

“Walk in Their Shoes”: A Pre-service Teacher’s Reflection on Working with Homeless Families

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Abstract

This study explores a pre-service teacher’s reflective journey through community-based service learning in a family homeless shelter. More specifically, the study examines how the community-based field experience transformed the pre-service teacher’s views on families experiencing homelessness and provided opportunities for understanding the personal and educational needs of the families. Findings reveal that, though begun with fear and resistance, the community-based service learning experience provided the pre-service teacher with time and space to listen to the stories of the families. Participating in the interactional service learning activities and listening to the mothers’ personal stories the pre-service teacher gained a contextual understanding of the complex picture of poverty from the mothers’ perspectives. In addition, the pre-service teachers started to question the deficit perspectives deeply rooted in our society and educational system. The importance of using community-based field experience and its implications for teacher education are discussed.

Homelessness has a significant impact on various developmental domains of young children including physical, social, emotional, and academic development. Due to lack of access to early education programs and instability of residence, young children of homeless families often experience a delay in the development of academic performance (Walker-Dalhousie & Risko, 2008). One of the principal causes of academic failure of children in high poverty and culturally diverse communities is the incongruity between home and school practices. Home-school partnerships are especially important for children of families who have been marginalized and misunderstood in school settings (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) due to widely held stereotypes, especially deficiency views surrounding lack of English proficiency, cultural difference, and socioeconomic status.

Homeless families are often viewed as having dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes towards life. These undignified images are one of the most destructive barriers such families confront (Swick, 2001). Negative images and the absence of factual understanding of what homeless families go through are indeed barriers to accessing quality education as well as participating in the community (MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, 2010).

Especially in schools, the majority of pre-service and in-service teachers who are mostly White middle class tend to rely on unchallenged assumptions that working with families in high poverty is unsafe and students from families in high poverty have academic and behavioral issues. These perspectives underestimate the inherent abilities of children in poverty when they

are learning (Gentry, Lamb, Becker, & Hall, 2012; Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). Teachers' lack of understanding of family needs and cultures can significantly contribute to the school failure of children in high poverty.

Research has shown that one of the critical approaches to closing the gap between home and school is to understand families of different communities in relation to their strengths (Heath, 1983). One of the best ways for teachers to understand their learners' experiences is to hear voices of families and understand "stories" they live and tell in their communities (Bruner, 1990; Delpit, 1995). Community-based field experiences are considered to be a beneficial and powerful way to provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to transform their views through understanding such "stories" of their learners in their home communities (Cooper, 2007; Kim, 2013; Swick, 2001; Zeichner, 2010; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996).

This study explores a pre-service teacher's reflective journey through community-based service learning in a family homeless shelter. More specifically, the study examines how the community-based field experience transformed the pre-service teacher's views on families experiencing homelessness and provided opportunities for understanding the personal and educational needs of the families.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study builds on three major theoretical frameworks to conceptualize the service learning experiences of the pre-service teacher: (1) community-based service learning as a sociocultural process (Cooper, 2007; Hallman, 2012; Swick, 2001; Zeichner, 2010; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996), (2) critical reflection as central to understanding the complex nature of teaching and learning (Dewey, 1933; Freese, 1999, 2006; Gay & Kirkland, 2003), and (3) narrative practices as an interactive social and cultural process (Bauman, 1986; Heath, 1983).

Community-based service learning has been used as one of the most powerful approaches to teach pre-service teachers about other cultures (Cooper, 2007; Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). The process of learning about other cultures can be nurtured in community-based service learning based on mutual understandings and interactions between pre-service teachers and community members. Therefore, community-based service learning can enhance pre-service teachers' understanding of the strengths and needs of their learners in the sociocultural contexts where their learners are likely to demonstrate strengths and succeed (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). This perspective of service learning as a sociocultural process highlights how people live and learn in multi-layers of interrelated contexts including home, school, communities and society (Rogoff, 1995).

The aim of service learning can be realized only when future teachers engage in critical reflection on their own beliefs and their learners' experiences in the interrelated contexts (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Critical reflection is essential for pre-service teachers to see teaching as a complex act (Freese, 1999) and search for more innovative solutions to the problems that arise in their classrooms (Hallman, 2012; Swick, 2001).

In this study, the pre-service teachers participate in collaborative bookmaking activities with homeless families in which they could critically reflect on the families' life experiences. Listening to the families' narratives was one of the key tools provided to the pre-service teachers for critical reflection. The notion of narrative as social action was used to frame the pre-service

teachers' critical reflection processes. Through narrative practices learners become conscious of their experiences as historically and ideologically constructed within specific power structures (Shor, 1999), which reveals the inherently political nature of narrative practices in different communities.

According to a social and cultural perspective on narrative practices, developing narratives is a way of using language in social interactions rather than a set of skills that are required to learn (Bruner, 1990). That is, the present study builds on the notion of narrative genre as a form of discourse shaped by situational contexts (Bauman, 1986). This perspective suggests that telling stories is a form of discourse that is influenced by meaning-making practices of social phenomena. Thus, telling stories enables the narrator to shape, construct and perform the self, experience, and reality within the narrator's community, organizational and social membership (Bruner, 1990). Such a socially situated feature of telling stories endows pre-service teachers with a lens to acquire a rich understanding of similarities and differences in the patterns of the storied selves and realities in particular times and places (Bauman, 1986; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). Specifically, in this study, the notion of narrative as social action could be used by the pre-service teachers as a way to "see the possibility to change the dominant narratives, to shift the taken-for-granted social, cultural and institutional narratives" (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p.601) imposed on homeless families.

Methods

Context of the Study

The course. Ten pre-service teachers enrolled in a graduate elementary education program at a Northeastern public university completed community-based service learning in a homeless shelter during the Spring semester of 2013. The course, titled *Understanding Child Development in a Diverse Society*, was a required course on developmental theories and diversity issues associated with child development. The researcher was the instructor of the course and, as part of the university-wide effort to incorporate service learning components in courses, she designed a semester-long community-based service learning experience in a homeless shelter to be incorporated in the course.

Pre-service teachers completed weekly community-based service learning activities in a homeless shelter. There were two components of the service learning experience: volunteer hours and bookmaking activities with the families. The pre-service teachers observed and assisted the parents during the bi-weekly bookmaking and storybook sharing activities in the shelter conducted by the instructor. The families in the shelter were invited to make picture books using their photos. The instructor brought in blank board books in which the parents could put their photos and type in simple sentences on each page under the photo. The pre-service teachers during these activities were asked to actively participate as teaching aids to help the parents engage in the bookmaking process. The pre-service teachers, through this service learning project, were expected to understand challenges that homeless families faced when educating their children and reflect upon what stories the families brought in to share during the project. In addition to the bookmaking project, the pre-service teachers also complete volunteer hours doing miscellaneous jobs requested by the staff members of the shelter such as cleaning

the windows and organizing donations on the shelves in the basement. The pre-service teachers were encouraged to observe the physical environment as well as the routines and rules of the shelter during their volunteer hours.

The shelter. The shelter serves homeless families in a city located north of Boston providing long-term transitional housing, health services, employment positions and education programs such as basic skill education and children intervention programs. At the time of this study, they shelter served 23 homeless families. The majority of the parents in the shelter were single mothers with an income below the poverty-level, with either a substance abuse or mental health challenge. The age range of the children in House of Hope was between 1 month and 10 years old.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected and analyzed in this study include the researcher's notes on weekly large- and small group discussions on the service learning experience. Students engaged in discussions after the service learning activities each week about what they learned about the families, what kinds of challenges they experienced in order to understand shelter living and analyze and compare their experiences with the content within the assigned course readings.

The pre-service teachers also engaged in in-depth reflection by writing weekly journals on their service learning experiences. They were encouraged to reflect on certain aspects of the service learning by answering the following prompts: 1) Freely share how you felt during the project, what you worried about, what made you feel comfortable and/or uncomfortable about going in the shelter; 2) Freely share what you learned about families living in poverty (especially homeless) through this service learning experience, class discussions, and readings (refer to readings and include references); 3) Describe what you learned about the physical, emotional, academic, and social aspects of living in the shelter and the needs of the families. What strengths do you see in the families and what challenges did you notice they face when you heard the stories they shared? How does this learning help you challenge the stereotypes (or lack of knowledge/information) you previously had toward homeless families? What did this experience teach you about the needs of families? 4) Describe what the experiences in the shelter taught you regarding teaching and learning children with diverse backgrounds in school. Discuss how teachers can effectively support children in poverty in and out of school. What could be "culturally relevant teaching" for children in poverty? (support your claims with readings and include references).

For this article, Jillian's written discourse (reflective journals) was analyzed using analytic tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Gee, 2008). Jillian was one of the pre-service teachers who participated in the service learning project as part of the course. While analyzing the general themes that emerged from the journals of the pre-service teacher, special attention was paid to the social and ideological aspects of understanding homeless families and the teachers' role described in the journals. For example, the author coded and analyzed the written discourse particularly focusing on the pre-service teacher's use of language to reflect on working with homeless families at the personal (e.g. challenging personal

beliefs), institutional (e.g. the shelter and school), and societal levels (e.g. the deficit model, cultural models to define homelessness; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the pre-service teacher's reflection process during her service learning in the homeless shelter. Through the interactions with the mothers and children in the shelter she started to view the families as individuals with varied experiences rather than a group of homeless people living in a shelter. This new perspective was acquired by challenging societal stereotypes of the homeless and understanding the challenges the families faced in their lives. More importantly, deeper reflection occurred when the pre-service teacher personally connected with the mothers through direct interactions during bookmaking activities and developed an understanding of the mothers' perspectives on education and literacy. Based on this critical reflection she continued to rethink the traditional approaches to educating children with diverse backgrounds and reflected on more concrete examples of culturally relevant teaching for children living in high poverty.

“Just Like Us”: Homeless Families as Individuals with Varied Experiences

In the beginning of the semester, students were asked to work in groups to brainstorm preconceived notions associated with homeless people. Most of the words were related to the stereotypes and negative images imposed by our society on homeless people such as “lazy,” “dangerous,” “not caring about their children's education,” and “uneducated.” Several studies have shown that pre-service teachers hold stereotypical views of certain groups with diverse backgrounds and felt fear or anxiety in urban placements (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). Not surprisingly, many of the pre-service teachers were initially nervous about going into the shelter and did not know what to expect from this service learning activity. It was evident that Jillian felt uncomfortable about spending time in the shelter. In her reflection, she described many of the students including herself not feeling safe about going to the shelter:

I was not sure how I felt about spending time in the shelter. Even among my classmates we decided that we would be sure to go in groups of at least two, for the reason of safety, I am not even sure what we were thinking we needed protection from, but we felt a sense of comfort knowing that we would not be venturing into the home on our own.

The pre-service teachers were required to complete volunteer hours as well as bookmaking sessions with the residents as part of their service learning for the course. Jillian was unsure about how the volunteering hours such as cleaning the kitchen and organizing the donation shelves in the basement would help her to become a better teacher. Interestingly, however, as she engaged in more reflection about the volunteer hours and her time spent assisting with the bookmaking activities, she started to challenge not only her personal beliefs but also the societal stereotypes of homeless families:

As the process continued, I was amazed at the amount of food that was being removed from the shelves because it had already expired. Unfortunately too many believe that the food may not be good enough for their own family, but it is good enough for the poor.

As Jillian reflected on the kinds of goods and the quality of support that the families received such as outdated exercise equipment, broken furniture, unattractive toys, shared refrigerators, lack of access to technology and educational materials, she moved beyond a simplistic understanding of the physical conditions of the shelter life. Consequently, she posed the following critical question regarding how the shelters and our society can more effectively and respectfully serve the people in high poverty as a community of support:

The families living in the shelter are trying to get their families back on track and in their own homes. It is discouraging that they are viewed as being less worthy than others simply because of their own situation. If we want the support that these shelters offer to the residents to be an opportunity for them to realize that the community is there to assist them, what can be done to educate the community that the support needs to be positive and not half-hearted?

Though begun with fear and resistance, the volunteer activities paved the way for the pre-service teacher to gain an authentic understanding of the unique contexts where the homeless families dealt with daily challenges. The activities also provided tools for thought that challenge the status quo on supporting homeless families.

“Homeless Does Not Mean Wordless”

Uneducated was the word that stood out to describe homeless people during our first discussion on service learning. This particular stereotype is problematic especially when it comes to teaching children from homeless families because the word portrays homeless parents as those who do not value education for their children. Central to the service learning component of the course was the bookmaking activity in which the mothers and pre-service teachers collaboratively made picture books using their photos. This activity required a greater degree of involvement from both the pre-service teachers and the residents while they shared their life stories and made connections to common experiences.

In the beginning of the bookmaking project, Jillian was concerned about how she would be viewed by the mothers as she felt like she was intruding on the mothers' private lives. She was also unsure of what kinds of connections she could make with the mothers and what she could talk about during the activity. Indeed, in the first meeting, most of the mothers were a little hesitant to work with the pre-service teachers; however, as the pre-service teachers interacted with the mothers more in subsequent book making sessions, both the mothers and pre-service teachers felt that it became easier to open up. They described making connections through sharing life experiences as the key to gaining access to the mothers' world and building trust (Bruner, 1986). Throughout the bookmaking activities Jillian reflected on “ways of words” (Heath, 1983) in the shelter that demonstrated how literacy was valued and used in the shelter although it was not as visible as in typical middle class households. For instance, during the

bookmaking process Jillian started to view the mothers as competent writers who value the ability to read and write as illustrated in the following passage:

I was interested in listening to the words that the mothers wanted to include in the books that they created. Each mother has a specific story line that she wanted to follow, and was not shy about specifically stating the words to be used.

Most of the mothers wanted multiple copies of the books they were making to share with other family members. During our in-class discussions, the pre-service teacher interpreted this fact as the mothers' interest in the function of literacy and the value of making personal books for their children. As such, interactions with the mothers during the bookmaking processes provided Jillian with opportunities to counter stereotypes associated with homeless people's intellectual abilities:

Granted many of the women have not attended any post high school education, but they certainly were not illiterate or uneducated. They realized that because the books would only be able to include a limited amount of words they needed to think about the most beneficial and powerful words to use. If they were uneducated, the knowledge of certain words having a more powerful meaning than another would not be evident.

These moments gave the pre-service teachers a chance to examine the literate environment of the shelter. The resource room was full of donated books and board games for the residents of the shelter. But, in order to get in the resource room, a staff member of the shelter had to unlock the door, which means limited access to the books and educational materials. We often had discussions in the resource room after bookmaking activities and examined what kinds of books and educational materials were available and how those books were organized. The pre-service teachers also found that it was quite challenging for the parents to read to their children in their rooms while there were people talking. Jillian made the following connections between the literate environment of the shelter and instructional practice in her reflection:

Seeing firsthand the challenges that families in a shelter face in regards to opportunities to interact with literature will be beneficial when entering the classroom. It is important to emphasize that there was not a lack to interest in books on the part of the mothers, but a lack of age appropriate books and no meaningful separation of the books that are available. Living in a shelter does not negate a desire to do what is best for your child.

“One Size Does Not Fit ALL”: Reflection on Educational Practices for Homeless Children

Observing and learning about the daily routines of the families and rules of the shelter helped the pre-service teachers understand individual needs of the families and challenges they faced on a daily basis. The pre-service teachers learned that living in a shelter was not just about financial crisis: it was about families whose 'normal' interactions were often limited by the environment, more specifically the rules and regulations of the shelter, which made the homeless

families' lifestyle somewhat different than that of others outside the shelter. This realization, as illustrated below, helped Jillian view the role of teacher as central to the student's growth.

This inconsistency of who is going to be in the place that they live from day to day has to be unnerving and at times disruptive to establishing a natural flow of daily life. As a teacher we need to remember that we may be one of only a few consistent adults in a child's life, and we need to make sure that we keep our message to them as consistent: they are worthy and able to receive an education.

Based on the strengths and resilience she observed in the homeless families Jillian also emphasized, in her reflection, the importance of helping not only homeless children but also other students in the classroom undo the stereotypes associated with people in high poverty so that all children feel safe and valued in school:

The lessons that teachers present also need to actively engage students in breaking down stereotypes and validating the value of all. It is important that the instruction not be a vague representation of what the children should be taught since research has shown that the implicit message 'We're all friends.'

This learning process helped Jillian realize that the teachers' understanding of their roles is closely related to their instructional practices. The most significant impact of the service learning activities on the pre-service teachers was that they started to reconceptualize the notion of educational practices and role of teachers working with children living in high poverty. More specifically, they came to the conclusion that teachers should build on the strengths and resilience of families struggling with homelessness rather than unchallenged stereotypes. Jillian engaged in critical reflection on the current educational practices that emphasize basic skills for children living in poverty. She realized that the teacher would need to think outside the box in order to teach children not only their current needs but also a higher level of learning. Building on her firsthand experiences of working with homeless families, Jillian wrote the following:

To be successful, teachers must define their own understanding of their role in the development of a child and how it correlates to the students in their classroom. The effective teacher realizes that the life a student outside of the classroom is important to their success in the classroom.

In other words, she concluded that the key to meeting the needs of children with varied experiences in school is that the teacher needs to realize the importance of learning about students' lives outside of the classroom where their strengths can be valued (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Discussion

Findings of this study revealed that observing and reflecting on the physical environment, routines and rules of the homeless shelter afforded the pre-service teacher opportunities to understand the challenges that the homeless mothers faced; however, direct interactions with the mothers and children through sharing life stories during the collaborative bookmaking process helped her reflect at deeper levels. Participating in the interactional service learning activities and listening to the mothers' personal stories the pre-service teacher gained a contextual understanding of the complex picture of poverty from the mothers' perspectives. This experience also helped her question the deficit perspectives deeply rooted in our society and educational system.

Continuous critical reflection occurred at different levels albeit closely intertwined; it started at the personal level questioning her own beliefs and fear toward people in poverty. The learning process of rethinking the institutional practices (e.g. rules of the shelter and services provided by the shelter) and challenging the traditional teaching practices (e.g. "one size fits all" approach) provided her with in-depth knowledge and more concrete ideas of educational applications.

Most importantly, the pre-service teacher gained important insights related to the interrelated nature of teacher beliefs and instructional practices through critical reflection. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that teachers can be more open to the experiences of their students when they critically examine their own beliefs, attitudes, and instructional practices. One way that teachers can engage in such critical reflection on what their students are bringing into the classroom is to learn about their students in non-school settings such as during after-school activities or home visits where they are likely to demonstrate strengths and success (Cooper, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Through the community-based service learning experience the pre-service teacher obtained more authentic knowledge about students' lives and further reflected on teacher accountability which "involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one's own teaching beliefs and behaviors" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181).

Though begun with fear and resistance, the community-based service learning experience in the homeless shelter provided the pre-service teacher with time and space to listen to the stories of the families. The pre-service teacher was attentive to the social and ideological nature of the daily experiences of the homeless families, rules of the shelter and literacy practices at the shelter, and learned that the mothers in the shelter strived to make sense of their identities as mothers, members of the shelter, and members of the society. If heard, these rich stories of resilience of families struggling with homeless/poverty will help teachers increase their knowledge base on families and children living in poverty and work with such populations more effectively.

One of the challenges in the field of teacher education is that many teachers many not view themselves as cultural beings assuming that they are not part of cultural diversity (Gay, 2001; Tatum, 1997). Carefully designed community based field experiences are a powerful way for pre-service and in-service teachers to not only learn about their students' cultures but also view themselves as community builders who can create communities of learners where all students can learn and thrive (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Swick, 2001).

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