pre-
service teachers took more initiative, especially among the females. While some preservice teachers initiated informal conversations with youth, and others attended parent meetings, most continued to describe their activities as “fitting into” the status quo.

Why did preservice teachers play it safe? For some, caution indicated uncertainty, especially about cross-cultural interactions. In a reflective essay, one white male wrote:

When I first set foot in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, I was unsure of what to expect. I felt like an ambassador and an invader at the same time. I wanted to make a good impression and I was unsure how I would fit in... Before a word was spoken, I learned a valuable piece of information. It is intimidating to walk into a place where you are the minority. (C.S., 10/7/98)

While it is natural to be anxious about novel situations, for some white preservice teachers service-learning was a powerful encounter with difference. For these preservice teachers, the outward appearance of compliant service work often masked internal struggle and reassessment.

Another reason for playing it safe was that it was the easy thing to do. One white female described her feelings this way: “It was my long day. I thought kids will get off school and be obnoxious. Then, it was actually fun, you get to play with them, it doesn’t take a lot of brain activity. You’re just hanging out with them” (J.F., 9/29/98). Another white male preservice teacher expressed this view as participation in a “community service baby sitting service” (M.H., 9/29/98). For preservice teachers like these, service-learning was a “no-brainer” opportunity to interact with children.

Playing it safe was expected by some community leaders, but disrupted by others. For example, one pastor praised preservice teachers as “leaders,” but disrupted by others. For example, one interact with children. Service-learning was a powerful encounter with difference. While it is natural to be anxious about novel situations, for some white preservice teachers service-learning was a no-brainer opportunity to plan and implement activities and events.

Playing it safe impacted preservice teachers of color in ways similar to their white counterparts. Two preservice teachers appeared to play it safer than they were. One young woman, described by her community director as “monotone” and “observant,” inwardly perceived herself as fully engaged and gaining self-assurance. In a reflective essay she wrote:

I would never go anywhere without a way back from where I come from. At [church], I went three times without a way back and had no problem getting home. I am not saying I would ask any stranger for a way home, I am expressing how I improved my self-confidence. (N.G., 12/10/98)

Another preservice teacher spent most of her time in a “safe” tutor role, yet quietly focused her assistance on youth of color at her site. Two other women of color took more strident actions: one accompanied a family to a football game, another participated in an overnight lock-in. In both instances, multiple factors were at play. The first preservice teacher shared a strong interest in marching band with her young community friend, and the second was prompted to stay overnight by her gregarious, white dorm buddy and classmate.

Most preservice teachers considered themselves increasingly comfortable in their placements. Yet, they continued to operate within prescribed service tasks and often overlooked opportunities to reinterpret them from a multicultural perspective. For example, at one community center, preservice teachers developed a reading club. The instructor encour-
aged them to construct the initiative around multicultural children’s literature. However, the team played it safe and reinforced an ongoing reading incentive program. They encouraged youth to read a quantity of the books on site, regardless of their multicultural potential.

**Teacher/Helper**

The teacher/helper role dominated service-learning interactions. When asked to assist with a task that was “school-related,” such as assistance with homework or a scout badge, preservice teachers immediately fell into a teacher role. They offered praise and encouragement, gave hints and asked questions. As noted earlier, they kept youth on task. This seemed not only comfortable, but a default position as well—preservice teachers taught when uncertain about what to do. For example, when asked to help girls earn a scout badge, one preservice teacher developed a worksheet of questions to assist scouts in learning the necessary background information. All tasks were not school-related, yet preservice teachers responded as teacher/helpers. The teacher role was easy to assume; after all, this was a field experience for a teacher education course. However, “teaching as helping” usually was confined to the “correct” completion of worksheets or textbook assignments. Discussion of youths’ personal interests or home lives was carried on primarily outside the teaching/helping role.

“Helping kids” sometimes was coupled with a “feel good” rationale. One preservice teacher of color explained it this way:

> The first day the kids asked us: ‘Can you help me and be my mentor?’ I was happy to see that the children were willing to receive all the help they can. Knowing that I was available to work with them made me feel well inside. (C.R., 10/7/98)

Further, a white, female, preservice teacher told us: “So far, all I thought about is what I’m going to get out of this. Is this going to make me feel good? How can I help other people? Will I be doing good?” (S.J., 9/29/98). This grouping of “feeling good,” “doing good,” and “helping” was reiterated across race and gender lines. For many prospective teachers, helping kids was a major impetus for their service. Through helping, preservice teachers felt important to children’s lives, they “made a difference” through assistance as a tutor, mentor, or friend. While viewed as positive by preservice teachers, responses sometimes had missionary tones. Preservice teachers offered something they felt youth lacked—stability, attention, and strong male role models.

For most preservice teachers, across subgroups, service-learning was viewed pragmatically, as beneficial to “becoming a better teacher.” According to one white, female preservice teacher: “This is a total learning experience for me. I try different things to help kids, just to learn. So, I’ll be more comfortable in my classroom” (L.W., 9/29/98). Another preservice teacher eschewed the “feel good” rationale for a more practical approach: “I am not at Girl Scouts to feel good about myself or have fun. This experience will prepare me for problems that will arise in my classroom” (S.J., 11/2/98).

“Becoming a better teacher” had two meanings: understanding more about youth, especially culturally diverse or low-income youngsters; and gaining teaching, especially management, techniques. As an example of the first view:

> Their church life is more a main thing than mine. The people at my church didn’t come to see me perform because I wasn’t their child. It’s a family atmosphere there. As a teacher, I need to keep in mind what things are going on different from what I went through. (C.M., 10/19/98)

As an example of the second view: “I’m learning that kids don’t respond to bribery. If you do this, then I’ll give you some candy, doesn’t work. I need to be street smarter than the kids to get them to do things” (L.A., 10/19/98). The first view was attuned to cultural and community influences on children and teaching. The second view was focused on control issues, particularly in regard to children of color or from low-income situations.

Most preservice teachers of color expressed the multicultural position—they were attentive to cultural and economic differences. One middle class prospective teacher struggled to accept youth from low-income backgrounds. In reflective essays, she at first denigrated youth from low-income homes as uninterested in educational experiences and overly streetwise. In her final essay, she expressed willingness to learn more about, and work with, youth from low-income backgrounds. Two other women of color, from segregated backgrounds, described themselves as becoming more comfortable and prepared to work in mixed race situations. The fourth preservice teacher, biracial and comfortable with multicultural situations, utilized service-learning to extend her knowledge about an ethnic group different from her own.

Of the seven white males in the course, four selected church placements (some because the Sunday schedule worked for them). This group talked and wrote about teaching youth through enthusiasm, compassion, and parent involvement.
They described their experience as “eye-opening,” particularly about ways in which racism and minority status affected children’s lives. The other three males were placed at community centers or Head Start. They struggled with deficit notions about youth living in poverty. Two of the three asserted that youth needed positive male role models, like themselves. Site placements seemed to matter. Deficit views were not expressed by the males at the churches. There, they witnessed the presence of supportive families, including affirmative male role models.

Among the thirteen white women, becoming a better teacher had several, shared dimensions. Mostly, these preservice teachers disrupted stereotypes and accumulated realistic knowledge about diverse youth. As examples, preservice teachers recognized that the “perfect vision” of a future classroom was faulty (M.M., 10/7/98); discovered that deficit assumptions, especially about parents, were misleading and wrong (J.F., 11/4/98); learned not to misjudge the reality kids lived (M.M., 10/20/98); and realized that youth knew more about “sex, drugs, and violence” than expected (J.K., 10/21/98). Learning to “handle” problematic situations related to difference was repeatedly cited as a useful aspect of service-learning.

The teacher/helper role was reinforced by most field situations. Part of the mutual agreement that underpinned the project was the provision of quality volunteer service in return for opportunities to learn from the community. Of the six sites, five indicated that the ability to render additional services, however temporary, was a major benefit to them. For most agencies, service centered around tutorial or teacher aide activities. For example, preservice teachers served as a “third person” in Head Start classrooms and their volunteer hours were counted as part of the “in-kind match” for the agency’s federal funding. The churches enjoyed extra help with various events, but assistance often broke away from the teacher/helper role.

Regardless of the limits of the teacher/helper role, most community directors agreed with the following: the “experience itself was huge for them. I’m sure that it was” (C.T., 1/27/99). One pastor talked about “bonds” and “friendships” that preservice teachers “may carry with them the rest of their life” (W.M., 2/18/99). Another Christian Education Director felt that preservice teachers learned about culture, particularly the religious influence of the Black church upon its children. Although preservice teachers often focused on one-to-one encounters, some translation to the larger picture was expected. For example, at Boys and Girls Club: “Students [preservice teachers] get experience working with kids, large numbers of kids at one time. They work one on one, but they experience one hundred twenty kids in here. You know a big group of kids, you know how to handle situations” (B.E., 1/5/99).

For legal and confidence reasons, community directors rarely shared in-depth information about children’s backgrounds or pushed relationships beyond teaching and helping. Instead, they cautioned preservice teachers to refer problems back to them. Also, community directors tended to teach indirectly about cultural diversity or poverty. They generally preferred to let the “experience speak for itself” (C.T., 1/27/99). From an atmosphere of welcome and acceptance, to messages of God’s love across race, to principles of respect and equality, each site practiced high regard for human dignity and equality. Regardless of preservice teacher’s immediate activities, directors expected them to “soak up” some of the realities of diversity, poverty and community via moments of immersion in local life.

Companionship

Service-learning offered opportunities to “hang out” with children, something missed in other teacher education classes. According to one preservice teacher: “We learn about teaching everyday, but rarely get to just spend time with kids. Service-learning gives us a reason to spend time with kids. That is why we are becoming teachers in the first place” (S.J., 3/5/99)! Companionship took time to build and became evident later in the experience. During early visits, preservice teachers actively engaged in activities, such as working at the play-dough table at Head Start. However, interactions were adult-child oriented, one had the power to question or direct the other. Also, conversations tended to turn into teaching/helping situations. As preservice teachers became more comfortable with the situation, companionship evolved.

In the companion role, preservice teachers did activities with students, conversation was more equal, less forced by the adult, and more casual. Preservice teachers still resorted to the teacher/helper role, but generally, interactions exhibited that of two companions, rather than an adult and child. Companionship was more pronounced in settings with older youth, particularly at one community center, where preservice teachers spent a lot of time playing pool and video games, watching television, or just talking with youth. Significantly, this rapport had a teacher-oriented end—preservice teachers sought to gain youth’s respect in order to encourage them to participate in a reading club.

As companions, preservice teachers avoided the assumption of authority. When they needed to
counter the wishes of youth, they placed blame on an outside force. For example, in order to quell arguments about the reading quota for earning a free pizza, a preservice teacher responded with, “I don’t make the rules” (J.K., 10/12/98). Further, “I don’t make the rules” was an indicator of compliant participation in service-learning; often it was something that happened to preservice teachers, rather than being enacted by them.

The time optimally needed to become a companion often exceeded the service-learning cycle. However, increased knowledge of, trust for, and interest in youth and their families was mentioned across all subgroups of preservice teachers. It was illustrated in comments made over time by one white male preservice teacher:

(early in the experience) We need to be able to teach kids, not solve their family problems. If I were closer to James and knew his family maybe I could talk to his mother, but I think it is important for me to accept that he has family problems, understand it could affect his learning, and move on. (M.H., 10/7/98)

(Later in the experience) The kids and I sat down on the steps in the front of the building. They began to question me, to learn who I was. They wanted to see my keys, wallet, and car. They counted my money and told me their dads let them do the same sometimes. At this moment I realized that not every child at the Club came from a broken home. I wish I could have had more time to get to know the family background and history of these kids. (M.H., 11/5/98)

To some extent, companionship was eased by preservice teacher’s perception that “all kids are just kids.” Once the novelty wore off, preservice teachers begin to see diverse youth as “normal.” To most, kids were similar, regardless of ethnic or economic differences. According to one white male: “The kids at Head Start are mature and independent. Other kids’s moms stay home and do everything for them. Some kids tattle, here they work it out. For the most part, kids are kids” (G.P., 9/29/98). “Kids are kids” tended to be articulated by white preservice teachers. This view shifted the perception of differences from deficits to human universals. While intended positively, “kids are kids” sometimes glossed over real differences, such as opportunities related to income. Although similarities and differences, among and within groups of people, were stressed in the multicultural education course, prospective teachers tended to see commonalities.

A few preservice teachers pricked at the edges of this idea—children were the same, but.... As an example, “Just when I had decided that all kids were the same, something happened to change my mind (I think I will go back and forth with this for a long time)” (S.L., 10/21/98). This conceptual maturity eluded many preservice teachers. Several preservice teachers of color, one white, nontraditional student (and mother), another white preservice teacher from California, and one white male who had attended Montessori schools, grappled with notions of similarity and difference. Prior life experience, especially with diversity, seemed to influence this realization.

Companionship depended, at least in part, on time, and time was too short. Every community director identified time constraints as the low point of the course. According to the parent coordinator at Head Start: “They just get to know the kids and kids get to know them and they leave” (N.M., 2/9/99). One director worried that preservice teachers left with just a glimpse of the context. Another pastor was concerned that bonds were temporary and unreal:

I get disappointed when I see that if our children pick up a bond, it’s a temporary one, real at the time, but not for real... When they see another set of students [preservice teachers] come in they might get the attitude—I don’t want anything to do with them (B.H., 1/26/99).

Some directors suggested an extension of service-learning projects to the next semester in order to offer longer-term relationships.

These three roles and perspectives do not constitute a continuum, from playing it safe, to teacher/helper, to companion. Preservice teachers commonly operated within approved, safe roles. This approach is sensible for short-term visitors to another’s world. They usually functioned as teacher/helpers, but often this task was prescribed for them. In contrast, one preservice teacher (and likely others) was remembered by her community director as always holding a baby or young child, at ease, and willing to tackle any task. She gave and received companionship from the moment she walked in the door. Yet, there does seem to be a progression toward companionship, as a function of contact and time. Companionship had the most potential for the course aim of learning more about youth and families, but general experience “in the thick” of a diverse context was fruitful for multicultural education as well.

**Service-Learning for Multicultural Education**

What really happens in service-learning experiences? What do preservice teachers do that supports or limits reconsideration of their Eurocentric views?
Do certain experiences spur self-examination and realization? Are there constraints to the learning process? Can experiences be altered to generate cultural insights and motivate social critique?

In this case, what really happened was learning through service, mostly in prescribed roles, in affirmative, culturally-diverse situations. Preservice teachers focused on youth, primarily as teachers and helpers for them. This constrained their knowledge of adults, families, and community resources, but opened their eyes to cultural norms and life situations of youth. They received some instruction and guidance from community liaisons—enough to function in the context, but rarely enough to fully understand it. Nevertheless, the experience spoke for itself. Preservice teachers were immersed, at least momentarily, in neighborhoods from whence many of their future students will come. There was quality to “being there.” Preservice teachers had opportunities to interact cross-culturally, disrupt stereotypes, experience community resourcefulness, and learn to work positively with diverse youth.

Preservice teachers certainly could have gone beyond the roles and perspectives described. A major challenge is to rethink such projects in ways that support more assertive engagement by preservice teachers and offer them deeper connections with youth, families and communities. The factors which strongly influenced the field experience serve as a starting place for this reconsideration.

Sites

If experience speaks for itself, then service-learning sites matter a great deal. Here, service-learning sites were located in a lower income neighborhood of a small, fairly affluent college town. Outside the university, the population of color was small. The church sites included many African American members, and congregations varied in education and income levels. The lower income neighborhood was modest and acute conditions of poverty (as indicated by subsidized housing) were limited. As a result, preservice teachers interacted with a wide range of people of color, and with whites from lower income situations. For these preservice teachers, many from small or middle-size, in-state, homogeneous towns, interactions with these groups offered powerful, novel experiences with diversity. The biographies of preservice teachers impact what is novel, or outside their prior life experience; this point is considered in a following section.

In order to reinforce the major messages of the multicultural education course, it is fundamental that what happens inside service-learning sites affirms cultural diversity, challenges inequity, and supports educational equality and excellence. Each organiza-

tion did so, but in ways that opened different doors for preservice teachers. In the churches, preservice teachers were able to interact with entire families. Preservice teachers placed there expressed positive views of parents and families. In community centers, where preservice teachers primarily worked one-to-one with youth, they articulated more information about children, especially about teaching techniques responsive to diversity. A mix of these knowledge bases is necessary to achieve the aims of multicultural education. Site locations should be potentially rich in contacts with youth and parents and willing to involve preservice teachers in situations oriented to families.

Tasks

While the teacher/helper role had its place, and companionship was desirable, by themselves these roles played it too safe for multicultural education. Preservice teachers often perceived children as learners, much as they would in a school-based field experience. A primary reason for service-learning beyond school boundaries is to learn to situate children as family and community members and to view both as sources of knowledge about and strength for youth. Interactions with families and instruction about community issues occurred here, but it was spotty. An expansion and diversification of educative tasks, across all learning sites, could strengthen service-learning as a field experience for multicultural education. For example, attendance at community events, such as evening reading circles and parent meetings at Head Start, offered contact with adults and motivated reconsideration of stereotypes, particularly of “poor” parenting. The development of an event, such as the Hallelujah party, opened doors to acquaintanceship with a wide range of community people. The completion of mini-inquiries or Why? Studies, which required in-group (insider) and out-group (library) sources, engaged preservice teachers in conversations with site directors and other adults and youth within agencies. The use of such tasks as required dimensions of service-learning could move preservice teachers beyond one-on-one tutoring roles. The completion of an array of tasks could offer more insight into diverse and/or low-income communities.

Community Contact Person

Community directors were selected primarily for their potential to serve as cultural brokers to the local community. Either the person was a member of the group served, or had grown up in the neighborhood, and/or had worked effectively in the locale for a long while. The promise of community connection was realized partially. The directors were
dissatisfied with their guidance and supervision of preservice teachers and wanted to do more. To some extent, they were crippled by other, heavy demands on their time, but this will always be the case. How can educators tap into the potential of community brokers? The framework set by the course instructor for service-learning was insufficient to motivate vigorous involvement from community directors. Given the willingness of directors to do more, a specific list of service-learning activities that bolster multicultural education might motivate and guide their leadership. Movement toward stronger partnership, possibly the designation of directors as co-teachers, might also spur their interest and commitment. For example, in the development of a variety of field-based tasks, community representatives should play a collaborative role.

Student Biography

The major “punch” or power of this service-learning experience was exposure to people and settings significant to preservice teacher’s future classrooms, yet outside their previous life experiences. Service-learning jolted most preservice teachers from assumed (often biased) views of culturally diverse youth, of poverty, and of teaching in pluralistic situations. Because prospective teachers came from varied backgrounds, the service-learning experience “spoke” differently to each person. For many white teacher candidates service-learning in culturally diverse contexts was a “first” intensive interaction with people of color. For many preservice teachers with enough affluence to attend a major university, service-learning was a real confrontation with youth in poverty. For preservice teachers of color who grew up in segregated, minority communities, service-learning offered extended experience in multiracial situations. The biography of preservice teachers matters. Service-learning is a developmental endeavor related to previous life experience. If service-learning is to foster heightened awareness of culture, race, and power, then situations and activities must be carefully considered in terms of their power to offer new insights. Advance knowledge of preservice teacher’s backgrounds is key, particularly to structure potentially powerful learning experiences for them.

Course Instructor

The instructor was committed to service-learning; in her mind multicultural education without a community touchstone was abstract and shallow. Familiar with service-learning, she carefully structured the course and the field experience to build upon one another. It is impossible to disentangle the effects of one upon the other. Given the constraints of field roles and activities, however, some of the inward struggles of students about biases must be attributed primarily to the multicultural education course. The instructor was responsible for teaching and monitoring the multicultural education course and the field experience. Oversight for service-learning was a teaching overload and the instructor’s time could not stretch to offer much presence in the field.

The instructor organized a service-learning orientation, detailed assignments for reflective essays and mini-inquiry projects, suggested possible field activities, and provided time for reflective sessions. Once the framework was in place, field activities were left to the discretion of community directors. This stance relinquished control of the field experience and stymied some of the instructor’s expectations. A messier, more hands-on, continually collaborative orientation to community connections may be called for in order to fully meet university and community aims and needs.

Conclusion: The Promise of Service-Learning

What really happened did not fully realize the promise of service-learning for multicultural education. Preservice teachers reported a great deal of self-growth—they bonded with new friends across cultural and economic lines, they grappled with their own biases, and they gained responsive teaching strategies. Yet, preservice teachers’ links to and understandings of families and community strengths and problems was weak. Some shortcomings can reasonably be resolved through reconfiguration of the service-learning project, and several proposals for impacting influential factors were discussed.

But there is certainly a “long way to go” to create experiences that assist preservice teachers in becoming “better” teachers for the natural constituents of multicultural education. As teacher educators, we need to consider ways in which service-learning can be intensified and redirected to further undergird and augment multicultural education. Knowledge about what really happens is a necessary first step for all of us.

References


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