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## A Comparative Case Study of Service-Learning in Teacher Education: Rethinking Benefits and Challenges of Partners and Placements

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# A Comparative Case Study of Service-Learning in Teacher Education: Rethinking Benefits and Challenges of Partners and Placements

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## **A Comparative Case Study of Service-Learning in Teacher Education: Rethinking Benefits and Challenges of Partners and Placements**

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*In this comparative case study, two teacher educators turned the research lens on their own experiences with service-learning. Positing that teacher education programming can explicitly address pre-service teachers' assumptions through course-embedded academic service-learning activities, particularly reflection, the advantages and difficulties of various placements and partners were examined. Using a case study design allowed the researchers to share their experiences locating suitable placements and forging sustainable partnerships for their courses. Findings include the importance of considering the utility of non-traditional placements and settings, the value of cultivating long-term partners, and the significance of frequent and ongoing reflection. The authors conclude that comparative case study is one method for teacher educators interested in service-learning to examine their own courses as pathways to preparing pre-service teachers. Teacher educators can intentionally incorporate service-learning components that expand pre-service teachers' frames of reference, using reflection as a tool for preparing future teachers for increasingly complex teaching.*

As researchers working within two distinct teacher education programs at Louisiana State University, one of our primary goals is to foster a pedagogical experience for our students that connects experience and content knowledge through continual reflection. We both employ Academic Service-Learning (AS-L) as a viable means of strengthening the preparation of K-12 pre-service teachers (PSTs) and refining our methods of preparation through continual reflection on the intersections among coursework, field experiences, and service. AS-L engages students in experiences that prepare educational practitioners who understand the importance of reflection and action, or praxis (Friere, 1970). Both a philosophy and an instructional method, AS-L reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens, and academic courses should include activities that address real community needs. Essentially, students learn course objectives through active engagement (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Root, 1997). In AS-L classrooms, education course objectives are matched to the mutual benefit of both service provider and service recipient integrating service into the course (Furco, 1997; Root, 1994; Schnaubelt, 2001; Tai-Seale, 2001).

As a pedagogical method to achieve authentic academic goals (Billig & Furco, 2002), AS-L engages university students in activities that extend their lived experiences and connect theory with practice. In this way, AS-L transforms our students' field experiences by asking them to connect coursework to a perceived need, a service, which deepens their understanding. Our approach is also guided by our School of Education's (SOE) conceptual framework which is to prepare teachers to be reflective practitioners who value and establish cooperative relationships with peers, families, school colleagues, other education

specialists, and community agencies. Service-learning courses may give PSTs glimpses of education that challenge their taken-for-granted views of schools and students. Our experiences with AS-L are an effort to include ourselves, our students, and our community partners in envisioning what Maxine Greene calls “what was once familiar abruptly appears strange” (1997, p. 142).

Service-learning is profoundly ingrained in the action-reflection theories of John Dewey (1915; 1938). Reflection is a fundamental element of service-learning. Both service-learning practitioners and researchers have established that the most effectual, useful, and successful service-learning experiences are those that intentionally include “structured opportunities” for learners to analytically reflect upon their service experience (Eyler & Giles, 1996; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). According to Moon (1999), these structured opportunities for reflection, embedded in courses with service-learning experiences, allow opportunities for learners to self-examine and shape their assumptions, judgments, and subsequent practices related to an action or experience, while simultaneously gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and future actions (Moon, 1999). Consistently, reflection in service-learning has been referred to as the “link that ties student experiences in the community to academic learning” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 171). Eyler and Giles (1999) have established that the process of reflection provides the mechanism for students to connect their service and their learning. Our purpose was to examine how each of us refined field experience placements and partnerships, reflecting on the need to seek out mutually beneficial sites and sustainable partnerships. In this article, we employ a comparative case study approach to examine the efficacy of non-traditional service-learning placements and the value of sustained partnerships designed to address tensions and strengthen preparation to teach in diverse settings through the lens of continual reflection.

### **Framing the Study with Academic Service-Learning and Wide-awakeness**

While reflective goals are the ideal standard for service learning, we are also bound by the guidelines and mission put into place for teacher education programs by various governing organizations. For example, we strive to ensure that our course-embedded AS-L components meet the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards for field experiences. Standard 3 specifically links the role of field experiences with candidate preparation:

#### **Standard 3: Field Experiences and Clinical Practice**

The unit and its school partners design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice so that teacher candidates and other school professionals develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn (2012).

In this standard, NCATE does not specify types of placements but acknowledges the importance of partners working together to craft field experiences that prepare PSTs to teach all students.

Engagement with AS-L can take many forms within teacher preparation programs. Sullivan (1991) suggested AS-L as a way to overcome the inadequacies and shortcomings

of traditional teacher preparation but advocated for social service placements only. Further, Sullivan (1991) reported that PSTs who finished community service internships experienced success in their student teaching experience, especially greater ease in planning activities, increased communication with parents, and effectively using the interpersonal skills necessary to deal effectively with adolescents (Sullivan, 1991). Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) posited the positioning of teachers, which we extend here to PSTs, as working toward becoming what they term “transformative intellectuals,” those who teach critical thinking as preparation for K-12 students’ civic engagement. In tandem with Sullivan, Root (1994) perceived AS-L as a means of both extending traditional teacher preparation and, similar to Aronowitz and Giroux, she advocated for what she terms “participatory democracy,” wherein teachers and PSTs become focused on the needs of service recipients. Root (1994) aligned her views with Darling-Hammond and Snyder (1990) who argued involvement in AS-L courses assists PSTs to truly focus on learner-centered needs. One way to enrich the connection between PSTs and their future students is for PSTs to understand how what occurs in the classroom is very often connected to what happens outside of the classroom.

As teacher educators, we have come to view AS-L courses through the theoretical lens of Greene’s (1995) notion of “wide-awakeness.” In *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), Greene envisioned classrooms in which teachers and students engage in “collaborative searches” which allow them to “break through. . . the taken for granted, the unquestioned” (p. 23). These searches, she explained, should incorporate the community and can lead to moments of what she calls, “wide-awakeness.” Revitalizing neglected areas of the community, planting community gardens, and tutoring, she continued, can bring together individuals who become “moved to *imagine* what might be if they took action together” (Greene, 1995, p. 40).

In order to achieve Aronowitz and Giroux’s (1985) stance of “transformative intellectuals,” Root’s (1994) recommended extension of traditional teacher preparation, Darling-Hammond and Snyder’s (1990) focus on students and ultimately, Sullivan’s (1991) success with student teaching, we posit that through deep reflection, both on the part of students and ourselves, AS-L allows us to craft meaningful field experiences that better prepare our students for teaching. The intersection between reflection and the consideration of placements and partners is the crux of this study.

One way to ease the dissonance between PSTs and their future students is for PSTs to understand how what occurs in the classroom is very often connected to what happens outside of the classroom. One example is Lee’s pedagogical approach that is based on her work, cultural modeling, “a framework for the design of learning environments that examines what youth know from [their] everyday settings to support subject matter learning” in school so that “differences between community-based and school-based norms can be negotiated by both students and teachers” (p. 15). We feel comparative case study methods can serve as one way for teacher education faculty to evaluate the efficacy of their field experiences and how AS-L might guide faculty to address their mission and goals.

## Methods

The definitive and real-life purpose of educational research, comprising studies of schools, classrooms, teachers, and students, is to advance education (Spindler, 1982). The continued need to examine how teachers are best prepared, especially for diverse settings,

led us to this timely study; a case study approach seemed the most appropriate (Merriam, 1991).

### **Comparative Case Study Design**

The design of this study was a comparative case study (Merriam, 2009) wherein the purpose was to examine how each of us worked toward field experience placements and partnerships that were appropriate and fitting. First, our current position within the School of Education (SOE) at Louisiana State University, the state's flagship university, both located in a large urban metroplex and producer of the largest number of teachers makes the study significant. Second, our personal experiences contributed to our questions about the benefits and challenges of service-learning partners and placements. Both of us came to Louisiana State University in 2006; Sulentic Dowell teaches literacy-related courses within the SOE's elementary education program, while Bach teaches English education courses in the SOE's secondary English program. In addition, prior to joining the faculty at Louisiana State University, Sulentic Dowell served as the assistant superintendent of elementary schools in the adjacent local school district. Both authors have a combined public school teaching experience record of 25 years.

Because of our familiarities with reflective teaching, this comparative case study facilitated a dialogic process that resembles the process we hope our PSTs undertake throughout their program. The weaving together of story and theory can encourage researchers, as well as teachers, to interrogate assumptions captured in their personal stories as well as present new avenues for exploration. Given the importance of placements and partners in the success of service-learning, we examined the benefits and challenges of partners and placements, rethinking previous sites and entities.

### **Participants**

Grounding ourselves within our research, we specifically examined the fall 2011 semester placements. Case one's 32 participants were enrolled in an elementary literacy assessment course; case two's 27 participants were enrolled in an adolescent literature course.

### **Study Setting**

Sites within the local urban metroplex where Louisiana State University is situated served as the setting for our study. As the capital city of Louisiana, Baton Rouge presents typical schooling challenges.

### **Data Sources**

As the design of this study was a comparative case study (Merriam, 2009), the purpose was to examine how we perceived placements and partners for education preparation courses designated as service-learning courses. This study employed three data sources: sixteen weekly observations from each of the authors, student reflections captured in course assignments (three assignments for case 1; five assignments for case 2, and the end-of-the-semester service-learning course evaluations. Observations, often recorded in personal reflective journals, e-mails, and written reports became the primary source of data with student reflections, and service-learning course evaluations providing triangulation with the observations. According to Charmaz (2000), employing these sources achieved

triangulation.

For case 1, Eyler's reflection map template, used for thinking through possible options for incorporating reflection into service-learning courses or programs, was adapted (Eyler 2001). Students are asked to complete a major reflection at three points during the semester. The initial reflection actually captures students' assumptions about the impending service, asking students what they presume and imagine they will encounter about students with whom they will work, the neighborhoods or community in which the school is located, and the school itself. The medial reflection invites students to reflect on what has surprised them up to the midpoint of the semester juxtaposed with the assumptions they initially expressed. The final reflection queries students what they will use from what they have learned from the service-learning experience and asks students to examine again, their initial assumptions and what they listed as surprises at the midpoint of the semester. These students were observed weekly, but on a rotational basis.

For case two's course, students write a series of five reflections that not only prepare them for their projects but also ask them to connect course content with their service-learning experiences. They first write an essay that describes the library in which they are placed and a twenty-minute interview they conduct with a young adult reader they meet at their libraries. They reflect on how that experience helped them come up with service-learning project ideas. Then they describe what their group project will be and what they think the obstacles and benefits will be of that project. The third assignment requires that they make an action plan which outlines the roles and responsibilities for each group member. The fourth paper relates explicitly to course content as each group must read at least five additional books in order to help them with the S-L project. The final project is a highly-reflective paper with a brief group presentation on what each student has learned during this service-learning experience. Students answer the following questions—Has their idea of the adolescent reader changed? Why or why not? What have they learned about young adult libraries and librarians? How did this experience extend their understanding of this course's content? Students in case 2 were informally observed as I attended these events as well as being observed during planning meetings. Typically these observations occurred three to four times within the semester.

Our university uses a separate student evaluation document that is common for all service-learning courses and that data is collected by our Center for Community Engagement, Learning, and Leadership. This form consists of ten questions and students answer each question using a Likert scale response. Examples of those statements include "Overall, my service learning was a valuable experience," and "The tasks I performed for the community helped me to gain a better understanding of course content," and "As a result of my service-learning, I know more about the problems and assets of the community."

The researchers met regularly before, during and after the fall semester of 2011 to share their experiences. During those meetings, we discussed various theories and approaches to preparing teachers to work in diverse settings in the context of our experiences with AS-L.

## **Analysis**

We centered our analysis on a constructivist paradigm as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2011). Congruent with our paradigm, our methods within this comparative case design provided us prolific sources of data allowing us to develop rich descriptions of the benefits and challenges of placements and partners. In our analysis we addressed credibili-

ty, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 2006) through prolonged engagement with each site, multiple interactions with the principal, teachers, and librarians, and seeking out analytical feedback of our analysis and case write-ups from colleagues.

Data were analyzed using Creswell's (1998) and Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method involving a continuous cycle of conception and categorization. Researchers coded field notes generated from observations, reflections, and service-learning course evaluations individually line-by-line. We compared views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences of our students and ourselves. Themes developed from three code phases based on the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Initially, researchers interacted with the data to develop individual or open codes from raw data. Then, we compared our individual data. Axial codes, codes that correlated within broad service-learning concepts, were merged to form code concepts. Further examination of the interconnectivity of categories, allowed us to further refine these code concept categories. Analysis of concepts led to selective themes. Point of saturation occurred when no new themes emerged. Our final three themes are: 1) the importance of considering the utility of non-traditional placements and settings, 2) the value in cultivating long-term partners, and 3) the significance of frequent group reflection in preparing our PSTs for teaching in culturally diverse settings. Following the tradition of reflexivity in case study research (Creswell, 1998) we switch to the first person in discussing our findings.

### **Case One: Service-Learning Journey within Teacher Education-Issues with Placements and Partners**

Despite the efficacy of AS-L regarding the preparation of PSTs to teach in urban environments (Boyle-Baise, 1998; 2002; Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000; Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000) and the obvious benefits to both service recipients and service providers, placements and partners can be problematic. At Louisiana State University, PSTs majoring in elementary education complete a total of 180 field experience hours spread throughout several courses over three semesters. As part of the elementary education sequence, I (Sulentic-Dowell) teach a literacy course within the first semester of the program with two co-requisite professional practice courses, each with required field experiences. In this course, PSTs typically spend from eleven-fifteen hours in the field over a ten-week period. Committed to AS-L, I sought to connect the literacy services PSTs in my courses could provide, to address community partners' needs. Over the course of nine semesters, I struggled to find a partner and subsequent placement that "fit" the needs of my PSTs and provided a valuable community service. For example, although teaching in a 1-5 accrediting program, several traditional elementary schools, enlisted as service-learning sites, insisted on including kindergarten placements, problematic as the placements did not match the certification program. It was very difficult to communicate both with numerous teachers across different grade levels and to adequately supervise PSTs each week. Over the course of several semesters, it became clear to me that a principal's willingness to host PSTs wasn't always shared by classroom teachers and thus, top-down directives were counter to what I envisioned through a service-learning placement. As such, I continued to seek a partner and placements that saw a perceived need as a means of inviting PSTs into classrooms for a viable service-learning experience.

### **Considering the Utility of Non-Traditional Placements and Settings**

In the fall of 2009, a local charter school principal contacted Louisiana State University's Center for Community Engagement in Learning and Leadership requesting assistance with elementary students struggling with reading comprehension. This school operated as a district established choice charter (Type I) and had educated K-5 students for over a decade. Children's Charter School was in its 12th year of operation, served 277 K-8 students of which 91% received free and reduced lunch and 95% were Black, and had demographics similar to the surrounding urban district schools (Bickmore & Sulentic Dowell, 2011). In turn, the Louisiana State University's Center Director contacted me. Although the need and service aspect were mutually beneficial, the classroom placements were still problematic. Reluctant at first to use a charter school as a field site, I worked with the principal, the school's instructional specialist, and interested teachers, until finally, a placement involving the school's entire first grade were secured. Having PSTs in the same grade led to the opportunity to observe, interact, and specifically focus on the characteristics of one grade level, a rich experience for PSTs' initial field experience. In addition, I deepened the service-learning component by embedding a Report of Assessments and Tutoring into the course. As Children's Charter School needed assistance with literacy, what was a simple tutoring assignment evolved into supplying the school with in-depth assessment reports for each child tutored.

### **Cultivating Long-Term Partners: The Efficacy of Multiple Placements at One Grade Level**

Multiple placements at a single grade level were opportunities for PSTs to be immersed in an experience of what it means to be in a first grade classroom—the ability to master standards for first grade, to observe grade-level planning, and to reflect frequently as a group, as well as individuals, about the placement. By the fall of 2011, the partnership was well established, and the first grade teachers reached out to me, asking for more time for structured small group experiences in addition to the one-to-one tutoring PSTs provided. In addition, the two first grade teachers requested an orientation meeting at the start of the semester to help acclimate PSTs to their students and school and first grade classrooms.

### **Frequent Opportunities for Reflection**

Bringle and Hatcher (1999) established reflection as a hallmark of service-learning. Reflection is particularly suited to teacher education as novice PSTs need the time and space to think about instructional decisions, students' responses, and their actions such as choices, judgments, and assessments. As part of this literacy course, each semester students complete three major (aforementioned) in-depth reflections. These three reflections, initial, medial, and final, were shared in class selectively, as after I read and responded, I underlined provocative statements which I then invited PSTs to share aloud. The three major reflections, and the subsequent culling of provocative comments, tended to generate deep, often raucous discussions about assumptions, and often these assumptions centered on economic, racial/ethnic, and linguistic difference. Weekly reflections were also submitted and shared, but in small group settings. Sharing sessions resulted in dynamic conversations about how the experience was a catalyst for students to re-examine their assumptions and also revealed issues with placements and partners. A prime example is a

student writing, "I assumed because we were working in a public school, children would be wild, the classes would be chaotic, and the teachers wouldn't care what was happening. Boy, was I wrong. And I am ashamed at what I thought." My field notes revealed that the ensuing class discussion centered on this feeling of guilt, fairly prevalent among Louisiana State University students, but led to deeper discussion about media portrayals of public schools in Baton Rouge. The class discussion, based on a student's reflection, revealed that through reflection, students were able to explore their assumptions, compare assumptions to the experience, and arrive at the conclusion that media portrayals did not match their service-learning experience at Children's Charter School.

Having PSTs in the same grade also led to productive, generative, and reflective course discussions about the possible range of skill and ability levels in any given classroom as well as the opportunity to observe and interact with teachers from one grade level. The in-depth nature of the placement meant PSTs came to understand a specific grade level well in terms of expectations, standards, skill development, and the parameters of the grade. These same discussions had exposed problems such as field or host teachers who were unwelcoming and didn't want university students in their classes or who had been mandated to "accept" PSTs, as well as teachers who engaged PSTs in activities such as running off copies, moving furniture, and returning library materials. Reflections also disclosed inappropriate situations such as PSTs left alone with classes of children. In particular, reflections revealed that having a class of students spread over multiple grade levels made adequate supervision and observation difficult to impossible to achieve.

After eleven total semesters - seven semesters at this charter school, I finally achieved a partner and placements that both benefitted PSTs and provided tutoring at a crucial grade level, first grade as service-learning. The fall 2012 semester marked the seventh consecutive semester I partnered with Children's Charter School. Through two different administrators and three first grade teachers, I felt as if I had finally crafted a true service-learning partnership wherein each entity provided a mutually beneficial learning experience. Table 1 illustrates the process of narrowing down different partners and placements.

In my experience, novice PSTs want to be observed and receive feedback. They also want to share what they are learning and question what they are experiencing in meaningful ways. Multiple classrooms across several grade levels made such feedback and conversations difficult. However, the current placement, two classrooms that comprise the entire first grade are ideal, especially in terms of reflection. Having all students in a class placed in one grade level results in deep, rich classroom discussions about what is typical for that grade, how teachers interact, and the routines and procedures in place for that grade. During the fall of 2011, one PST reflected, "I can't believe how much I learned about teaching, about kids, and myself this semester. Seeing how Ms. [Blinded] and Ms. [Blinded] shared with each other and how they structured small groups was so eye-opening for me. I had read about it, but seeing it was unbelievable!" Another PST shared, "I am amazed at how close these two teachers work, and they are so genuine about wanting us there, sharing how students have grown. And informally mentoring us. I love this, I don't want the semester to end." Yet a third PST reflected, "It amazes me how Ms. [Blinded] creates centers. She knows so much about her students and I learn from her every week how to plan instruction that meets the needs of students."

Table 1

*Various Partners and Placements on the Journey to Locating a True AS-L Experience.*

Semester	Partner	Placement	Classrooms
Fall 2007	Traditional K-5 Elementary	1-5 classrooms	10
Spring 2008	Traditional K-5 Elementary	1-5 classrooms	14
Fall 2008	Traditional K-5 Elementary	K-5 classrooms	12
Spring 2009	Traditional K-5 Elementary	K-5 classrooms	12
Fall 2009	Charter K-5 Elementary	3rd & 4th grade classrooms	4
Spring 2010	Traditional K-5 Elementary	K-5 classrooms	12
Fall 2010	Charter K-5 Elementary	2nd, 3rd, 4th grade classrooms	6
Spring 2011	Charter K-5 Elementary	1st grade classrooms	2
Fall 2011	Charter K-5 Elementary	1st grade classrooms	2
Spring 2012	Charter K-5 Elementary	1st grade classrooms	2
Fall 2012	Charter K-5 Elementary	1st grade classrooms	2

Data from field notes generated from observations and culled from service-evaluations revealed students' excitement, active engagement, as well as appreciation for these partners and this placement. In the fall of 2011, I received a huge affirmation of this placement and these two first grade teacher-partners when service-learning evaluations received for this course were the highest evaluations across Louisiana State University's service-learning courses.

### **Case Two: A Journey outside a Teacher Education Course-Issues with Placements and Partners**

Bach's journey into service learning began with her application to Louisiana State University's faculty scholars program—a semester-long course designed to assist those faculty interested in service-learning to incorporate its philosophy, principles, and practices into one of their courses. In my 2010 application essay, I wrote:

In my adolescent literature course, we often surmise what the reading habits of adolescents might be—what types of books they read, how they do/do not discuss them, and how they write about literature. This [service-learning] experience would give my students an authentic look at what it means to be a contemporary adolescent reading about the authentic teenage experiences represented in these books.

My initial plan was to place students in middle and high school English/ Language Arts classrooms in order for them to get to know adolescent readers through engaging with them during classroom activities and silent reading programs, such as Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). It was my participation with the scholars program that broadened my notion of the potential placements for my students. Because of my previous experiences working with librarians who work with young adults, I considered placing my students in public libraries instead of schools. In fact, two out of the seven objectives in the course syllabus directly pertain to a librarian's primary responsibilities: "Students will be able to understand the diverse needs/ interests of adolescent readers by: 1) Being able to recommend quality titles to them, and 2) Becoming familiar with marketing policies in bookstores, libraries, and online."

In analyzing the various written reflections and course documents I kept before, during and after the semester, I realized that from the very beginning I assumed that service-learning might prepare my students to understand and work with diverse adolescents and their reading interests and habits in spaces other than the classroom.

In Louisiana State University's English education program, PSTs earn a BA degree in English and fulfill the requirements for teacher certification through the SOE. Our PSTs spend 40 hours each semester for three consecutive semesters in middle and high school classrooms teaching mini-lessons, leading small-group discussions, and preparing materials before they begin their student teaching internships during the last semester of the program. They rarely have an opportunity to interact with middle and high school students in non-classroom settings unless they make an effort.

These PSTs take a variety of required courses including one that I teach—the adolescent literature course. A general focus of this course is reading texts that are written for and marketed to readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and I saw service-learning as a way to improve my PSTs' knowledge of adolescent readers through interactions with middle and high school students in non-classroom settings through a series of service-learning placements at local public libraries.

### **Considering the Utility of Non-Traditional Placements and Settings**

I began my search for potential libraries by contacting the local Head of Teen Services for our public libraries. From the start, I had hoped to work with a variety of libraries that served economically and racially diverse populations and wrote her the following email:

I'm teaching an adolescent literature course with a service-learning component. My vision is to send groups of four students to a library that serves young adults and have them work with a librarian to assist him or her with their needs in regards to teen programming, cataloging, surveying, promoting, making a display, whatever the needs might be. They would be required to spend 10 hours on this project and part of their course grade depends on their contribution to the project . . . Do you have any branches who might be interested in participating? . . . I really want students in a variety of settings.

My contact responded "YAY!!! I really like the fact that you are teaching the teachers to think of public libraries as 'community partners'." She then helped me establish partnerships with three different libraries: one with vibrant teen programming; one with less-structured programming but frequent use by its patrons; and a third which served more as a holding place for adolescents after school or for non-book programming such as SAT prep courses or tutoring. Each group of PSTs worked with their placement partners to design and enact a different project based on their library's needs. Those projects reflected their patrons' interests—the first group worked with the teen group to organize and host a Battle of the Books, the second group held weekly contests in which patrons wrote Tweets about their favorite books, and the third created recommended book lists and attempted to survey their patrons. But, those projects did not come easily.

### **Cultivating Long-Term Partners**

In order to sustain long-term partnerships, Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker and Donohue (2003) offer useful suggestions such as building trust, sharing power, and meeting each other's goals. Engaging in a comparative case study that included my own ongo-

ing written observations, frequent check-ins with my co-author, and follow-up meetings with my community partners, also contributed to ways of cultivating long-term partners by helping me identify those approaches that sustained our relationships. However, those practices also revealed potential missteps (and a few actual mistakes) I might have made during the semester.

At the end of teaching the course for the first time, I wrote the following entry in my observation journal:

Diverse placements are key, but a lot of work. Also it helps if the partners as well as the students come to their first meeting with ideas of the type of service projects in which they might engage. I underestimated the need to identify problems beforehand; I thought the process would be more collaborative, but I found myself having to tell the partners what their “problems” were so my students would have something to do.

While I had learned the importance of sharing ownership with my students and community partners as part of my training program, I overlooked my role in establishing and sustaining partnerships. In reviewing my lessons plans from that semester, there were three times that I had written myself a note to meet with the one group who was struggling to “find something to do.” In sustaining and cultivating partnerships, I learned I must also maintain frequent communication but also a more active role in the design of what the partnership would look like.

### **Frequent Group Reflection**

Reflection is paramount in service-learning (Bingle & Hatcher, 1999; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996). Students should reflect with their placement partners, themselves, and each other. After I have my students turn in their final reflections, I select lines from each one of their papers, combine those lines into one document and ask students to respond in writing to one comment written by one of their classmates. In my selection, I try to capture the wide variety of placement experiences that result from these three diverse community placements. The Fall 2011 semester, my students demonstrated their limited knowledge of libraries as they wrote, “Many people including teens do use their libraries” and “I would have still maintained that libraries were a dying breed;” however, through this experience, they came to deduce that the reasons teens use their libraries has become “more about programming in the library rather than the types of books they [teens] want to see.” Many of them were also surprised to learn that teens are reading more science fiction and fantasy, genres they admitted they were not interested in themselves as adolescents. During whole-group conversations, my PSTs also discovered the variety of placements meant they had interacted with diverse groups of students who had various needs from their libraries: “One thing that I have learned about the YA [young adult] library is that it is not a very ideal situation” reflected one student who completed her service-learning at a library without a thriving young adult group. A student who had been placed at a suburban library reflected, “I think the young adult reader population is broader than this.” Together, the students came to realize the relationship between reading and environment and how it plays “a key role for readers” as well as the diverse readers found (or not found) in particular libraries.

## **Lessons Learned: Blueprint for Successful Placements and Partnerships**

Through our AS-L experiences, we have come to recognize the importance of reflecting on our own courses, recognizing when there is a need for a service-learning placement, or when we need to modify the field experiences for a course. Our first step was rethinking our field experience placements for our PSTs; for example, focusing on one grade level rather than several, considering a charter school, and locating non-traditional placements outside of the classroom that might be more closely aligned to our educational goals, both personally and institutionally. We agree with Bringle and Hatcher (1999) who noted the importance of critical self-reflection in service-learning courses, and we structure our reflection activities in ways that we hope educate and transform rather than reinforce stereotypes and generalizations. Therefore, we created opportunities for individual, small group, and whole group reflections and invited our community partners into these discussions.

Engagement and sustainability are characteristics of efficacious AS-L projects. However, such measures can be problematic and difficult to evaluate. We find that developing and sustaining reciprocal relationships with community partners is a crucial first step in establishing an effective evaluation system in which all participants reflect on the roles of one another. In addition, we find that colleagues who share similar philosophies toward service-learning should engage in ongoing conversations during which they weave their AS-L stories with theory as Spry (2002) suggests. We'd like to encourage alternative methods for evaluating those experiences—those which employ systematic empirical methods that pull from other disciplines.

Finally, we learned to pay attention to our own PSTs' impressions of schools and students through their words and actions. We try to be aware of the ways service-learning can help us consider the taken-for-granted, how we view our PSTs and their needs in our own programs. While operating in two different teacher education programs, our experiences with AS-L point to our shared need for rethinking traditional placements, various methods for reflection, and cultivating partnerships that facilitate AS-L. In order to do so, teacher educators should take risks and consider the needs of the university students who are poised to enter the classroom and the students whom they will one day teach.

### **Implications**

Various rationales have been posited for including service-learning in pre-service teacher education (Allam & Zerkin, 1993; Anderson & Guest, 1995; Peterson, 1995; Root, 1994; Sullivan, 1991). We share the aforementioned researchers' views, perspectives, and findings as valid reasons for aligning academic service-learning with pre-service teacher education courses. But, we go beyond. Our collaborative approach led to shared stories woven with our theoretical backgrounds on preparing future teachers for diverse classrooms that opened up alternative methods for designing, evaluating, and improving service-learning for our students. Looking at our experiences and the decisions we made, in essence, studying our processes, has led both of us to stronger service-learning experiences. In turn, these intentional placements and cultivated partnerships have resulted in course-embedded experiences that create pathways for pre-service teachers to work successfully with students, schools, and community partners.

## **Conclusion: The Usefulness of Service-learning and Teacher Education**

Case one highlights the need to continually evaluate placements and partners. In lieu of simply seeking field placements and logging requisite hours for field experience, seeking a placement that wanted PSTs to provide a focused service and working with a partner that was sensitive to PSTs needs, as novices over an extended time frame, was significant. The sustained partnership and subsequent discussions with charter faculty expanded the school's need into a true service-learning experience that allowed PSTs to gain valuable literacy teaching experience in a urban setting. The charter school setting added an unexpected dimension of exploring issues of school choice.

Case two demonstrates the usefulness of bringing together PSTs and students in diverse settings outside of the classroom. With deliberate course assignments, PSTs come to know students in ways they may not have time for in their classrooms—in this case, as diverse readers. Furthermore, non-traditional placements not only emphasize the variety of resources available to teachers but also provide ideas for future collaboration. Finally, engaging in systematic research with colleagues who are also engaged with service-learning is a way to continually evaluate the efficacy of such experiences.

Using Greene's words—we too try to be “wide-awake” to the ways service-learning can help us consider the taken-for-granted, how we view our PSTs and their needs in our own programs. While operating in two different teacher education programs, our experiences with AS-L point to our shared need for rethinking traditional placements, various methods for reflection, and cultivating partnerships that facilitate AS-L. In order to do so, and achieve Greene's notion of “wide-awakeness,” we took risks and considered the needs of the university students who were poised to enter the classroom and the students whom they will one day teach.

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