# Encouraging interaction and striving for reciprocity: The challenges of community-engaged projects in teacher education

Meghan E. Barnes

*The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1449 South Milledge Avenue, Athens, GA, 30605, United States*

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The cultivation of reciprocity across groups was not considered valuable by PSTs.
- PSTs disregarded the role they played in the construction of places.
- PSTs should view themselves as involved in relationships with people and places.
- Teacher educators could stress the transferability of the *tools* of inquiry.
- All stakeholders should consider how they build reciprocal relationships.

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Opportunities for experiential learning in teacher education are increasingly important as the demographics of teachers and students diverge. I draw on place-conscious pedagogies, funds of knowledge, and teacher development theories to inquire into pre-service teachers' developing conceptions of community as they engaged in a project meant to introduce them to the local communities. Findings suggest that PSTs' experiences with communities growing up limit their understanding of reciprocity between communities and schools as teachers. The findings have implications for the ways that teacher educators incorporate experiential learning into their programs.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Opportunities for experiential learning have been incorporated into teacher education programs with increasing frequency worldwide in recent years. In the U. S., experiential learning in teacher education has included formal student teaching, service-learning projects (e.g. Hallman & Burdick, 2011; Lake & Jones, 2008; Kinloch & Smagorinsky, 2014), community inquiry projects (e.g. Burant & Kirby, 2002), diversity study circles (Moss, 2008), and "cross-cultural immersion projects" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 97). When combined with narrative inquiry strategies, one form of experiential learning, service-learning, has been used in Canada, Kenya, and Turkey with PSTs[1] whose backgrounds differ from those of their students (Mitton-Kukner, Nelson, & Desrochers, 2010). In Ireland, practicum placements, another type of experiential learning, have been structured to extend PSTs' school-based interactions beyond mere observation, to allow them to practice pedagogical methods in actual classrooms (McCormack & O'Flaherty, 2010).

Ideally, experiential learning experiences should occur over time and in multiple spaces (Richards, Moore, & Gipe, 1996; Sleeter, 2008), encourage PSTs to learn about teachers' various roles in schools and communities, and should lead to increased interactions among community members, teacher educators, and PSTs. Foundational to these interactions is reciprocity, "where all learn from and teach one another" (Mitchell, 2008). I draw from place-conscious pedagogies (Gruenewald, 2003) to extend the concept of reciprocity to include individuals' interactions with and in places. Reciprocal interactions and relationships, both with other individuals and with places, are based on connection rather than difference (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Mitchell, 2008) and challenge power hierarchies where the needs, interests, and knowledge of one group are positioned ahead of the other. In teacher education and teaching, in particular, reciprocity might mean that PSTs and teachers inquire into the goals, interests, experiences, and

---

resources of students, families, and communities to help them make pedagogical and curricular decisions. Reciprocity is not driven by service or a perceived need. Similarly, the type of experiential learning I discuss in this paper is not an example of service-learning. In service-learning, students "(a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). Although it shares some of the same goals, the experiential learning presented in this study does not entail a service component.

Experiential learning in teacher education programs can provide PSTs with opportunities to develop their multicultural awareness through interactions with diverse populations of students (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011; Hogan, 2006; Moss, 2008). Interactions with diverse student populations are particularly important in settings like the one featured in this study, where the demographics of the PST population do not mirror those of PreK-12th grade students. Most U. S. college students choosing to major in Education are monolingual middle-class White women (Carnevale, Strohl, & Melton, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013; Sleeter, 2008). However, the demographics of practicing and pre-service teachers do not mirror the increasing diversity of students entering U. S. PreK-12th grade each year (Banks, 2006; NCES, 2014). Further, the majority of teacher educators in U. S. schools of education are also White (United States Department of Education, 2016), contributing to the incorporation of experiential learning opportunities that can provide opportunities for PSTs to learn from, about, and with local communities as they prepare to teach diverse populations of students (New, 1995; Sleeter, 2008).

This study is set in a university-based school of education in the U. S. Southeast and the surrounding community. The demographics of this English Education program and many of the surrounding secondary schools mirror the national demographic data of U. S. teachers and students. As a teacher educator in this program, I incorporated experiential learning into my teaching, through the use of a Community Inquiry Project (CIP) to better prepare PSTs to work with diverse groups of students. PSTs completed the CIP during teacher education, in addition to their practicum and student teaching work. I approach this project and subsequent research from a conception of community that includes people, places, and tools—but also extends across time to include histories and imagined futures (Dewey, 1927; Greene, 1995). Further, I consider communities as continually constructed (and reconstructed) through social interactions (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008).

I consider the CIP to be an instance of experiential learning that provides a space for PSTs to consider how communities shape schools, students, and the work of teachers. Specifically, in this study I inquire into the ways that PSTs' prior life experiences informed their understandings of the interaction between schools and communities as they completed the CIP. This inquiry is guided by the following questions:

1. In what manner did PSTs draw on their own conceptions of and experiences with school and community while growing up as they inquired into the community surrounding the university and/or the community in which their student teaching school was situated?
2. In what ways did PSTs' experiences with school while growing up influence the ways they went about learning about the particular students they were working with in their student teaching placement?

## 1. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

I approach this study from the understanding that myriad factors, experiences, people, and places interact to inform PSTs' developing conceptions of teaching and schools (Author & Colleague, 2016; Colleague & Author, 2014). Specifically, I use a place-conscious pedagogical approach (Gruenewald, 2003), which recognizes individuals as actively constructing and manipulating spaces, to frame my inquiry into the ways that PSTs make sense of communities. I also took a "funds of knowledge" approach to teaching that foregrounds the role of places in students' learning and regards students as belonging to extensive social networks that offer a wealth of cultural resources (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll & González, 1994). PSTs' knowledge of communities and schools also contributed to their developing teacher identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

## 2. Place-conscious pedagogies

Places have multiple dimensions, with the perceptual, ideological, and sociological dimensions particularly salient here (Gruenewald, 2003). The perceptual dimension of place suggests that peoples' perceptions of places are relational—shaped by their interactions with other people and places. Individuals' experiences in schools can both support and hinder their ability to perceive places as relational (Abram, 1996).

The ideological dimension assumes places to express ideologies and relationships of power. In other words, spaces can facilitate and legitimize certain cultural reproductions of power based on the ways people interact with and attempt to control them (Foucault, 1980, 1997; Gruenewald, 2003; LeFebvre, 1974). Many social institutions, like schools, have traditionally been places where control has been used "to legitimize and reproduce the authority of those institutions" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 629).

Finally, the sociological dimension of place recognizes places to be social constructions. People infuse places with meaning, and are also shaped by the places surrounding them. Disregarding place in education limits the opportunities for students to consider how culture, society, and politics interact in the process of place-making (Gruenewald, 2003).

Unfortunately, schools at all levels often disregard the perceptual, ideological, and sociological dimensions of place (Gruenewald, 2003). Alternatively, place-conscious pedagogies recognize places to be both constructed and pedagogical (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2016; Nespor, 1997), shaping and shaped by individuals who move through them (Gruenewald, 2003). Further, when educators extend pedagogy to include places, they may encourage students to critically examine the interactions among multiple sociocultural contexts: cultural, historical, social, emotional, personal, and place-based, among others. Experiential learning may provide a means through which educators can connect schools and communities (Basso, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1996). In particular, opportunities for experiential learning during teacher education could help PSTs to extend their own multicultural awareness as they learn about, with, and from community places and people (Chang et al., 2011; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995; New, 1995).

However, short-term community-based experiential learning methods that lack opportunities for critical reflection are also criticized for privileging the needs of the university over those of the community (Bortolin, 2011), positioning university students as providing a service to the community (Flower, 2008; Hallman & Burdick, 2011), and potentially reinforcing deficit-oriented stereotypes of others (Mitchell, 2008). In an effort to minimize the above pitfalls of community-engaged experiential learning opportunities, PSTs engaged in various forms of critical reflection periodically