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# TOWARD REALISTIC ALTRUISM: A COMMUNITY-BASED FIELD EXPERIENCE

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This is a study of the perceptions of preservice teachers engaged in a human services field experience and the college instructors responsible for teaching the Human Development course attached to the field experience. Student data came from semi-structured focus group interviews and student journals maintained throughout the experience, faculty data from one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Using the constant comparative method, data for students and faculty were grouped as follows: a) what students do during their placements, b) benefits and challenges of the experience, c) connections built between their experiences in the field and in the classroom. Analysis indicated that while the experience is generally perceived as valuable, there are gaps between what students actually do and faculty perceptions. Also, certain types of placements are much more powerful than others in yielding desired results of empathy, awareness of diversity and teaching skills. Recommendations for increasing the benefits and minimizing knowledge gaps are discussed.

## **Introduction**

"It's an escape from the regular college thing." Jay.

"It's a three ring circus, but I mean that in a good way." Amy

"It's like a war within myself." Matt

"It's a movement toward what I like to call realistic altruism." Professor Jimmy

Some key players in a human services field experience at a midwestern public university used these metaphors to describe their semesters. This article presents the perceptions of students engaged in the field experience (PTE 290) and faculty who

teach the Human Development course (PTE 200) attached to the field experience.

## *Context of the Program*

PTE 290 is one response to a state mandate doubling the number of hours students were required to spend in field experiences prior to student teaching. With preservice teachers already saturating schools in the immediate area, the college chose to place students in human service agencies. A full-time coordinator administers this program, functions as a liaison between agencies, students and faculty and serves as instructor of record for the course. 150+

community agencies participate in an agency fair each semester, during which students and agency representatives interview one another. Once selections have been made, agencies construct individualized work contracts with students. Agencies formally evaluate student performances to help determine final grades. Assessments are based on students' journals and criteria established in the work contracts, typically including reliability, ability to fulfill the assigned tasks and professional demeanor.

#### **Background**

Engaging students in community-based field experiences is not a new idea, nor is it limited to teacher preparation programs. Indeed, support for service-learning is found within and outside the United States, at college and high school levels and for education majors as well as students in all fields of study (Brady, 1987). Within the United States, the concept of service learning can be traced back several decades. "The notion of school and community-based teacher education which uses the entire community . . . is especially crucial today as teachers are increasingly faced with the task of educating children whose characteristics, cultural background and values are different from their own." (Zeichner, 1989, p.8). Sullivan (1996) suggests that schools need to lead the call for volunteerism, contending that community-based learning experiences allow prospective teachers (both high school and college students) to learn, while at the same time offering services to community agencies. Bonar et alia (1996) argue that learning through service provides oppor-

tunities to test reality and to become more aware of self, society and the problems facing education, noting that "A fundamental change is occurring in several institutions of higher learning as we approach the twenty-first century. Educators around the nation realize that a socially responsive knowledge base is necessary if colleges and universities are going to be successful in preparing students to assume the duties of active citizenship in the future" (p.13). Goodlad (1994) recommends that "programs for the education of educators be characterized by a socialization process where candidates transcend their self-oriented student preoccupations to become more other-oriented" (p.83). A recent Rand Study (1996) provides clear evidence that students who participate in service learning activities substantially enhance their academic development, life skills and sense of civic responsibility.

Clearly, community service-based experiences have much to recommend them. What was unclear was if those benefits were being realized by students at a public university in the Midwestern United States (of 7500 students), after the new requirement had been in place for five years. This piece represents half of a two-pronged study for which a team gathered both survey and qualitative data around the question "What is the community service field experience like for students?" Quantitative results from this study have been reported elsewhere (Potthoff, et alia, 1998); this piece puts robust flesh on those numbers, offering informants' own descriptions of the experience, suggesting patterns which emerged and the lessons to be learned from those accounts.

### Methodology

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest that qualitative researchers begin their studies with analytic questions “because they give focus to data collection and help to organize it as you proceed” (p. 155). The questions we asked of students and which we pondered as we read their journals facilitated our analysis. Focus groups of students from four placement categories, representing thirty agencies, were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol: “What is the human services field experience like for students?” with probes. Their journals were examined for insights into the tasks comprising their placements and the lessons they learned from those experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose seeking heuristic units among the data during analysis, that is, units “aimed at some understanding the inquirer needs to have” (p.345). Lincoln and Guba also suggest adaptations of the constant comparative method of sorting data into categories first provided by Glaser and Strauss (1967). That is, the data are grouped by means of constant comparison to previously categorized incidents. Students’ responses are reported here according to the following categories: a) what they did, b) benefits of the experience, c) challenges of the experience and d) bridges between this experience and the Human Development course. Three faculty members, each teaching two or more sections of the Human Development course, participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data from those interviews are grouped in the same way as those gathered from students: their perceptions of the benefits and challenges to students and the connections they

made between the field experience and their course. Finally, we also employed a device unique to qualitative research, asking our informants “to play with metaphors, analogies and concepts” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p.162). These metaphors, generated by the participants themselves, bring richer understandings of student and faculty perspectives on the human services field experience.

In the ensuing section, we present students’ responses to the research question, “What do students do during their human services field experiences?” Their duties fall into three categories: working one-on-one, with small groups, and providing clerical support. We follow with students’ accounts of the benefits and challenges they perceived, ending this section with the connections students made between the field experience and their coursework.

### What do they do?

*One-on-one.* Many students worked intensively with individuals. Jennifer said about her work with profoundly physically and mentally handicapped adults at a residential care facility: “I was like ‘wow’ all the time; I’d do things like help them eat or do their physical therapy exercises and just seeing them make any kind of progress: getting the spoon of Jello to their mouth, holding onto a ball, have any kind of conversation would energize me.” Matt, placed at the same agency, echoed her sentiments: “For me, it was like a bungee cord. I had never been around that many physically or mentally challenged people in my life and it was really tough at first. My job that first day was to make sure this guy didn’t fall over because he spent all his

time in a wheelchair. He tried to communicate with me in some sort of way, but it was just a mumble. That day, I saw my first seizure. I've heard about them and seen them on TV, but I had never seen one in real life. By clock time, it lasted about two minutes and forty seconds. I knew the safest thing I could do was stay back and let it happen, because there's nothing you can do for it except let it occur. My first day! That's why I say the experience was like a bungee cord. At first the bungee cord stretches and then it comes back together as one. When I first got there, my mind completely stretched and as time went by, that cord just came right back up and I felt all together. It stretched and challenged me."

*Small groups.* A different kind of experience was shared by Ashley, Becky and Joe, who each worked with groups of people. Ashley, a secondary special education major, was placed with a Head Start site, where she planned circle time activities for three-year olds, such as stories, listening games and counting tasks. "You know, like the movie "Kindergarten Cop! I quickly learned that there is no way I'm going to work with those kids again. I don't have enough patience! There are good days too, but then they can just start hitting and screaming and butting heads. It would just wear me out and I think I would get burned out doing that real quick."

Becky too was placed at Head Start and responded with a laugh: "I'm exactly the opposite of Ashley. I loved working with that age group. I got energized from working with them because they are so cute and they just give you hugs all the time. But I definitely learned to be more patient with

them. I would be sitting at the Play Dough table and tell them to stay there and they would be like "No, I wanna go over there," so you just kinda gotta do what they do. (The teacher) assigned some of us to certain kids and when I did that is when I really learned the stuff." What was "the stuff?" the interviewer probed. "Oh you know, I am not there to try to tell them what to do, I am just there to try to basically keep them under control and out of trouble. . .so patience and flexibility is what I learned."

Joe worked with profoundly multiply-handicapped adolescents at a residential care facility. As Ashley and Becky talked, he entered the conversation with: "I can relate to that because I was in the Blue Room and these were not younger kids. They were 18 year olds, 17, 16 year olds. They're really profoundly mentally retarded, their behaviors were more like a five year old. There was one student where some days she wouldn't listen . . .and on her bad days, she would just lay on the floor and pout. There were a few days where they had to physically pick her up and sit her in her chair because she would fight. At first I didn't know how to respond; it was hard to have a lot of patience with them. I had never been around these kind of people before. At first, it was strange because I'd help them with a shirt guard or bib and how do you treat them like a seventeen year old when they are functioning like an infant? I realized that I have the patience, the compassion to help these people."

The experiences of these three preservice teachers were less like "real school" than what Beth found in her work with

small groups of incarcerated youth (ages 13-17) at a regional rehabilitation and treatment center. She worked on math with small groups of students and assisted in the facility's GED program. "Some of you are shaking your head when I say that I actually feel much safer at (the center) than when I am by myself in a big city school, but they just don't have the disciplinary problem out there like they do in the public schools. When a boy is assigned to this center, they are assigned to a group of boys and those boys are responsible for each other's behavior. So if one boy is doing something that is not appropriate, the other ones catch him and make him see what he is doing wrong. . . . It seems to me that these boys know that if they don't shape up "this is it" and they have got to do right to get out of there; so they just do what they are asked to do. Anyway, the boys that I worked with did. I think it was just so amazing how much respect for authority they had because they had to. I thought gosh, we could do this in a high school!"

*Clerical support work.* An issue prior to this study was the perception of some faculty and students that PTE 290 students spent an inordinate amount of time tending to clerical tasks. One of our goals was to find out if this concern was substantiated. In truth, few students reported spending more than 10-15 hours of the 50 filing, answering phones or grading papers. From interview data, those who did have to do clerical work did so to make up hours met due to being sick or other scheduling conflicts which made it difficult to complete their 50 hour commitment in another way. Nikki fought boredom in the agency office where she filed reports and fielded few

phonecalls in two five-hour stints in an agency office. Beth also struggled with boredom in her scramble to accrue enough hours at the treatment facility where she loved working with the young men in the classroom. Their ennui may be due to the fact about the power of this experience, as we hear Professor Jimmy state later, that "It's about relationships, and you can't form a relationship with a filing cabinet."

#### Benefits

*Patience, patience, patience.* Student comments from interviews, journals and course evaluations were generally positive about the contributions this human services field experience made to their personal and professional growth. Overwhelmingly, patience was where students felt they made the greatest gains, regardless of the type of clients the students worked with or the nature of their work. Furthermore, many students felt they had learned to be flexible and that they gained self-knowledge and the ability to be introspective, making the realization that "as a teacher, you are dead in the water if you DON'T have patience and flexibility!" Several students echoed these comments from written course evaluations: "I really learned a lot about myself as a person through this program. . . . I impressed myself with what I was able to do!"

Along with personal insights, students also learned about their aptitudes as teachers, what is required of teachers these days and the extraordinary burdens borne by children and adolescents. Journal comments documented personal growth: "I learned about people different from myself" and "At first I was really nervous,

thinking about the crimes that those boys had committed, everything from theft to murder. . . then I realized I felt concern for them because once they leave the treatment facility, they are going to end up right back in the environment that put them there. Then there was a growth in compassion, because they are at-risk youth. Their lives, what they experience are so different from what I experienced. . . but they also made me angry sometimes. We all have choices and they made the wrong choices..."

*Career decisions.* Many students expressed that through the field experience, they were better able to determine whether teaching was a career they should pursue. For some, like Jennifer, "This narrowed out some options. By that I mean that finally getting me in with the kids made me fall back in love with my decision to become a teacher. It definitely reinforced my love of teaching!" Specific instances in their placements made Stephanie and Andrea grateful for their career choices. Stephanie talked about one individual to whom she became close in a residential facility for adolescent girls: "One of the girls I worked with got discharged and moved. She wrote me a letter, I wish I could have said goodbye to her because I really got attached to her. She was so appreciative about me helping her with her algebra and I was just amazed that just that little effort of mine made that much difference to her. It made me realize how big of an impact teachers can have without knowing it and that was good to recognize." Andrea shared her realization that she had something special to offer children: ". . . at the end, I organized a talent

show, and through that I got to teach a few of the girls how to play the piano. It was really neat to teach them how to play the piano, because many of them, I don't think, had ever had that type of experience. They weren't really involved at the high schools they came from and it was just so neat to see the excitement of their faces."

Working with troubled youth, Jay learned this about teaching: "I didn't understand how taxing it was going to be if I wanted to do it right. Dan affirmed this notion, saying "When you really connected with a person, 50 hours was not enough time to help all you'd want to. It really helped me to get out of my comfort zone."

*Movement toward empathy and compassion.* Perhaps the most poignantly expressed changes in the college students were when they moved from a level of fear or apprehension to appreciation and emotional attachment. Throughout the group interviews, we heard echoes of Matt's statement: "I realized that these people are human beings with most of the same needs we have. . . these are people with feelings, who want to be loved and appreciated for who they are." The differences students encountered among their clients included low socio-economic status, mental and physical handicaps, abusive home environments and struggles to learn English; "Not the kinds of home or conditions most of us grew up in," Dan pointed out. Students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to work with people different than themselves. Nikki spoke for many of her peers when she concluded that the overall worth of her experience ". . . is that it prepares me very well to handle situations that will come up in my classroom. Just to



keep the kids on task or if they mainstream. It will help me to deal (as a regular classroom teacher) with kids with Down Syndrome or the mentally challenged. I was brought into this population of people that I had never really come into contact with and it just broadened my awareness and it helps a lot."

### Challenges

"A hell of a lot of hours..." Even though the majority of students felt that this field experience afforded them very good opportunities to grow, many also expressed concerns, dealing primarily with the burden of completing 50 hours of service in about nine weeks. Due to the structure of the program and the amount of time consumed by the application, interview and selection processes, students do not receive their field assignments until the sixth week of a sixteen week semester. They do receive five hours' credit for those processes, so the actual time they work at the community agencies is 45 hours, 40 if they take a placement out of town. Most do not question the worth of the experience, only the timing, especially since they receive just one credit hour. Jennifer explained: "It was very hard on me. I didn't know when I took 290 that it entailed all that. If I had known before, I could have planned my classes differently. I had to go from 7:45 a.m. until 9:45 just before my class. Then I got so far behind that I had to go in the afternoon after my classes were over too, so I guess if I had known that I should make it a block, that would have been helpful." Jay affirmed that: "I don't think getting into the 290 is a good idea for someone in fall sports. I had to wait until the end

of the season and miss half of that, then had knee surgery and missed more. . . It was pretty hectic this last three- four weeks going in every day. Doing class and rehab and going to Head Start, that's all I have to my life right now. It's stressful, but I learned a lot!" It was the timing, not the experience itself, that posed the challenge for some students.

*Struggling to make connections.* What others did struggle with was in seeing all the possible connections between the field experience and the human development course. Asked specifically about those connections, most students were able to articulate some connections and methods that they or the course instructors had used to forge the connections. These included the reflective journal, in-class applications of field experiences to course concepts and formal case studies assigned by one instructor.

Although every student in PTE 200/290 maintained a journal, in which they were to make a substantial entry after each stint with their agency, the benefits were not uniform among the students who participated in the focus groups. In two focus groups, the students did not mention the journals at all as being useful in connecting the course with the field experience. In another, only one of six participants reported that their PTE 200 instructor read and responded to their journals. "He collected them a few times in the semester and would respond to three or four of your entries," Andrea recalled. This did trigger a brief discussion of how the journal, an occasionally cumbersome assignment, could have been more useful. From Jay: "It's just not as effective if someone isn't respond-

ing to you. If you got those comments back throughout the year, you could look at those views and see it in different ways, kind of analyzing it better. Because now that you are done, you are not going to remember it at all." From Katie: "Yeah, I would have liked a chance to have somebody read my journal part of the way through and just from their perspective, what are their thoughts? I like to know what everybody is thinking, am I doing something wrong. . . just little feedback would have been good."

As far as relating the experiences to the course content, opinions varied, but most did see their instructors endeavoring to do this, either through specific assignments or class discussions. Jennifer noted "I think my PTE 200 instructor did a good job of paying attention to the needs of the class and usually he would ask us to talk individually with the person next to us. So we got feedback from other students." Andrea chimed in: "I thought doing the case study helped a lot in making connections. We took an individual we were working with, though some of us were limited by confidentiality stuff. . . we looked at their background and then we tried to determine their moral development, cognitive development, social and the other ones. And then at the end, we had to try to predict what we thought would happen to them. It really helped to make connections." Jay saw clear connections: "They're directly related. Especially in my case. You go over ADD [attention deficit disorder]. My child had ADD. We'd learn about what are some things you can do to help these children. I mean, that is what we are learning to do, is to deal with children." Kim built upon

that notion, saying "It was like PTE 200 teaches you how to teach and in PTE 290 you can actually practice it, like always having extra stuff planned, or like identifying, some of my kids were abused, having to be able to talk to them, being there for them, how to react to them."

But reactions were mixed on the strength of the bridges built between the two experiences. Some negative responses had to do with the perceived relevance gap between the ages studied in class and the ages a student might have worked with in their placement, as with with Stephanie, who explained: "I had a little bit of a problem connecting them. I'm sure I did subconsciously. You learn a lot of things without realizing it, but it seemed like a lot of PTE 200 was targeted more at preschool and lower grades and I was definitely working with upper grade kids. It just seemed like everything was elementary. I'm sure some of it applied, but you don't realize it really." Her friend agreed: "I felt like we focused mostly on younger ages except near the end we had to do all these group projects where we worked on something like abuse and drugs. That focused more on stuff related to what I was working on in my placement." And finally, Dan asserted "I really COULDN'T connect my PTE 200 class with my PTE 290. It was just really because my PTE 200 class was very unstructured. It didn't seem like we focused much on anything. I'm sorry, but I couldn't connect the two."

Having examined the tasks, benefits and challenges of the field experience in the words of the students who participated, we turn now to the perceptions of faculty members. The three informants in

the following section each taught at least two sections of the human development course attached to PTE 290. As with the students, their comments are grouped according to these categories: what they saw as students' tasks, the benefits and challenges of the experience and their own attempts as teachers to create links between their courses and the field experience

#### **Instructors' Perspectives**

*What they do:* "When it's good it's wonderful, but when it's poor..." This observation of Professor Susan relates to the perception expressed strongly by two of the three faculty members that the field experiences which are part of this program are not equal in value. Professor Jimmy's conviction that the whole 290 experience is about building relationships has already been noted. Both he and Professor Susan expressed strong feelings about students either being misplaced in an agency (stuck doing clerical work for the majority of the 45 hours) or not taking the placement seriously enough. Basing her perceptions on class discussions, Professor Susan related some of her students' dismal experiences, as well as her proposed solution: "It's very difficult to construct a journal if you haven't had the kinds of experiences that have allowed you to make any human connections. I think there were three students in my afternoon class that were either just filing papers or doing a newsletter. A couple of them said "I'm paying for this and I don't feel that I'm getting anything out of it that is related to teaching." They felt like they were being used. . . I'd take them out of that placement immediately. If they are to get something valuable from it, then

I think they should have the same opportunities as others to have a good placement."

Professor Jimmy gave an example of this kind of non-educative situation: "I had a very bright, creative nontraditional student, an artist. And for some reason, her primary placement was not granted her and that made it difficult, because of her time constraints -she had a family and a full time job. She got sent to Social Services. What it came out to be was filing cases in their office. She was allowed to look at some of the cases, but they said it would give her an idea of what they deal with there. Yeah, there were some interesting cases; yes, she read about some interesting people, but she didn't have any real contact, which was frustrating. I don't think PTE 290 does much for people if it's that kind of paperwork."

Professor John posited a different read of the possibility that some students might be over-engaged in clerical duties. He noted: "My sense is that there may be some real misconceptions out there about the degree to which that's the dominant experience. I will use the analogy that teachers do a lot of things that are pretty laborious, tedious type stuff: run copies, make worksheets. I would suspect that in social service agencies, there's a lot of not-so-glamorous things to do also. I would expect that a certain amount of that is okay. My suspicion is that we probably have a few students who lay back and let that happen more than they should, and it might be their fault as much as anyone else's. But I think actually we've articulated fairly successfully that this is supposed to be a thing where they work with people, so it's not that common.

It's partly a matter of our students having the confidence, interest and drive to make the experience something that's really good for them."

*Benefits to students.* Faculty do see students making gains in many areas. Professor Susan stated that she usually sees "...an increase in their organizational skills coming out of the scheduling and all the paperwork they do as a part of this process. There is an evolution towards understanding the 290's value. I see some sensitivity come out of it: comments like "They're people with feeling just like everyone else" are always a revelation to some."

From listening to the comments of his students, Professor Jimmy sees two main benefits for students: "They usually build their awareness of intervening factors which have an adverse effect on kids, which fits in really well with the focus I take in my class on at-risk youth. I also see them moving toward what I like to call "realistic altruism," from naivete that most of the 20 year olds have to more sophistication, sometimes a tempering of their "save the world attitude" that led them in this direction in the first place."

Professor John also sees great potential for student growth, which in some ways trouble him: "I worry that we're putting people into placements that are very powerful, maybe more powerful than some schools, without having all the support mechanisms we might to help them process the information in ways that are likely to promote change as opposed to reinforce stereotypes. A specific example would be sending someone to work with very low income children. If they don't have sub-

stantial support, either through the agency or the university or peers, it's possible that they'll go into the experience thinking "that's what those people are like" and just confirming that "yes indeed, that's what those people are like." That's why I see the need for connections between the 290 and concurrent [classroom] experiences."

*Challenges to students.* Besides those noted above, faculty also perceived the difficulty many students experienced in fulfilling their 50 hours, due to the late start in the semester and students' multiple commitments. John and Jimmy called it "an expensive placement," in that students are in community agencies rather than schools for the first part of their teacher education program. As John noted, when links are not clearly articulated, key connections might be missed. Students' ages can occasionally present challenges. Susan teaches an evening section of PTE 200 and working adults tend to take that. "They are able to use not just their 290, but their considerable life experiences to make connections to the material, whereas talking with the younger students, you just get a little laundry list of what's happening in their lives." Jimmy concurred, adding "It's just where a 20 year old is, developmentally."

*Building bridges.* To varying degrees, all the PTE 200 instructors incorporated elements of the field experience into their courses. Strategies included reading and responding to the reflective journals students kept (John), asking the students to bring in their experiences when they were relevant to a course topic (all three) and using examples from field experiences to initiate direct instruction and small group

class activities (John and Jimmy).

New to the institution during the year this study began, John was the most aggressive of the three instructors in seeking information about the field experience. He noted: "I teach two sections of 200 this semester and have become very interested in PTE 290 and I have a very clear sense that even in one semester, I probably know as much about the combination of those two as anyone on campus. I have been to many of the placement sites, and those visitations were very powerful. A good example: at the Salvation Army. I thought I had a vision of what it was, and it was really mind-boggling. More than anything, it's a church, which I would have answered false to before the visit. One of the core elements to the youth rehab and treatment center is that it's an accredited state high school, which I didn't know." This increased knowledge about what students were experiencing enabled John to forge ties between their fieldwork and his classes. He consistently used student journals and his own observations to build bridges with which he was fairly satisfied. He added "The best assignment I did this semester was a case study. All of the students selected a person from their 290 to study and apply growth and development principles to. That really helped build a bridge between what was going on out there and what they were reading."

Susan plans to use the students' journals more extensively in the future. Her strongest ties to students' experiences come in using them to illustrate concepts she is teaching: "For instance, this last semester, we were watching a video segment that illustrated how play supports social devel-

opment and intellectual development. I was able to ask are you seeing ego-centrism, are you seeing parallel play? Are you seeing guided participation? I had a student in the Child Development Lab and he was able to bring in lots of examples which fit the things we were talking about. Students working with Social Services are able to make some real sensitive connections to the people they're working with and the content."

Jimmy uses an approach similar to Professor Susan's: "I don't organize it, in the sense that I have a specific place where I tie it in. What I do is in our small group discussions, I tell them "as you come to places where your field experience is relevant, please bring that into the discussion, because it enriches everyone in the group. I do it also if we're seeing a videotape or clip and they can bring in their own experiences in the agencies to make it more relevant. It doesn't always happen. And it's partly because some of the field experiences aren't always relevant to what they're reading in the text and seeing in my class."

#### Lessons Learned

Two professors called PTE 290 "an expensive placement," as it is fifty hours of education students not participating in school-related activities. Students Matt and Jennifer compared their experiences in PTE 290 to farming and working with computers, respectively, both noting that "you only get out of it what you put into it." Our study suggests that both perspectives are true.

*"In general, it's a good thing."* Overall, students, faculty and community

agencies can see that this is a worthwhile experience, with the caveat that some experiences are more powerful than others in yielding the kinds of benefits sought by this teacher education program. Those placements which put students directly in contact with clients, such as residential facilities for handicapped individuals, tutoring programs, and treatment centers for troubled youth consistently enabled students to gain empathy and compassion for others different from themselves and to grow in their awareness of diversity. Additionally, where faculty were able to build bridges between coursework and the field placements, whether through direct instruction or well-crafted journal assignments, students and faculty alike reported gains made in introspection, leading to increased and valuable self-knowledge, skills and career direction. Appropriately challenged, college students reported elevated awareness of and satisfaction in being able to make a difference in the world.

*"We could probably do better."* Professor Jimmy's sentiment indicates that while PTE 290 is indeed valuable, the college can be more aggressive in seeking the kinds of placements which are more likely to produce personal and professional development in the students. Not only that, but the college can also be more explicit with agencies about the benefits of direct interactions with clients for students, and discourage agencies from assigning students to clerical duties which, without fail, were perceived by all parties as the least productive experiences. Furthermore, education faculty can be more deliberate about articulating connections between the content of their courses and the experiences

students are gaining in the agencies. Dissemination of both the benefits to students and the possibilities for better bridge-building is crucial for the full power of this experience to be realized; college faculty need to promote these conversations with their colleagues within and beyond this single institution.

### Conclusion

Thoughtfully constructed, community-based field experiences can facilitate powerful growth in students and this study illustrated the kinds of growth that are possible. In particular, students gain insights into the complexities of working in a diverse society with people who are not only culturally and linguistically distinct from themselves, but also represent a wide array of family structures and physical and cognitive abilities. They learn to become more reflective about their own strengths and weaknesses and gain important professional skills. They can see stronger connections between their coursework and their work in the field.

There are some barriers to that growth. It is clear that preservice teachers need their own teachers to be aware of what is happening in their field experiences and to provide thoughtful links between practical and theoretical knowledge. Without opportunities to debrief, there lurks the possibility that even powerful field experiences will do little to transform and elevate students. Rather, their own stereotypes can be reinforced, if chances to write, discuss and reflect upon their field experiences are not built strongly into the overall sequence.

Service learning is a way for students

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into their instructional techniques.

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<sup>1</sup>There was a typographical error on one of the Likert-type scaled in the section of the instrument titled "Your Classroom Teaching." A revised form was mailed out to all the participants in this sub-sample and data was collected from revised forms.

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to become responsible, engaged citizens of society. We echo Boyer's (1987) assertion that service learning should constitute a vital part of the undergraduate experience because "the goal of the undergraduate experience is not only to prepare individuals for careers, but to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to give knowledge to the students, but to challenge knowledge to humane ends" (p. 8).

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