

# ***SERVICE LEARNING AND ITS IMPACT ON MIDDLE LEVEL PRESERVICE TEACHERS' LEARNING FROM FIELD EXPERIENCES***

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This qualitative self-study examines the incorporation of service learning in 2 sections of a middle childhood undergraduate methods course. As a beginning teacher educator, I used self-study to explore the following research questions: (a) How does engaging in a service-learning project during a field experience influence middle level preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and working with young adolescents?; (b) How does engaging in a service-learning project during a field experience impact middle level preservice teachers' learning from field experiences? Data was collected from 55 preservice teachers who were placed in 4 different schools within Midwestern rural Appalachia. Three major findings emerged during data analysis. First, engaging in service learning allowed preservice teachers to feel they were adding value to their school in ways beyond that of their previous field experiences. Second, engaging in the service-learning project encouraged and required preservice teachers to interact with school personnel, the local community, and students with whom they previously had not interacted during their placements. These interactions raised perceptions of role responsibilities and increased preservice teachers' sense of professional identity. Finally, some preservice teachers' stereotypes about the Appalachian context were reinforced during the needs assessment process. However, the service learning projects created a space to start meaningful conversations to address these preservice teachers' cultural deficit perspectives and consider strengths-based ways of knowing their students and their families.

Service learning has been found to be a valuable instructional strategy in K-12 and higher education (Jacoby, 2003; Root, 1997; Seitsinger, 2005; Wilson, 2011). Service learning is largely viewed as a pedagogy that connects academic learning goals with the needs of a community through engaging in some form of service. In recent decades there has been a push to incorporate service learning within

preservice teachers' academic experiences (LaMaster, 2001; Myers & Pickeral, 1997). This study examined middle childhood preservice teachers' methods course-based service-learning projects linked to field experiences in four schools in Midwestern rural Appalachia.

According to the Association of Middle Level Education, Initial Level Preparation Standards, middle level candidates should

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effectively be able to “articulate and implement developmentally responsive practices, such as, teaming, advisory, extracurricular, and service learning” (Association of Middle Level Education, 2005 p. 7). As the researcher of the study and instructor of the methods course, it was my hope that engaging preservice teachers in service learning would help them to develop a deeper sense of the value of service learning and heighten awareness of how to organize, implement, and lead a service learning project with their future middle school students. The course addressed the following middle level teacher preparation standards: young adolescent development, middle level curriculum and assessment, middle level teaching fields, and middle level instruction and assessment. In addition, incorporating service learning was my way of addressing the Association of Middle Level Education Initial Level Preparation Standards’ emphasis on creating “coherence among curriculum, instruction, field experiences, clinical practice, assessment, and evaluation” (p. 1).

In the following article, I start with a brief overview of how service learning is currently conceptualized. Next, I discuss the methods used to conduct this self-study, including outlining who the participants were, what data were collected, and how the data were analyzed. In the subsequent section I give a brief overview of the service learning projects that students created and provide analysis of the data, discussing the research findings. Finally, I conclude with some recommendations and considerations, based on my experiences of studying my own practice, for teacher educators who would like to incorporate service learning into their courses.

### ***SERVICE LEARNING***

Although the phrase *service learning* was coined in the 1960s by Ramsay and Sigmon (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), conceptually, service learning has been around since the 1900s, finding its philosophical roots in

Dewey’s notion of experiential learning (Rocheleau, 2004). Some have proclaimed service learning to be more than simply a teaching strategy or instructional method but rather a revolutionary pedagogy because of its transformational potential (Butin, 2005; Liu, 1999; Speck & Hoppe, 2004). Educators are in agreement that, at a fundamental level, service learning can be seen as a “values-oriented philosophy of education” (Stanton et al., 1999, p. 5).

Coffey (2010) argued that service learning has been a powerful pedagogy in helping preservice teachers to put theory into practice. Middleton (2003) pointed out that the goals of a professional development school (PDS) naturally lend themselves to service learning since PDS partnerships simultaneously focus on preparing preservice teachers while providing much needed support for the schools in which preservice teachers are placed. Even outside of the PDS model, Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisill (2007) noted that, in contrast to the traditional preservice teachers’ field experience that predominantly benefits the university student, incorporating a service learning component allows the community partners to benefit as well.

Service learning has been found to have an impact on preservice teachers’ dispositions toward working with diverse student populations (Baldwin et al., 2007). Connecting service learning to coursework has been effective in developing preservice teachers’ awareness of their own ethnocentric views, consciousness of structural inequalities, and understanding of cultural diversity (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011). Whether preservice teachers are engaging in service learning as a way to develop their own understanding of issues of diversity or to bridge the theory-to-practice divide, research has shown that adding a service learning component to teacher education programs benefits the preservice teachers, the communities where the service takes place, and, potentially, the future K-12 students and schools in which these preservice teachers will work.

## **METHODS**

This research is a qualitative self-study. "The term self-study is used in relation to teaching and researching practice in order to better understand: oneself; teaching; learning; and the development of knowledge about these" (Loughran, 2004, p. 9). My goal of evaluating the practice of incorporating service learning within my course, an instructional strategy that I advocate for my preservice teachers to implement with their future middle school students, naturally led me to use self-study methodology. The value of using self-study is not only in researchers' abilities to exam theories of teaching and learning, but also to advance them through the investigation of their own practice (LaBoskey, 2004).

This self-study provided a way for me as a teacher/researcher to better understand and improve my practice. The guiding research questions included (1) How does engaging in a service-learning project during a middle childhood methods course and in connection to a field experience influence middle level preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and working with young adolescents? (2) How does engaging in a service-learning project during field experience impact middle level preservice teachers' learning from field experiences?

Berry (2004, p. 1306) notes that "for self-study practitioners, conventional social science methods have been unhelpful for the development of understanding practice." Applying self-study provided a constructive method for me to investigate the learning that occurred for my preservice teachers in relation to the academic goals outlined by the course, while reflecting on my own practice as a teacher educator to create a better learning experience for my current and future preservice teachers. Dinkelman (2003) notes that while some traditional educational researchers critiqued the academic rigor of self-study, others such as Zeichner (1999) have argued that self-study is "probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher

education research" (p. 8). The growing acceptance of self-study within the field of teacher education is evidenced by the increase of self-study research published in highly respected peer reviewed education journals (Zeichner, 2007).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

To maintain academic rigor, I used LaBoskey's (2004) five predominate characteristics of high quality self-study research methodology. They include: (a) the research is self-initiated and focused; (b) the research is aimed at improvement; (c) the research is interactive and collaborative in nature; (d) multiple, primarily qualitative methods are used by the researcher; and (e) exemplar-based validation is used to establish trustworthiness of findings.

These five characteristics were used from the conception of the study to the write up of the findings. As previously stated, this self-study was used to as a way to improve my practice as a teacher educator. While the name self-study may make the methodology seem individualistic, self-studies are very collaborative in nature. This self-study was no different. LaBoskey highlights that within teacher education self-study research collaboration can take place in many forms including between colleagues, researchers and their students, and text. In the case of this study, the major forms of collaboration came from communication with my preservice teachers during the course of the semester. In addition, school liaisons that serve as the major contact person at each school placement site became supportive collaborators in helping to structure how service learning could be implemented in my course and in evaluating the impact of the service learning projects at the various school sites. Finally, fellow colleagues became important collaborators in my reflection process to better understand and improve my practice. All three forms of collaboration were valuable for this self-study. As LaBoskey (2004) states, "gathering multiple perspectives on our profes-

sional practice settings helps to challenge our assumptions and biases, reveal our inconsistencies, expand our potential interpretations, and triangulate our findings (p. 849).”

In adhering to LaBoskey’s fourth guideline, multiple forms of qualitative data were collected for this self-study. Data were collected from 55 preservice teachers enrolled in the course titled *Middle School Curriculum and Instructional Processes*. As part of their service-learning project, preservice teachers were required to conduct a needs assessment of their schools, create their own or group service-learning project to fulfill a need within their assigned school, implement the project, formally present their service-learning project in class, and individually reflect on their service learning experience. Empirical data analyzed included an initial questionnaire assessing preservice teachers’ knowledge of and previous experiences engaging in service learning, my reflective field notes of classroom discussions, group written assignments and presentations, and individually written student reflections.

Lastly, LaBoskey calls for exemplar validation. This discussion of validation and trustworthiness of findings is not new to self-study and qualitative research in general. In order to attain to this guideline and because of my text-rich data that was highly narrative, I was led to use Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber’s (1998) systematic method of categorical content analysis to formulate emergent themes and identify findings within the data corpus. They identify four steps involved in this process. The first includes selection of the subtext based on the research questions. To help ensure trustworthiness of findings, emphasis was placed on data that emerged directly from the preservice teachers’ voices in the analysis, instead of simply focusing on my reflections on how I felt things were unfolding in the course. Step 2, definition of the content categories, and Step 3, sorting the material into the categories, unfolded in a recursive process. This included carefully reading and rereading the data, generating categories that emerged from the data, sorting data based on categories,

suggesting new categories or redefining existing categories in a circular procedure until categories were saturated and well defined. The last step was drawing conclusions from the results.

### ***Participants***

Participants in this study were undergraduate middle childhood preservice teachers. The preservice teachers reflected the national demographics of in-service and preservice teachers, with the majority being White, middle class, female, and monolingual (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Of the 55 participants, all were White except for one self-identified biracial student who was half White and half Black. In addition, 12 out of the 55 participants were males. Most participants self identified as being from an urban or suburban setting, while only a few of the participants claimed to be from the local Appalachian region. All candidates had junior or senior status and planned to complete their professional internship during the next academic year.

This Spring 2011 course served as a follow up to the initial middle childhood general methods course that I taught during the fall quarter of the same academic year. In addition to being enrolled in my courses fall and spring quarters, the preservice teachers were dispersed to four different professional development schools (PDS) in local rural Appalachian communities that were connected to the middle childhood program for the entire academic year. The students had been placed in the same PDS for the previous fall and winter quarters. As part of the PDS model, preservice teachers were required to complete a minimum of 50 field hours per quarter, though preservice teachers often exceeded that requirement. Preservice teachers remained in the same PDS throughout the three quarters but were placed in different classrooms each quarter to provide them an opportunity to see a variety of pedagogical approaches to working with young adolescents, to explore how age level affects the developmental needs of young adolescents

in grades four through nine, and to have experiences in classrooms reflecting both of their required content area concentrations.

### ***School Sites***

I believed that using the school as the basis for the service learning project was meaningful because it served as the site for these preservice teachers' field experience and also because of the significant role that schools play in supporting rural communities' revitalization (Miller, 1997). The four schools all were considered to be in rural Midwestern Appalachia. Students within these schools have unique sociocultural and historical identities. Heilman (2004) makes the argument that students within this region of Appalachia should be considered marginalized ethnic Whites. She states that many of the issues that students in the Midwest Appalachian region face such as "class stigma, discrimination due to language and dialect use, low educational attainment, underrepresentation in the curriculum, and negative stereotypes" (p. 70) are common to other marginalized groups. In addition, within a school setting, many Appalachian students are often "objects of scorn and contempt among teachers" (p. 67).

The four schools in which preservice teachers were placed were Star Elementary, Chase County Middle School, Butler Middle School, and Henry County School.<sup>1</sup> Star Elementary was the only school located in the same city in which the University was situated. Of all four schools, Star Elementary was deemed the most ethnically diverse (72% White) and affluent (only 12% deemed "economically disadvantaged"). One of the main reasons for the diversity and higher socioeconomic status was the fact that this was the school where many of the university faculty and graduate students sent their children. The other three schools, Chase County Middle School, Butler Middle School, and Henry County School were located between 25 and 45 minutes from the university and thus had a more rural, less ethnically diverse setting (97–98% White) with a greater

proportion of lower socioeconomic status students (55–64% deemed "economically disadvantaged"). Chase County Middle School had the largest student population, with a fifth-through eighth-grade configuration. Butler Middle School served fifth through eighth grades but shared a building with the elementary school. Henry County School included both Henry Elementary and Henry Junior/High School. The school's structure was reflective of many small rural school districts, where one school building housed both the elementary and junior/high school and thus had Grades K–12 in one building. The two Henry County schools were separated by a cafeteria and preservice teachers were placed in both schools in fourth- through ninth-grade classrooms.

### ***Service-Learning Projects***

In the course, preservice teachers were provided the option to organize service-learning projects in a variety of ways from working individually to working across course sections and organizing one big service-learning project in connection with their corresponding PDS. All preservice teachers chose to work in school-based groups across course sections and thus four service learning projects were created. The preservice teachers at Butler Middle School held a book drive to collect young adolescent books for the school library since the majority of the school's books were geared toward elementary students. The preservice teachers at Chase County Middle School sponsored a fundraiser for recess supplies because students did not have anything to play with during recess. The preservice teachers at Henry County organized a field day for the elementary school students at the school because the physical education teacher who normally organized field day had retired and the school did not have the funding to fill the position. Finally, the preservice teachers at Star Elementary helped commemorate the Centennial of Star Elementary by creating what they classified as a beautification project that represented all students from Star. Preservice teachers at Star Elemen-

tary stated that school spirit and the celebration of school history were important at Star. To help commemorate the anniversary preservice teachers raised funds and purchased pinwheels for each student at the school and placed them in the shape of 100 on the day of the schoolwide celebration. Students were then able to take their pinwheels home and the remaining money raised was donated to the Smart Board fund at the school.

Table 1 provides a description of the service learning projects, the needs that the preservice teachers felt that they addressed, and an excerpt of a reflection on the project from the groups. All comments inserted into the charts came directly from the preservice teachers' final group Powerpoint presentations and papers.

## ***FINDINGS***

Analysis of the data drawn from multiple sources (preservice teacher questionnaire, instructor/researcher field notes, group assignments and presentations, and individual preservice teacher reflections) yielded findings in three areas that are outlined below. The findings are grouped into perspectives on the *value* preservice teachers saw themselves adding to the schools where they were placed; the opportunities for *interacting with others* identified by the preservice teachers; and *unintended outcomes* recognized by the instructor/researcher as I analyzed and reflected on preservice teachers' work.

### ***Value Added***

Engaging in service learning allowed many of the preservice teachers to feel they were adding value to their school in ways outside of the traditional field experience. One of the benefits identified by preservice teachers was that their project allowed them to give back to their schools. As one preservice teacher who was placed in Star Elementary mentioned in her final reflection, "We felt that during this project we could really show our gratitude

toward the school and the surrounding community." Though the preservice teachers acknowledged that simply being in classrooms helped teachers and students, they perceived that the relationship in their field experience classrooms was not fully reciprocal and that they were the ones who benefited the most out of their partnership with mentor teachers. However, they saw service learning as creating an opportunity that allowed them to express their gratitude. A preservice teacher who participated in the field day service-learning project stated "they have helped us grow and benefited us by letting us in their lives and this is a good way of saying thanks to the students, teachers, and the entire faculty."

Some of the preservice teachers felt that their project allowed them to show their gratitude and also became a way for them to leave a lasting presence at their schools. This was particularly expressed by one preservice teacher at Butler who stated "we will always be a part of the school and district through the books we were able to donate. Leaving this school with 200 more books than when I came is something I am very proud of." It was evident that this value added was not just perceived by the preservice teachers but voiced by multiple members of the school as well. One preservice teacher at Chase County Middle School voiced how students, teachers, and the principal were excited about their project:

Not only were the students excited about our project, but the teachers were excited as well. Mr. Moore, the principal, even came up to me one day and told me what a great idea we had. He really liked that we were doing something that would directly benefit the students.

In the case of Star Elementary, this sense of adding value extended into the community:

While setting up the pinwheels on the morning of the celebration, several members of the community made comments while walking by on how wonderful they looked. These comments really made our hard work feel appreciated. Overall, this project was not only a great way to celebrate the school, but also made us feel a part of the Star community.

TABLE 1  
Service-Learning Projects

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**Star Elementary Service-Learning Project Description:** To commemorate the Centennial of Star Elementary, we created a beautification project that represented all students from Star: 1 pinwheel per student, about 300 total, were placed in the form of 100 on the school lawn on the morning of the celebration.

**Needs Addressed:** School spirit and celebration of history are important at Star. We were lucky to teach during a landmark year, and wanted to help commemorate the occasion. We designed a project that would allow all students to be represented.

**Group Reflection:** Goals were achieved! Teachers and the principal liked the idea. Parents and community members said it looked great. A couple people took the reins and delegated responsibility. Everybody chipped in and made it a great project that made the students at Star happy. We also had great support from teachers and the principal.

**Butler Middle School Service-Learning Project Description:** Our goal was to collect adolescent age-level books. We also wanted to collect different types of books such as, mystery, romance, and adventure because not all students have the same preference.

**Needs Addressed:** We want our students to be motivated to read. By allowing them a larger variety of books to choose from, they will ultimately be increasing their reading skills and vocabulary skills. Students are more likely to read when they are choosing books based on their interests. By providing students with more choices in the school library, this takes pressure off the teachers to spend their own money on larger libraries within their classroom. Also, when students choose their own books for silent reading based on their own interests, it gives teachers more time to monitor individual reading levels and issues.

**Group Reflection:** After spending a year with Butler MS students and learning about the Butler community, it is clear that students need to have some sort of motivation to read. The district is also struggling to keep up with the needs of their students due to money restrictions. We struggled with this service learning project, because Butler Middle School ended their school year on May 27. Time was a serious restriction. We're also all very busy people, so finding time to coordinate working on the project was challenging. However, we were still successful in collecting over 200 books for Butler Middle School!

**Chase County Middle School Service-Learning Project Description:** This project's goal is to raise money for gym equipment for the fifth grade to use during their recess time. After discussion with the PE teacher, Mrs. Hughes, we thought of an activity that could help with this cause. Mrs. Hughes suggested we use the three Wii systems she had to raise money during the fifth-eighth grade lunch periods. This would actively involve students in working toward this goal.

**Needs Addressed:** With students having recess on a blacktop that is just additional parking spaces there is little to do during this time period other than just stand around.

**Group Reflection:** Mrs. Martin was impressed with the results of the fundraiser and is looking forward to purchasing equipment for the fifth grade. Many students really enjoyed the Wii activity, as some became regular visitors during the lunch periods. This activity will probably be used in the future since it was so successful.

**Henry County Service Learning-Project Description:** K-6 Grade Field Day activity. K-3 in the morning and 4-6 in the afternoon. We had different activities for younger and older students.

**Needs Addressed:** The school was not going to have a field day this year because the gym teacher retired and there was no one to plan it. The students don't have many opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities due to budget cutbacks.

**Group Reflection:** We met our goals! Students had a great time. We worked well together. The principal was very thankful and surprised it went so well, given that it was our first time organizing this type of event. Our teacher liaison stated they will have university students organize the event next year.

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This sense of adding value through service learning went farther than reflecting on their current field placement; it made some of the preservice teachers reflect on their future role as teachers. The sense of pride translated into

preservice teachers wanting to implement service learning within their own classrooms to recreate this sense of fulfillment and belonging in a school community for their own future students. One preservice teacher stated, "When I

am a teacher I hope to do some type of service learning project with my students so they can feel as proud as when I felt giving books to Butler Middle School.” For another preservice teacher at Star Elementary, this experience reconfirmed her commitment to teaching:

Taking part in this celebration and being appreciated for something that we worked so hard on only motivated me more to become an educator. I am excited for the future along with the possibilities to give back that follow. I know that by being a teacher I can do this in more ways than teaching. From this project, I’ve learned the importance of including every student, parent involvement, administration support, and doing the best you can at something you’ve already committed to.

### *Interacting With Others*

One of the greatest benefits voiced by several preservice teachers was that it provided an opportunity for them to interact with members of the school community that they did not previously have a reason to communicate with during their field placement. Engaging service learning encouraged and required preservice teachers to interact with school personnel, the local community, students, and fellow peers. This new level of engagement was articulated by a preservice teacher at Star Elementary:

The entire process pushed me to get more involved within the school, and allowed me to talk to teachers and parents I had never talked to before. I was also able to talk with the principal, Mr. Carr, which rarely happened this year. The project also allowed me to get to know a few of my fellow partnership peers better.

The preservice teachers stated that this project really required them to gain a better understanding of their school. One of the preservice teachers at Butler Middle School mentioned that before the project he did not know that the elementary and middle school shared the same library. Likewise, at Chase County Middle School, preservice teachers acknowledged that

it required them to learn more about their students:

This project helped me to explore more parts of the school than I had seen the previous two quarters. Since we helped the students during lunch, I got to interact with a wide variety of students. During the course of the year, I was placed in two fifth grade classrooms and a seventh/eighth grade classroom. So far, I had not had a chance to work with the sixth graders at all. Even though I was not in their classroom or talking with them for a long period, it still gave me a glimpse into what they were like. This process allowed me to see Chase in a different way. Usually when I am there, I am focused on a specific class or grade level. This opened up the school to me and showed me that every student there is important, even if I do not know them.

Several preservice teachers discussed the benefit of learning about students outside of the classroom context. This was particularly true for the preservice teachers at Henry County. One preservice teacher stated that,

In all, the field day experience was one that I will never forget. It has made a lasting impact on my life. It was great to see the kids outside of the classroom while still working effectively at a particular goal other than academics.

Another preservice teacher was also appreciative of the opportunity to see a different side of the middle school students, saying, “they laughed, competed, and cheered each other on, three things that I had not often witnessed in the classroom.”

It is important to note that the preservice teachers identified their interactions as helping them to understand potential tasks they might be required to complete as educators. Michele highlights some of the sentiments shared by her peers in her field reflection when she reflects on the amount of effort and organization that goes into coordinating events as a teacher:

I enjoyed this project because it helped us learn what all it does take to put on a big event. We had the field day at Henry County School and I thought that this would be a very simple thing and not too much prep work time should be spent planning. We are going to have games outside, what child would not love that? However, I was very mistaken. We had to contact the principal to make sure what date worked for them. We had to see what supplies the school had and what we would and would not be allowed to do. Long story short, there was more planning for this than initially thought.

Just as important as with whom and where the preservice teachers interacted was simply the process of collaboration, especially in light of middle school philosophy and the significance of teaming (George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000). A preservice teacher at Butler Middle School was able to make this direct connection in her final field reflection:

Another thing that I learned from this project was how to work with fellow colleagues. Working with the other students in the partnership and with the cooperating teachers of Butler allowed me to foresee how working with a group in the workplace might be conducted. This experience allowed me to think about what must happen when working with fellow team members.

One of the biggest outcomes articulated by preservice teachers during class discussions was that the interactions really helped them to transition from seeing themselves as students placed in the field to viewing themselves as colleagues. This new sense of self was expressed by one of the male preservice teachers:

It was nice to interact with the staff of Butler Elementary on a professional level when we were trying to plan and organize this event. It made me picture myself as a fellow teacher trying to plan an event like this for my students.

This sentiment of truly feeling professionally integrated within the school and community was also personally expressed by a preservice teacher at Star Elementary:

I feel as though I have made deep connections with my cooperating teacher, teacher liaison, the fellow at Star, as well as other students in my partnership. While celebrating the 100th year, we were able to deepen these connections and gain more respect from the administration, parents, students, and each other.

### *Unintended Outcomes*

One of the unintended outcomes of incorporating service learning into my course was that some preservice teachers' stereotypes about the Appalachian context were reinforced. While service learning helped preservice teachers gain a deeper contextual understanding of the professional roles of being an educator, the project at the same time seemed to open up a space for preservice teachers to articulate a deficit perspective about some of the young adolescents, their families, and communities, based on their socioeconomic status. Comments like "obviously, by eighth grade, there is absolutely no motivation to achieve" and "this may be deep rooted in the community," which was written in one preservice teacher's reflection, were not uncommon, and likely to reflect opinions expressed by some educators in the schools. While such statements were not due to the service-learning projects themselves, the process of assessing the needs within their schools and considering how these needs had come to be became a vehicle for preservice teachers to voice some negative judgments about students, families, and communities. The lack of structural interrogation and placement of blame on students and parents as well as a negative association between social class and values was reflected in a claim by a preservice teacher placed at Butler:

Working at Butler Middle School has shown me that being in a “poor” area goes much deeper than the funding that a school has. Students at Butler have many difficulties in their learning, as well as having parents who don’t support the education of their children. Many of the parents send their kids to school as a babysitter and then don’t care if homework is done or how their grades are. These parents often have children who don’t care about reading or other schoolwork because that’s the way they’ve grown up.

The issue of not interrogating structural inequalities was evident across all school contexts. For example, Chase preservice teachers also chose to raise funds to support needs for the school due to a lack of funding. While the preservice teachers did not blame this lack of funding on the students or community, there was not much reflection on why this poverty came to be, how it impacts student learning and socialization, and who benefits from it. In the case of preservice teachers at Star, they chose a project that would add to the 100th year school celebration largely because they viewed Star as not having any financial needs, outside of raising funds for Smart Boards™. However, the school itself is located within one of the poorest counties within the state and there are economically disadvantaged students within the school. In addition, there are students at the school who were English Language Learners that the preservice teachers did identify as being underserved. So while Star Elementary school’s context might have provided opportunities to address more of an economic or cultural need, the preservice teachers did not entertain the idea because of their perception of the lack of need. To some degree, since this school with its majority middle class population represented the polar opposite of the perception of the “needy” Appalachian schools within the surrounding community, the preservice teachers did not see the opportunity to address some less obvious possible needs among subgroups within Star Elementary.

While there was a lack of deep reflection on issues of systematic inequalities, the service learning reflections did create openings for meaningful dialogue. Some preservice teachers were able to reflect in ways that went beyond a deficit perspective as they explored complex issues associated with working in a lower socioeconomic status school district. One such preservice teacher made this comment,

The school is lacking sufficient funds to keep the reading material, school supplies and other equipment updated. The school spends the money they get on things they absolutely need; some money comes from grants and is designated to certain things. For example, Butler Middle School just got a technology grant, so each classroom got a Smart board put in. They also got a set of 24 iPads as well as each teacher received an iPad. While technology is a great way to educate students, it seems like a paradox that Butler has the best technology but hardly any books or school supplies like paper and pencils.

Statements like this showed that some of the preservice teachers were thinking critically about the basic needs within schools and their comments provided a space that could lead to deeper conversations.

## ***IMPLICATIONS***

Similarly to Jenkins and Sheehey (2009) who studied the effect of implementing service learning within a special education methods course, the service-learning experience enhanced many of my preservice teachers’ learning of the course material and gave some of them a broader sense of their professional roles as future teachers. Many preservice teachers commented that completing their service-learning project was the most memorable experience of their partnership and all stated that it should be maintained as a required component of the middle level education methods course. However, the results of

this self-study suggest three areas of consideration when incorporating service learning within a methods course. These three areas of concern include the types of service preservice teachers engage in, the logistics of organizing a service-learning project, and the critical reflection component of the project.

### ***Types of Service***

Through class discussions and writings some preservice teachers questioned what constitutes a true service-learning project. This argument seemed to center around two concerns: the kind of service that was being provided and whose resources were being used to support the service. These two issues that were explored during a class discussion were also captured in two Chase partnership preservice teachers' individual reflections. One preservice teacher felt that middle schoolers should not have provided the money to raise funds for their own equipment:

The majority of our group agreed on it, but I thought that having the students donate their own money defeated the purpose of the service-learning project. I felt that we should have done a fundraiser to raise the money ourselves because having the students donate is having them pay for their own toys.

Another preservice teacher thought it was a good idea to include the middle schoolers, because it showed how they could be proactive in raising funds for their own school:

The opportunity for students to move and interact during their lunch periods greatly contributed to the fundraising, while a normal fundraiser may only involve the turnover of money for a baked good. Here this allowed active involvement. The fact that we were able to establish help from the school's student council also proved to be very beneficial, since this allowed a school organization to demonstrate the ease of running such an activity. In the future, the student council is considering this Wii activity to raise money for socials and other events at the school.

This issue came up again with the preservice teachers who participated with the 100th day celebration. There were one or two preservice teachers who equated service learning with providing some form of tangible resource, and for them, creating a service-learning project that was in support of a school's historical celebration did not constitute true service. While this debate of what constitutes service can be largely subjective, ultimately in the case of *service learning* it is important to reflect on how the service connects to the learning goals tied with the course. For example, within this middle school methods course, understanding school structure, fostering family-school-community connections, creating a warm and engaging school environment, and exploring developmentally appropriate ways to establish relationships with young adolescents, were all embedded within the curriculum. Therefore, a service learning project that centered on helping the school to commemorate its Centennial celebration could be viewed as a service-learning project addressing important academic goals in the course. As part of that project preservice teachers had to organize their event, which required communicating with the principal, teachers, and peers, composing an actual parent letter to hand out (versus a fictional letter which was an assignment within their fall middle childhood methods course), and interacting with every student within the school and members of the community on the day of the celebration. Though arguably they could have done a project that addressed a greater need at the school, in the end, what seemed to be important to the service-learning project for this methods course was not the product of the service itself, but rather the degree to which the service cultivated an academic learning experience. This project became a way for them to put one of the main tenets of *This We Believe* (Association of Middle Level Education, 2010) that a school for young adolescents should be characterized by a positive school climate, into place.

Arguably, the project that created the most tangible resources, the book drive, though valuable, had the least impact on preservice teachers' reflective ability to make connections between the course goals, their service experience, and their future role as a teacher. While many preservice teachers found value in the service learning projects that were created, it was evident that projects that required them to interact with their peers, students, staff, administrators, and community members personally were more beneficial in helping them to reflect on their roles as future teachers. In fact, those interactions not only made preservice teachers reflect on their future roles as teachers, but some stated it made them feel like an equal colleague within their schools.

As I reflect on my own practice in facilitating and assessing service learning projects within my course, the question that I now pose is how aligned are the learning goals of the course with the service that is being provided by my preservice teachers. Raising funds to support schools programs, extracurricular events, or finance school supplies is important, and definitely would contribute to supporting my preservice teachers' placement schools. Through that experience one preservice teacher realized how valuable student organizations could be in raising funds to support their own school. In interacting with students in a capacity in which this preservice teacher normally would not have been required to, he was able to see how middle school students themselves could be empowering resources to help the larger school community. In addition, some preservice teachers at Chase Middle School commented on physical and social differences that they observed between the different grade spans. This allowed for meaningful and contextual discussions to take place on developmental differences within young adolescents and what that means in relation to developmentally responsive practices. It became important for me to be well versed in my learning outcomes in order to find spaces or direct conversations so that meaningful connections could be made between the service

and learning when preservice teachers weren't able to make those own connections intuitively

### *Preservice Teachers' Concerns*

While preservice teachers could articulate benefits to engaging in service learning, many raised concerns about logistical problems associated with the service-learning project. One of the main issues was the time constraint they felt based on the 10-week quarter length. The limited timeframe was compounded by the partnership schools' academic calendar ending before the university's quarter was over. This required the preservice teachers to be introduced to the concept of service learning, complete a needs-based assessment, plan their project, and implement it within a shortened timeframe.

Some preservice teachers commented that since the university was transitioning to a 15-week semester, this might eliminate much of the limited time problem. In addition, many of the preservice teachers suggested that since this was a follow up methods course, future preservice teachers could be introduced to the concept of service learning during the fall semester so they could create better service-learning projects during their spring semester. One strategy might be for preservice teachers to learn about service learning fall quarter, use group seminars embedded within the PDS model during the winter quarter to design their projects, and implement their projects during the spring quarter since they stay in the same PDS the entire academic year.

Another issue voiced by several preservice teachers was that the limited guidelines for the project caused confusion. When the project was originally created it was to be completely preservice teacher driven. So while certain requirements were outlined, such as completing a needs assessment, actually doing some form of service learning that would directly benefit the school, presenting their project in class, and written reflections, there were no hard guidelines on how they should go about completing the needs assessment or what was

an acceptable form of a service learning project. In response to this concern, while not changing the preservice teacher-driven aspect of the service-learning project, one strategy might be to have more structured, tangible checkpoints throughout the project that would allow space to address concerns, either preservice teacher- or instructor-generated, and monitor progress toward completion of the service learning projects.

### ***Reflection and Learning***

Reflection is an important component of service learning. Berman (2006) argued that participants should reflect both on the service experience and the academic learning. Though reflections were required, and many preservice teachers were able to make connections among their service-learning projects, their future roles as teachers, and the academic goals within the course; deeper opportunities for reflections on systematic structures in regards to issues of race, gender, and, particularly in the case of these service learning projects, class, did not occur. So while the reflections did make the preservice teachers think about the importance of the service that they provided, they did not reflect on the structural barriers that caused the need for some of the services in the first place. This created a context where preservice teachers often accepted rather than challenged the status quo.

In order to address this concern, I offer two suggestions for teacher educators. One is for teacher educators to link the work in foundation multicultural education courses to methods courses to help preservice teachers see diversity issues from a more dynamic and critical perspective. Second, I suggest that teacher educators can draw from multicultural service learning practices (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Even if the focus of the methods course is not on cultural awareness or understanding, some aspects of multicultural service learning would be beneficial to help preservice teachers make necessary meaning of the social injustices that are highlighted when engaging in many

service-learning experiences. Going above simply implementing multicultural service learning in methods courses, Erickson and Anderson (1997) suggest that service learning should be integrated throughout a variety of courses within the entire teacher preparation program.

### ***CONCLUSION***

Similarly to other self-studies, this research supported my own professional development as a teacher educator and created a higher level of consciousness about my own practice (Korthagen & Luenberg, 2004). Engaging in this self-study helped me realize that I initially was more concerned with the service component than the learning component of their projects. I engaged in what Sigmon (1996) refers to as *SERVICE-learning* in which the focus is on service primarily and learning secondarily. This emphasis created a context where my preservice teachers were also more concerned with the service component than the learning. While meaningful learning in relation to my learning outcomes for the course did occur, this self-study led me to see the potential for preservice teachers to make explicit connections between important concepts related to becoming a professional middle level educator and the learning they experienced from the service learning projects. This would move us toward what Sigmon refers to as *SERVICE-LEARNING* where the focus is equally on service and learning, each enhancing the other.

Marchel, Shields, and Winter (2011) argue that the changing climate of teacher preparation lends itself to the implementation of service learning pedagogy. I suggest that integrating service learning is particularly meaningful for middle level teacher education preparation. Service learning can develop essential skills for middle level preservice teachers such as, understanding young adolescent development, teaming, developmentally responsive teaching practices, and exploring

what it means to create supportive environments for young adolescents.

Through the self-study process, I now have a better idea of how to be more intentional in setting the stage for preservice teachers to link their course learning about middle school curriculum and practice with their service learning projects. Three suggestions for middle level teacher educators who are considering incorporating service learning pedagogy include: (1) Have preservice teachers engage in service that requires them to work with students within their school placement. This can be in the form of getting the middle school students involved with the service or providing a service for the school community. Having direct contact with students allows for meaningful reflections and discussions about young adolescent development. (2) Encourage preservice teachers to work collaboratively with at least three classmates who are placed in the same school site. This will allow for meaningful conversations about teaming. While not replicating interdisciplinary teaming, it will allow them to start to think about what it means to work collaboratively with colleagues to increase student success. (3) After completing their own service learning project have preservice teachers brainstorm a service learning project that they could implement with their future middle school students. Requiring preservice teachers to outline the project, discuss how it would be tied to the academic standards, and state how the project would be assessed would allow them to gain practice on recommended middle level best practices.

### NOTE

1. Pseudonyms were used for all schools and names

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