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Promoting Social Justice through Service-Learning in Urban Teacher Education: The Role of Student Voice

Noah Borrero, Jerusha Conner, & Alex Mejia

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Abstract

Although service-learning is becoming more common in teacher education programs (Anderson & Erickson 2003), few detailed case descriptions show how service-learning can help to promote a social justice orientation for prospective teachers. A comparative descriptive analysis of projects within two teacher preparation programs—one focused on training undergraduates and one focused on training graduate students—illustrates how service-learning, when undergirded by student voice work, prepares prospective educators to teach for social justice in urban classrooms. We identify commonalities in our two approaches to integrating service-learning and student voice into the teacher education curriculum, and we show how our distinctive efforts support prospective teachers in developing the relationships, reflections, and practices they need to become effective educators of urban youth.

Introduction

A central challenge facing teacher education programs is how to prepare prospective teachers, most of whom are white and come from middle-class families, to work effectively with students whose backgrounds differ from their own ([Darling-Hammond, 2002](#); [Nieto, 2000](#)). This challenge is particularly salient in urban settings where under-resourced schools serve linguistically and culturally diverse groups of students ([Darling-Hammond, 2007](#)). A large body of research has examined what prospective teachers will need to know if they are to be successful in overcoming the “demographic divide” (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 1) that separates

them from their students. In addition to developing a strong command of their subject matters and a broad repertoire of pedagogical and classroom management skills, prospective teachers need to learn how to learn about their students and the communities in which they teach. This understanding, which goes well beyond mastering a shorthand list of different cultural practices, is central to building a culturally responsive practice that capitalizes on students' strengths (Borrero & Bird, 2009) and promotes social justice (Banks et al., 2005; [Gay, 2000](#); Nieto, 2000).

[Villegas and Lucas \(2002\)](#) identify service-learning as a type of field experience that can help prospective teachers develop understanding of and connections to a specific community, while also fostering their commitment to effecting social change. Although service-learning is gaining attention in teacher education programs ([Anderson & Erickson, 2003](#); Borrero & Bird, 2009; Furco, 2009), theoretical and empirical work linking service-learning, teacher education, and social justice remains thin. We build on Villegas and Lucas's argument about the potential utility of service-learning in teacher education by illustrating how two service-learning projects in two different teacher preparation programs promote a social justice orientation by engaging aspiring teachers in rigorous and substantive student voice work. Our analysis highlights the common and distinctive features of these two approaches to integrating service-learning, student voice, teacher education, and social justice, and offers evidence of how prospective teachers at different stages in their teacher education can be challenged to rethink their understandings of and approaches to the young people they teach.

Bringing Service-Learning, Social Justice, Student Voice, and Teacher Education Together

Defining service-learning as a practical concept has at times proved difficult due to overlap with practices such as internships, volunteering, and community service (Furco, 1996; [Sigmon, 1979](#); Stanton, 1987). One key distinction is that service-learning seeks to achieve equilibrium between both service and learning. This balanced approach (Furco, 1996) is in opposition to using service mainly as an avenue for practitioners to reflect on their experience of providing a service, or using service mainly as a way of providing resources to supposed "communities in need." Instead, we conceive of service-learning as the interdependence between the service provided and the opportunity for learning and reflection; and it achieves this symbiosis by providing service in conjunction with in-class curriculum (Furco, 1996).

As teacher educators, we position our approach to service-learning within a broader social justice perspective. Social justice as applied to education, particularly urban education, has been summed up as pedagogy and curriculum emphasizing:

principles of personal safety in interpersonal relationships, attention to the here and now, sensitivity to group dynamics, use of students' viewpoints to launch dialogue, and fostering social awareness and social action . . . in which experience is tied to critical analyses of systemic issues and power "of deeply embedded roots of racism,

discrimination, violence and disempowerment” (Cuban & Anderson, 2007, p.146, quoting Leistyana & Woodrum [1996] in Brown, 2001, p. 20).

This is the definition of social justice which our work seeks to advance.

For new teachers with limited knowledge of, and experience with, youth from diverse cultural backgrounds, it may seem that there are two distinct approaches towards social justice in teaching. These approaches may be characterized as *redistributive* and *representative*. The representative approach towards social justice focuses on in-class issues of discourse and representation; that is, a critical examination of images found in cultural mediums (popular and otherwise) and the ways in which these images shape discourses and relations of power (James-Wilson, 2007). The redistributive approach towards social justice positions redistribution of wealth and privilege as the main form of combating the oppression and marginalization found in the classroom (James-Wilson, 2007). We propose that the effective use of service-learning with a social justice worldview seeks to avoid dichotomizing these two aspects by connecting the internal life and classroom curriculum with the external reality of the communities in which the “service” takes place (Solomon & Sekayi, 2007). This focus honors the interdependency of the internal and external approach to social justice by bridging in-class curriculum to the outside world through service-learning.

Positive relationships between teachers, students, and parents are prerequisites for effective teaching, and these relationships are often hard to foster when there are barriers between teachers coming from elite academic institutions and students and families from low-income communities (James-Wilson, 2007). Service-learning with a social justice perspective is one approach towards developing these relationships between teachers and communities; however, service-learning cannot be seen as a quick fix that achieves automatic results. While research has shown that relationships have developed between teachers engaged in service-learning projects and the communities they serve, these relationships must be reciprocal and dynamic, evolving over time (Conner, 2010a; Cuban & Anderson, 2007). At times, even relationships developed through service-learning end up reproducing the power relations of privilege, which we find in the broader society (Butin, 2007; Erickson, 2009; Mitchell, 2008). This form of social reproduction, then, leads back to the question of how to effectively utilize service-learning for social justice in teacher education without having it become a mere formality for teachers, or seen as a shortcut towards the goal of developing positive teacher, student, community relationships.

Student voice may provide an answer to this lingering question. Student voice work is rooted in the idea that students have unique perspectives on their schools and classrooms, schooling, and how they learn, and that this knowledge is critical to informing any educational reform agenda (Rudduck, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Student voice necessitates a paradigm shift, recasting young people from passive recipients and empty vessels waiting to be filled, to active participants who possess deep stores of understanding and insight. As students reframe the experience, power is redistributed (Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007). No longer do authority,

status, and power solely reside in the adults' hands. Through both re-representing and redistributing, then, student voice work connects with the ideals of equity embedded in the social justice perspective. It also activates the "use of students' viewpoints" principle that [Cuban and Anderson \(2007\)](#) included in their definition of social justice.

We contend that service-learning provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to engage in student voice work, and that such work, in turn, can help the prospective teachers gain experience enacting social justice ([Butin, 2007](#)). In other words, as prospective teachers learn to listen to their students, to recognize the value of their ideas and insights, and to create opportunities for them to be heard and make contributions, they begin to practice social justice ([Nieto, 2005](#)). No longer are they simply hearing or reading about a social justice lens. They now have the occasion and the tools to apply it to their work. Student voice becomes the linchpin, then, linking service-learning to a social justice approach, an approach which, for us, involves teachers and students working together to unmask, analyze, and challenge inequities that stem from oppression and discrimination, including paternalism and deficit orientations.

Understanding social justice as a foundational perspective for effective urban teaching, which challenges both the material and ideological forms of inequity, allows pre-service urban teachers engaged in service-learning to foster community strengths and engage in community struggles outside their classrooms, while also relating these struggles to their in-class practice and pedagogy. When student voice becomes part of the equation, service-learning with a social justice orientation can help future educators develop the relationships, reflections, and practices needed for effective teaching, by transforming their day-to-day thinking about teaching in urban communities ([Banks et al., 2005](#); [Butin, 2007](#)). The case studies presented in this paper illustrate these possibilities, demonstrating how service-learning can be supported by student voice work to promote the values and vision of social justice in teacher candidates.

A Sociocultural Approach to Learning and a Focus on Teaching Diverse Students

Along with a balanced approach to service-learning and our social justice orientation within teacher education, as defined above, two theoretical perspectives informed the design of the projects discussed below and our comparative analysis. First, we draw on a sociocultural approach to learning, and the belief that learning is context-driven and largely a social process ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)). Teachers need to enter the profession with a clear understanding that students learn from their families, communities, peers, and school experiences. We believe that the tremendous diversity of students' cultural backgrounds in our urban schools today is a resource that must be acknowledged and utilized ([Borrero & Bird, 2009](#); [Darling-Hammond, 2007](#); [Nieto, 2005](#)). Second, we use a theoretical framework for teaching diverse learners developed by [Banks et al. \(2005\)](#) to focus our comparative analysis. [Banks et al. \(2005\)](#) argue that in order to be prepared to teach students whose backgrounds differ from their own, teachers must learn how to learn about their students, themselves, and the craft of teaching. The authors contend that "teacher education pedagogies that stress all three of these knowledge domains—knowledge of learners, knowledge of self, and knowledge of how to

learn in teaching—suggest how we might begin to consider the implications of considering the ‘diverse learners’ when thinking about learning to teach” (p. 264). In this paper, we provide examples of the vision and pedagogical tools we use to develop this understanding in our pre-service teachers. We also offer evidence of learning in each domain.

Method

Our qualitative research is based on two case studies using comparative descriptive analysis (Yin, 2003). To present the details of these two service-learning projects and the voices of the students involved, we draw on data collected from a number of sources. First, through participant observation, we documented our experiences as faculty members and students to describe the undergraduate and graduate programs from their inception. These descriptions come from field notes, reflective student essays and free-writes, and records of conversations and collaboration with the K-12 students and community partners.

The perspectives of pre-service teachers in both programs were also captured through an anonymous, short-answer survey administered at the end of the semester. Twenty students (10 undergraduates and 10 graduate students) were asked to comment on their interests in teaching, their perceptions of the assets of and challenges facing urban youth, and the most important things learned in the course. The responses were analyzed by the authors. Before coding, each researcher read and re-read survey responses independently (Merriam, 1988). Next, each researcher began to underline recurring units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) from the data. Units were phrases, sentences, or longer quotes that shed light on students’ perceptions of diversity and social justice for urban youth in and around schools. Each researcher then began generating categories of meaning based on different units of data. These categories were concepts that emerged from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and included factors like caring, parent involvement, and school engagement. This “open coding” was used to generate as many codes as possible.

The three researchers then met to share their codes and discuss themes. Central themes were explored in depth (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and sub-categories were discussed. Researchers then re-read the surveys to identify commonalities and differences within themes. The researchers then discussed themes and did one final read through, identifying quotes that spoke directly to the agreed upon themes—relationship building, poverty, and school/community engagement. The quotations we share were selected for inclusion in our analysis because they expose the nature of a given theme (Glesne, 1999), not because they necessarily represent the perspectives of all respondents.

Setting the Context: Two Cases of Service-Learning within Teacher Education Coursework

In what follows, we briefly describe how we integrated service-learning and student voice into our teacher education coursework. We also note the learning goals associated with our respective courses and the institutional and community contexts in which these courses are situated.

Undergraduate Project

Reciprocal Learning and Teaching is part of a required Diversity course for undergraduate education majors at a private, mid-sized university, located in a major East Coast city. The prospective teachers who participated in this project were primarily white females, who by their own admission on the surveys attended high schools that were “a little” or “not at all” diverse. At the beginning of the semester, few aspired to teach in urban schools.

The project required prospective teachers in the course to work one-on-one each week with a senior in a nearby public, urban high school on his or her senior project, a 10-page research paper, and to elicit that senior’s perspective on educational issues connected to the topics addressed in the teacher education course. A primary goal of the course was to reposition students in relation to teachers (Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007) by showing prospective teachers that they have much to learn not only about, but also from their students, prompting them to reconsider traditional dynamics of power, status, and teaching and learning in the classroom (Conner, 2010b).

The course infused the service the prospective teachers performed with student voice work through three main sets of assignments, which were derived from best practices in the fields of teacher education and service-learning: a case-study, weekly discussion questions, and ongoing informal and formal reflection, each of which is described briefly below. In addition to helping their partner with his or her senior project, the prospective teachers devoted some part of their first five meetings to collecting data for a portrait or case-study of their student’s academic experiences. This assignment required the prospective teachers to spend time becoming well-acquainted with one adolescent whose school and life circumstances differed from their own (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Roeser, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The assignment was designed to help the prospective teachers learn how to learn from their students about what matters to them, how they see themselves, and how they respond to and interpret school and various classroom contexts. Upon completion of the case-study, the prospective educators were required to ask their partner a “core question” each week and to bring the student’s answers to class with them. The core questions, based on a model pioneered by Alison Cook-Sather (2002), were connected to the themes studied in the Diversity course. For example, during the week that the prospective teachers learned about differentiated instruction, the core questions were: “What kinds of learning activities do you like best and why?” and “How can a teacher meet the different learning styles and needs of

students in his/her class?" The high school students' responses became a text the prospective teachers analyzed alongside the assigned readings on theory and research.

Finally, weekly opportunities for reflection, including class discussions and informal assignments such as in-class free-writes, required the prospective teachers to find meaning in their experiences with their student partner, to examine their own values and perspectives, and to engage in critical analysis of the inequities they confronted. A final, culminating essay also engaged the prospective teachers in thinking about what they had learned from their urban high school partner and how these lessons would inform their approach to teaching.

Graduate Project

The *Community-based Curriculum project* was the core assignment in a graduate-level teacher education course entitled "Action Research and Service-Learning for Urban Teachers." The class was a required, culminating, masters-level course for prospective teachers at a private university in urban Northern California. Prospective teachers enrolled in this course were finishing their Masters of Arts degree in Urban Education. Because California requires teachers to obtain a bachelor's degree prior to completing their California Teaching Credential, aspiring teachers in the course were all completing a two-year teacher education program during which they earned their credential and their Master of Arts in Teaching degree. The majority of the prospective teachers in this course were white females from middle-class families, and all wanted to teach youth in urban schools.

The curriculum project that lies at the heart of this course was designed to encourage prospective teachers to connect classroom learning objectives for their students with a service-learning project in their school community. Primarily, prospective teachers developed a unit of study for their students that addressed a community issue. Student voice was central to projects, as these future teachers were charged with the task of creating curriculum to connect student learning inside and outside of the classroom (Nieto, 2002). To do this, projects needed to empower students to take action and have voice in their communities via learning about their unique strengths and challenges (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blythe, 1998; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992).

Students in the graduate program were completing their student teaching experience (in the local, urban school district), so each of them was teaching at least one group of students full time in a local, public school. The foci and details of the community-based project were the choice of the prospective teacher, but projects were evaluated on the degree to which they met the "Seven Elements of Effective Service-Learning" (Youth Service California, 2006): integrated learning, high quality service, collaboration, student voice, civic responsibility, reflection, and evaluation. These elements were an integrated part of prospective teachers' prior coursework, as were examples of projects from current in-service teachers in the community. Additionally, prospective teachers were part of a larger network of urban teachers

through their participation in a federally-funded urban teachers forum (see Borrero & Bird, 2009) at the university.

In the Action Research and Service-Learning for Urban Teachers course, prospective teachers received support from their instructor to write up their community-based project as a curricular unit addressing the California State Standards and specific classroom objectives that teachers were working towards. By the time that these prospective teachers were enrolled in the course, their community-based projects had been conceptualized and the local, community connections needed for implementation had been solidified. Thus, the support they received largely focused on the details of student voice and integrated learning—aligning curriculum with high quality service to empower youth (Youth Service California, 2006). Prospective teachers completed their requirements for the course by writing up a formal unit of study for their community-based project and creating (and presenting) a poster to display their unit and its service-learning attributes.

The unit of study that prospective teachers created contained project learning objectives, detailed schedules, daily lesson plans, and specific links to the class syllabus that teachers had already created for their student teaching. Additionally, the unit contained documentation of each instance where the project met (or provided an opportunity to meet) one of the “seven critical elements of service-learning” (Youth Service California, 2006). Prospective teachers were encouraged to create units that not only guided their own instruction, but also could be shared with colleagues who were developing similar projects.

The final class meeting of the semester was a poster session during which prospective teachers presented a portrayal of their Community-based Curriculum Project for their classmates and other teachers in the urban teachers forum. Posters included details of each teacher’s project, but also an added level of reflection in a section of the poster labeled “Implications and Future Directions.” In this section, teachers focused on where they would like to see this project go in the future (i.e., their first few years teaching).

In the sections below, we discuss what we think to be the key commonalities and distinctions between these two programs’ use of student voice as a way of infusing service-learning with a social justice orientation. We highlight details of each program, while also focusing on the learning outcomes initiated by service-learning.

Examining Service-Learning for Social Justice: Key Elements of Both Programs

Balancing Intended Beneficiaries

Both the undergraduate Reciprocal Learning and Teaching project and the graduate Community-based Curriculum Project were designed to meet the needs of not only the recipients of the service, but also the providers, thereby satisfying both aspects of Furco’s (1996) balanced approach to service-learning. This parity in intended beneficiaries is a defining feature of each of the service-learning projects we examine.

Meeting Teacher Candidates’ Needs

The students enrolled in each of the courses share the goal of becoming teachers. In addition, most are white females from middle-class and upper-middle class backgrounds. To this end, they share certain professional development needs. Darling-Hammond (2002) contends that irrespective of one’s personal background, learning to teach for social justice requires prospective teachers to understand students, schools, and themselves in relation to others. Banks et al. (2005) similarly argue that prospective teachers need to learn about themselves, their students, and how to continue to learn in teaching if they are to become successful educators of diverse students. As will be explained below, the service-learning components of the two courses found different ways to meet these needs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Different Approaches to Meeting (Different) Student Needs Through Service-Learning

	Undergraduate service-learning course		Graduate service-learning course	
General TC needs	Specific needs of TC’s	How course meets needs	Specific needs of TC’s	How course meets needs
To learn about students	<p>To become acquainted with actual urban youth</p> <p>To recognize their strengths and learn to appreciate their insights & intelligence</p>	<p>Experience working with high school student on senior project</p> <p>Core questions to pose to learning partner about teaching and learning</p> <p>Case study assignment</p>	<p>To learn about the backgrounds, interests, and values of their students; the needs and strengths of their communities</p>	<p>Interviews with multiple students from different language and cultural backgrounds</p> <p>Support connecting classroom learning objectives with community-based learning</p>

<p>To learn about self</p>	<p>To see self as someone who could work in an urban school</p> <p>To recognize own advantages as well as own biases</p> <p>To develop an orientation towards social transformation and social justice</p>	<p>Experience working with high school student on senior project</p> <p>White privilege readings and discussion</p> <p>Analysis of expectations of urban students and schools vs. reality experienced</p>	<p>To see the role of teacher as one embedded in a larger community</p> <p>To build personal and professional connections to community members and agencies</p> <p>To reflect on learning as a social act that extends beyond the classroom</p>	<p>Cultural History Map tracing school and cultural background and experiences</p> <p>Field experience in English Language Development (ELD) classroom</p>
<p>To learn how to continue to learn in teaching</p>	<p>To learn how to work effectively with youth whose backgrounds differ from their own</p>	<p>Experience working with high school student on senior project</p> <p>Reflection on and modifications to practice with high school student</p>	<p>To learn how to enact social justice values and vision in actual classroom</p> <p>To develop relevant & accessible curriculum</p>	<p>Networking and relationship development with community partners</p>

While both groups share the need for certain general understandings and skills, they also differ markedly from one another. The undergraduates, who range in age from 18-22, are younger, not yet in possession of bachelor's degrees, and in want of experience in the working world. The graduate students, who range in age from 22 to 40, are older and some are returning to school in order to change professions. Furthermore, the undergraduate students, for the most part, are ambivalent about teaching in an urban setting. In fact, most (85%) reported at the beginning of the semester that it was unlikely that they would seek employment in an urban district. By contrast, the graduate students are committed to working in an urban context. They applied specifically to the Masters Program in Urban Education within the Teacher Education Program at their university. This commitment to urban teaching unifies their cohort and undergirds their program of study. Finally, the undergraduates have yet to undertake student teaching when they enroll in the Diversity course. The graduate students enrolled in Action Research and Service-Learning for Urban Teachers, meanwhile, have commenced student teaching and have a classroom of their own in which to interact with students, practice pedagogical approaches, and develop curricula. In terms of their commitment to and experience with urban youth, the two sets of teacher candidates begin their service-learning projects at very different stages.

In the Reciprocal Learning and Teaching Project, survey results indicated that the undergraduates have limited experience with, exposure to, and indeed interest in urban schooling. As a result, these candidates need to develop a deeper understanding of urban schools and students. They need to see the urban school as both a viable and a worthwhile place to work. The service-learning project helps them to develop this perspective by granting them access to and experience in an urban school, by scaffolding their efficacy in working with students in this setting, and by developing their awareness of the pressing needs for good teachers in these schools. At the end of the course, the teacher candidates report feeling more familiar with the urban context—more confident in their own ability to be effective agents in these settings, and more cognizant of the inequities plaguing urban schools. For example, one teacher candidate wrote, “I learned far more about urban schools, the injustices that pervade them, and teaching methods on my Friday’s spent at [the high school] than I ever had sitting in a classroom.” She continued, “With my knowledge from *Diversity* and my experience as a mentor in an urban school, I feel well on my way to being an exemplary teacher of diverse youth.”

The undergraduate teacher candidates also need to overcome their initial assumptions about urban youth and urban schools, which for many rest on stereotypes and deficit theories (Conner, 2010b). They need to recognize the assets of the students, the school, and the community (Benson et al., 1998; Borrero & Bird, 2009; Moll et al., 1992). The conversations they have with their high school partners as part of the Reciprocal Learning and Teaching project are set up to yield this kind of understanding. In other words, student voice work serves as the key course structure by which these particular needs are met. Each week, the prospective teachers are required to ask their high school partners questions that tap into their knowledge of teaching, learning, and schooling. The high school students become teacher educators. As one teacher candidate reflected:

When the [high school] students were asked what they wanted their [university] mentors to take from the experience, their answers taught me that listening to my students is going to be pertinent to being a successful teacher. The students wanted us to know that they were full of potential, drive, and ambition. We should not make assumptions based on the high school they attend.

The case study assignment requires candidates to identify and describe not only the strengths of the student with whom they work, but also those of the student’s neighborhood and home environment. Learning to solicit and learn from student voice helps the undergraduate teacher candidates develop a richer and more robust understanding of the schooling experiences of urban students, preparing them to work more effectively in these contexts.

Finally, the undergraduate teacher candidates need to learn that the deficits they may perceive, such as students’ lack of preparedness to write a major research paper, are not the result of students’ laziness or incompetence, but the result of a system that does not offer the same quality of educational experiences and opportunities to everyone (Darling-Hammond, 2007;

Kumashiro, 2000). They need to learn about white privilege and the advantages they have received. And they need to come to greater understanding of how inequities have become institutionalized in and perpetuated by our social structures (Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001). They come to these understandings in part through course readings and discussion, and in part through firsthand experience in the school site, where they see the bare library shelves and where they talk with students like Zayde, who points out that:

I hope [the teacher candidates] learn that we're not exactly at the level we should be, but with help we could get there. 'Cause, I mean as opposed to schools out in the suburbs, where they have a lot of things—like curriculum. Their curriculum is at a higher level than ours. It's not that we're not capable of doing the work; it's just that it wasn't available to us.

Conversations and experiences with students like Zayde help move the teacher candidates a step closer to becoming not only effective teachers in urban schools, but also potential agents of change, who feel compelled to create classrooms that confront systemic inequities and promote social justice (Conner, 2010b).

The graduate students in the Community-based Curriculum project had different needs. Given the reality that they are student teaching in urban schools, they need to learn how to integrate their social justice vision into their day-to-day practice. Such praxis requires them to understand their students well, to know about their backgrounds, their daily lives, and the values and traditions that matter to them. The Community-based Curriculum project prompts prospective teachers to make connections with their students' communities and with agencies or organizations in those communities. They achieve this via their active participation in the urban teachers forum, school-based programs where they are student teaching, and independent research on different community-based organizations in their school communities. One graduate student shared, "I learned a lot about my students by spending time at school, around school, and in the neighborhood. There is a lot of community involvement there; more than I expected."

In order to know how to promote social justice in their classrooms, the graduate teacher candidates also need experiences from which to draw in taking action on an asset approach (Borrero & Bird, 2009). They need to learn not just about a community's needs, but also its strengths. The Community-based Curriculum project reinforces this message about the importance of recognizing community resources by requiring the teacher candidates to design a service-learning project that gives voice to students by addressing real issues in the community and leveraging its assets. For example, one teacher candidate wrote, "I want my kids to learn about the good things happening in their community." Prospective teachers read about the development of such projects (Benson et al., 1998; Borrero, 2008; Moll et al., 1992) as models, interview youth about their communities, and also spend time with in-service teachers in the urban teachers forum who actively use asset-based service-learning in their classrooms.

In addition to needing to understand their students' communities and the assets therein, the graduate teacher candidates need to learn how to forge links between the communities and their curriculum, and to connect the academic skills and knowledge they hope to develop to their students' daily lives. Teacher education students regularly read research articles and theoretical pieces that stress the importance of making learning relevant and meaningful for students. The Community-based Curriculum project challenges student teachers to bring these principles to life. It requires them to construct a curricular unit in which the content is accessible and realistic. It encourages them to see how learning can be expanded beyond the classroom. And it asks them to harness the community's resources to meet and advance their instructional objectives. The project gives them the opportunity to build their understanding not only of the communities in which they work, but also of how these communities can be utilized as instructional resources, texts, and sites for powerful student learning. One teacher in the graduate program wrote:

They [my students] are only talked about in government reports and failing test scores. But how often do kids speak for themselves? How much would anyone listen even when they would speak? I want to give those students a chance and the capabilities to be heard and take part in a community of learners where they can become agents of social change.

Although the two projects detailed above engage different sets of teacher education students, each with discrete needs, and although they foreground slightly different learning objectives, both use service-learning in conjunction with student voice to help prospective teachers develop the perspectives, habits, and connections that will enable them not only to teach urban youth (Banks et al., 2005), but also to promote social justice in their classrooms and communities (Nieto, 2005). At the same time that they meet the needs of the teacher candidates, both projects also seek to advance community interests.

Meeting Community Needs

In the Reciprocal Learning and Teaching project, community is conceptualized narrowly, and the service provided is small-scale, targeted, immediate, and to a certain extent, pre-determined. By contrast, in the Community-based Curriculum project, community is constructed more broadly, and the service offered has a wider reach, more distal impact, and more organic origins. These contrasting features of the two projects are rooted in the course designs and the learning objectives described above; however, they are also a function of why the service is being provided in the first place and who gets to identify the community needs.

In the case of the Reciprocal Learning and Teaching project, the definition of community and community needs arises out of the initial impetus for the service-learning opportunity, the Senior Projects Initiative. In conjunction with the school district, a non-profit organization selected 10 district high schools for a pilot project that paired them with university partners who could provide their students with guidance, encouragement, and feedback on their senior

projects. In other words, the needs of this community for senior project support were identified first by an intermediary organization that brokered the partnership between the high school and the undergraduate institution profiled in this case. The intended beneficiaries of the school district's Senior Project Initiative were the seniors at the selected high schools, whom the pilot project framed as in need of mentoring.

Within the specific high school profiled in this case, the needs of the students were further clarified by the 17 seniors who voluntarily chose to take part in the Reciprocal Learning and Teaching project in order to receive help with their senior projects. Some of these students needed help selecting a topic and getting started, while others felt that they needed help organizing their ideas and the information they had already collected. The project constructed the seniors as the intended beneficiaries of the weekly meetings, allowing them to direct the course and content of their sessions with the university students.

Seniors expressed that they had profited from the service the university students provided. For example, when asked to reflect on her relationship with her university mentor, one student commented, "She got me to get the project done, 'cause if I didn't have a mentor, I wouldn't have been done. I would have been doing the last minute, trying to cram everything together." Another student voiced similar sentiments: "At the beginning, I didn't know what I really wanted to do, but I knew that I wanted to do something that had something to do with leadership. And actually, the [teacher candidate] guided me to what I wanted to do. And without that guidance, I don't know I would have got this project done." Eighty-five percent of the high school participants surveyed indicated that their project had benefited considerably from the service arrangement, and 92% felt they had personally benefited from the relationship with the teacher candidate.

The Community-based Curriculum project was a purposeful, scaffolded assignment to make teachers connect their classroom learning with students' communities. This connection is central to the program's mission, which highlights "connecting students, teachers, schools, and communities through their cultural assets." In light of this mission and the fact that the teacher candidates in the course were student teaching in schools throughout the district, the definition of community used in this project is more encompassing than that used in the undergraduate project.

The progression of readings and assignments leading up to and during the Action Research and Service-Learning for Urban Teachers course helped prospective teachers reflect on their identities as new teachers of urban youth (e.g., [Duncan-Andrade, 2007](#); [Ladson-Billings, 1994](#); [Rist, 1970](#)) entering new communities. In addition to class discussions about the different communities in which they were starting their student teaching, prospective teachers completed a three-phase observation assignment in which they collected data to describe the community, the school, and the classroom for their student teaching placement. They then completed a modified I-Search Paper (Macrorie, 1988) in which they placed themselves (as new teachers) into these different contexts and discussed the role they hoped to play.

Additionally, as mentioned above, these prospective teachers participated in the urban teachers forum along with over 100 fellow in-service urban teachers in the surrounding communities. Central to the mission of the forum are the opportunities for networking and sharing best practices among the participants. These different facets combined to provide prospective teachers with background knowledge, exposure to their school communities, and examples of service-learning projects in local communities.

Graduate students were then given the choice to develop their own Community-based Curriculum projects. Projects varied, as did the students' conceptions of community. One new teacher, through interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, found that the school was looking to include more environmental education in its science classes. He noted that little to no awareness about the surrounding community's natural resources were a part of the school's curriculum or a part of students' lives. For example, he took a poll of his students, and not a single one had ever been to the hill atop the county park that lies adjacent the school. Eventually, through contacts at the school, this prospective teacher connected with a local organization dedicated to park restoration and education. He developed a project for his students to visit the park as a part of their life science course. They learned about the plant and animal species in the park and became a part of a park restoration collaboration between the school and the community organization. Another graduate student conceived of her school community differently. She was teaching high school English, and working with a large number of English Language Learners. Through her work with students and her communication with their families, she realized that many of her students served as bilingual interpreters for their family members. She did some research in the surrounding community, and found a local organization that trains bilingual youth in the skills of translating and interpreting. She partnered with this organization, and in the process, incorporated many of the teaching and learning strategies from their work on translation and interpreting into her classes. Additionally, students were able to work in the community and see the value in their bilingualism. Both of these examples show that while the process of constructing the Community-based Curriculum project benefits the teacher candidates, the project itself promotes student voice and helps youth become knowledgeable of and active in their communities.

In terms of how they benefit the community, the undergraduate and graduate projects differed markedly from one another along several dimensions, as depicted in Table 2. They can be distinguished by the community recipients they target. The service component of the undergraduate project targets a small group of individual students in a single high school, while the service piece of the graduate project targets many students in many schools as well as the communities in which these students and their families live. They can be differentiated according to the timing of the service. The mentoring service the undergraduate teacher candidates provide is immediate, but circumscribed temporally by the semester in which they visit the high school. The service project designed by the graduate level teacher candidates may have yet to be enacted, but it is also one that may be realized for many years to come as

the curriculum they develop is reused. Finally, the raison d'être of the service sets the two projects apart. The specific service the undergraduate teacher candidates provided was pre-ordained (provide support and guidance to seniors working on their senior projects), but the

Table 2. Different Approaches to Meeting Community Needs Through Service-Learning

	Reciprocal Learning and Teaching	Community-based Curriculum project
Target of service	Self-selected high school seniors at one high school.	The neighborhoods of the students taught by the student teachers at various schools throughout the district.
Timing of service	Immediate interaction, sustained over course of a semester.	Service may or may not be enacted down the road, but holds potential for many years of replication.
Reason for service	Need for senior project support identified by School District and non-profit organization.	Various community needs identified by student teachers in consultation with their students.
Role of teacher education student in providing service	Teacher education student assumes a direct role as service provider, mentoring a high school senior each week.	Teacher education student assumes as indirect role in providing service, instead supporting his or her students as the primary service providers.

graduate teacher candidates developed their own ideas about useful service projects, informed by their growing understanding of community needs and strengths. In spite of these differences, both projects succeeded in engaging prospective teachers in addressing specific community needs.

Teacher Candidates' Perspectives and Evidence of Learning

Survey data from both undergraduate and graduate students revealed that despite the differences in our approaches, our use of service-learning fused with student voice prompted both sets of prospective teachers to think carefully about their students and the important contextual factors that impacted student performance and interest in school. More specifically,

three themes emerged from our analysis of the data, which point to an emerging social justice orientation: relationship building, poverty, and school/community engagement.

The prospective teachers wrote in their surveys about learning the importance of building strong relationships of trust and understanding with their students. Many noted that soliciting students' perspectives was an essential first step in this process. For example, an undergraduate teacher candidate wrote: "I have discovered through my time at Sun Valley High School that the most important thing a teacher can do is listen to their students." Another wrote, "Communication is the key to any relationship."

Similarly, the graduate teacher candidates reflected upon building relationships with their students and showing how much they cared about the youth in their classes. One prospective teacher wrote, "it is about caring for kids," and then described the learning that she has done as a new teacher and the role of student voice:

By knowing yourself and loving yourself, you can begin to reach out to others to learn their stories, to see what they have experienced and begin creating new stories, new life-long learning in the classroom. And what I have learned about many of those stories is that we are all so much alike even through our differences.

Another member of the graduate program expanded on the importance of relationship building, not just with her students, but in the school and in the community: "I also learned there are communities of teachers devoted to getting social justice work done and to providing tons of resources, more than ever, to help transform classrooms into places of authentic learning and authentic caring."

The survey responses also demonstrated a growing awareness and understanding of the effects of poverty on low-income, urban students. The prospective teachers commented on the "barriers urban youth have to overcome," "the disconnect in the education system," and "the injustices that pervade school systems in urban environments." One undergraduate teacher candidate wrote, "Spending Fridays at Sun Valley provided me with tangible evidence of the struggles urban youth face in both their personal lives and their education."

Many of the graduate candidates also discussed the effects of poverty on youth as something that they, as teachers, learned to better understand and appreciate. They spoke of the strong will of their students and their unwavering desires to succeed. One future teacher wrote: "urban youth have tremendous perseverance. They overcome challenges every day and still come to school ready to learn." Like the undergraduate candidates, these future teachers also wrote about the disconnect between their students' lives at home and their lives at school, and how the school system seems to leave many urban youth behind.

Finally, the value of school and community engagement emerged as a common theme in the responses of both undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates. An undergraduate teacher candidate, for example, explained:

If I plan on teaching in these [urban] schools, then there needs to be a way in which I can understand my students and their backgrounds. This can be done through conversation, but it is also important for a teacher to go out into the community and meet parents. . . Although I may not have lived in their exact conditions, it is imperative for their success that I work towards gaining an understanding of their living situations.

Graduate teacher candidates also spoke about bringing the school and community together, and teaching for social justice. One teacher wrote:

I learned how to frame my teaching practice to best fit the needs of urban students, and how to develop a working framework for a social justice-driven pedagogy. I feel prepared to lead a classroom, reflect on my practice, and to continually work on my practice as a teacher of urban students.

Other graduate teacher candidates expressed the desire to go beyond acquainting themselves with the communities in which their students lived, to helping students to find their own voices to transform their communities. Referring to her Community-based Curriculum project, one teacher wrote about her own learning and her strong belief in her students:

A strength that urban youth have is the resilience to keep facing what they do each day. Urban students have an epistemic privilege that wherein they understand the hardships in the world such as poverty and violence because they have first-hand experience of such injustices. Because of this privilege and of this innate understanding, these students are the ones that will revolutionize the world.

This quote reveals the asset approach to diversity that many of the teacher candidates came to understand and embrace through their work with urban youth. More importantly, these three themes, taken together, reveal a level of understanding and commitment by these future teachers to appreciate the community contexts that their students' navigate outside of school. This is an important foundation for building a social justice perspective as new teachers, and some of the quotes reveal the role of service-learning as a mechanism for building connections between student voice, communities, and the classroom.

Embracing Our Role as Teacher Educators for the Next Generation of Teachers

This article has sought to illustrate how teacher education programs can use service-learning joined with student voice to prepare prospective teachers to teach for social justice in urban

contexts. We have highlighted two different projects that utilize service-learning to accomplish the same objective: advancing prospective teachers towards becoming agents of change. Our comparative descriptive analysis of the two case studies yields several implications for teacher education and teacher educators.

Although it may be the case that the prospective teacher pool is made up primarily of white females from middle class backgrounds, these women come to the profession with different commitments and orientations, and it is critical that we, their professors, recognize and respond to these differences. Some prospective teachers are passionate about working with urban youth and others are less sure. Some have strong social justice values, and others have yet to interrogate their own privilege or examine social inequities ([Deschenes et al., 2001](#); [Kumashiro, 2000](#)). Some view students and their communities from an asset-based perspective, and others adopt deficit theories. Some see the teacher's role as one of social transformation and others see it simply in terms of transmitting knowledge and skills. In other words, in their preparedness both to teach urban youth and to enact a vision of social justice in their classrooms, these prospective teachers may occupy different spots along a trajectory of professional development.

We feel that the two projects highlighted in this paper showcase service-learning, fused with student voice, as a particularly versatile tool for helping prospective teachers advance along this trajectory. As the undergraduate project shows, service-learning in combination with student voice can help prospective teachers begin the process of analyzing their unexamined assumptions about students, schools, and teaching, while also prompting them to learn about themselves, their own implicit biases and predilections. As the graduate project shows, service-learning joined with student voice can also prepare prospective teachers to ground their teaching in authentic, real-world learning that has the potential to engage their students in direct and meaningful social action.

The potential impact of service-learning on teacher education as we know it is significant. The sociocultural foundation ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)) undergirding this work is not new to the field of teacher education, just as the notion of authentic learning, or 'learning by doing' ([Dewey, 1938](#)) is not novel in any way. However, we as teacher educators cannot simply cite these approaches to learning in our articles or have our students read these seminal works in our courses. We must model effective classroom practice in our teacher education courses, and such practice must involve structured opportunities for prospective teachers to learn about, from, and within their students' communities. This is hard work and it cannot happen solely within the walls of our classrooms in our schools of education. Service-learning, and particularly a balanced approach to service-learning ([Furco, 1996](#)), is a tool that can help us, our teacher candidates, and their students make connections between classroom learning and the realities of life outside of school.

If we are to truly embrace the opportunity to train the next generation of teachers in this country ([National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003](#)), especially as urban

educators, we must acknowledge the changing demographics in our schools. We must acknowledge that classroom teaching may be different now than it was when we were full-time K-12 public school teachers. In so doing, we heed the advice of Banks et al. (2005) and seek to provide opportunities for our pre-service teachers to learn about their students, themselves, and the craft of teaching. We do not separate ourselves from this framework; however, because we as teacher educators have a lot to learn about ourselves, our students, and our teaching as well. This acknowledgement of the regenerative, reflective nature of teaching is what must accompany any approach to social justice in teacher education. In this way, we admit that neither service-learning nor the projects described above provide recipes for automatic effective teacher training. When coupled with a purposeful approach to social justice and sound pedagogical skills, we do feel that service-learning can offer prospective teachers, at different phases of their teacher education, a vision into meaningful, community-based teaching in their induction years.

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