

Service Learning with Vulnerable Populations: Pre-Service Teachers and Migrant Farm Workers in North Central Florida

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Service learning experiences create an opportunity for pre-service teachers to address issues of cultural and linguistic diversity among a variety of population. When such opportunities involve work among migrant farm workers, however, teacher educators may encounter conflict between offering students an important learning experience and protecting the very population they hope to serve. In this paper we describe how indirect service learning in the form of fundraising activities establishes a safe-zone between students and migrant farmworkers in north central Florida. This buffer, as we call it, stands between the possible effects of ideologies among some of our preservice teachers and the immigration status of some migrant farmworkers. We also present preliminary survey data to support claims regarding student perceptions about the usefulness of the course.

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Service learning is at once a philosophy and an educational method; it helps preservice teachers develop dispositions necessary to advocate on behalf of under-served populations and engages these students in real-world issues related to future work in schools (Anderson, 1999). This dual nature of service learning may be what distinguishes it from other sorts of experiential learning since, as Root points out, the beneficiary of service learning is the recipient, not the provider (Root, 1997). As we suggest in this paper, recipients gain crucial financial assistance, and pre-service teachers benefit from

this work by becoming aware of circumstances affecting the classroom performance of a population they will likely serve.

Root further observes that service learning can be direct, for example, “preparing meals in a shelter...or picking up trash in a park” or, “indirect,” for example, “organizing a food drive or doing clerical work for a social service agency” (p. 1). In either case, the goal is not to gain a particular skill-set but to socialize teachers into the moral obligation of their craft. In this paper we address how the dual nature of service learning has helped us mediate a dilemma we have faced for a number of semesters: how to raise the consciousness of pre-service teachers with respect to the needs of the children of migrant farmworkers while protecting this particularly vulnerable population from individuals hostile to what is currently referred to as “illegal” immigration. This presents us with a conflict. While we, along with Allen and Hermann-Wilmarth (2004), must believe in the potential of pre-service teachers to become culturally responsive, we struggle with ways to provide experiences to help them do so.

Let us explain. While many of our students embrace the conventional ethic that it is good to help ‘those less fortunate than themselves,’ they regard service as an act of charitable giving. Such a perspective is reinforced by Florida’s generous Bright Futures merit scholarship program, which requires high school students to dedicate a minimum of 75 hours to ‘community service’. Yet, while nearly all of our students receive the scholarship, its rationale is not informed by an agenda for social justice. Ultimately, then, community service, as it is promoted by Florida legislation that supports Bright Futures, is a superficial response that does not encourage students to examine the underlying causes of inequities. As Vadeboncoeur et al. (1996) have noted, service provided without

a framework for understanding amounts to “charity, at best, and voyeurism and exploitation at worst” (p. 191).

Since many of the children that preservice teachers will work on behalf of are undocumented-- a term we prefer over “illegal” because humans are never ‘illegal’--we are mindful not to design educational experiences that jeopardize migrant farmworking children. Thus, the question we pose is: how can we provide opportunities for predominantly White, middle-class preservice teachers to develop dispositions necessary to advocate on behalf of migrant farmworking families yet avoid exposing those families to possible repercussions, such as incarceration or deportation?

Context: Migrant Farm Workers in the United States

Migrant farm workers and university students can mutually benefit from collaboration in service learning projects. The education of pre-service teachers is enhanced when they become aware of the social, economic, and political issues affecting the education of migrant farmworking children. Farmworkers and their children benefit from the financial assistance that result from service learning projects, and migrant families may benefit from faculty dedicated to advocating for migrant children in schools.

Migrant farmworkers’ children are vulnerable in three ways, which, taken in combination, place them at risk for academic failure. These include poverty, mobility, and cultural and linguistic differences. The median income for 75% of migrant workers remains less than \$10,000 per year (Huang, 2003), and Perry (1997) reports that 90% of migrant children are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Secondly, in the United States there are an estimated 2.5 million migrant farmworkers, and Florida is “home” to

between 200,000 and 350,000 (Riley, 2002). Those workers engage in agriculture and related farm labor and move frequently as they follow seasonal harvests. It is not unusual for the children of those migrant workers to move three times within one academic year (Perry, 1997). Moreover, 84% of migrant workers are Spanish-dominant (NAWS, 2000) and the children represent non-mainstream and culturally different backgrounds (López, 1999).

Academically, migrant children achieve among the lowest scores of any subpopulation in the US on standardized tests. More than 50% of grades K-12 migrant students scored below the 35th percentile in reading; forty-seven percent scored below the 35th percentile for language arts; and 39% scored below the 35th percentile for mathematics (Perry, 1997). This leaves migrant students about three to four years behind their nonmigrant peers academically (Leon, 1996).

In addition to the above challenges, migrant children also face numerous social and emotional difficulties. Children of undocumented migrant farm workers fear deportation without notice, an all-too-common occurrence, and have difficulty forming lasting social relationships with peers and educators (Rothenberg, 1998). This is compounded by the difficulty of maintaining accurate academic records, and transporting those records to new schools (Branz-Spall & Wright, 2004; Rothenberg, 1998). Newly arrived migrant youth may have had no formal educational experiences upon which to draw (Romo, 1996), making the experience of school one of stigmatization and low expectations.

Migrant workers in north central Florida are no exception to these data. Within ten miles of the University, migrant workers harvest blueberries, work on dairy farms,

and tend shrubs and trees on plant nurseries, among other things. Migrant workers, whose children attend public schools, contribute to our local economy but nevertheless remain invisible in it. We believe that all of our preservice teachers, including those who will work in Florida as well as elsewhere in the United States, should understand the complexities of working with migrant children and ways to assist those children in and beyond the classroom.

Our Undergraduate Elementary Preservice Teachers

It is difficult to conceive of a contrast more absolute than that between migrant farmworkers and the preservice teachers in our undergraduate elementary education program, known as Proteach. Like many programs in the United States, ours does not reflect the linguistic diversity of the students they will teach (Cochran-Smith & Cawthorne, 2005). Language minority students account for nearly 20% of the US school age population (Crawford, 2002). In contrast, in 2005 the elementary education undergraduate program at the University of Florida consisted of 437 students, of which 94 % (409) were female and 85% (373) were White of non-Hispanic ethnicity. Our College does not obtain data on students' linguistic profile, but there are relatively few non-native English speakers in our classes. Thus, in a country increasingly diverse, both racially and linguistically, elementary preservice teachers are largely White, monolingual women.

Our ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) Foundations course, Foundations of Language and Culture in the Elementary Classroom, is offered both fall and spring semesters every year. Each semester we teach approximately 120 students. Under the 1999 Florida Consent Decree (FLDOE, 2007), all Florida preservice teachers

must take coursework that provides them with the skills and dispositions necessary to effectively work with English language learners in mainstream settings. At the University of Florida, this is a mandatory course in the students' teacher preparation program. In teaching the ESOL course, we have found many of our students' views—views honed by fears of terrorist threat and other anti-immigrant rhetoric—a daunting challenge to addressing issues of educational inequities and social justice. Like Allen and Hermann-Wilmarth (2004), we struggle against stereotyping our students for their

race and class privilege, socially conservative or outright bigoted family values... their unexamined Whiteness; ...proud monolingualism; ...sorority priorities;... [and] “love of little children” that seems to apply mostly to clean, White, well-dressed children and only in the most patronizing way to “those poor little Black/Mexican/trailer-park kids” (p. 214).

We agree with Allen and Hermann-Wilmarth that it is hypocritical for us to maintain a deficit view of our students while simultaneously impressing upon them the importance of tapping into their own students' “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1992). We are nevertheless dismayed by the large number of our students who, like those noticed by Vadeboncoeur et al. (1996) assert that “any kind of controversy at all has no place in public education” (p. 190). Thus, these tensions came to bear upon our design of the service learning project with migrant farmworkers.

Community Connections

A means of negotiating this difficulty occurred serendipitously. In fall of 2003, the Harvest of Hope Foundation relocated its headquarters to Gainesville, FL. The Foundation is the only national non-for-profit organization to provide emergency

assistance to migrant farmworkers. Established by Philip Kellerman, some of the Foundation's contributions include emergency aid for tire repairs to migrating farmworkers, electricity and water bill assistance, and higher education scholarships to undocumented students. In our conversations with Phil, we realized that we could involve students in helping farmworkers indirectly (Root, 1997) through activities to raise funds for some of the Foundation's work with no risk to the population that the Foundation served. Thus, the Foundation represented a sort of "buffer" between the preservice teachers and migrant families. The buffer would serve to reduce the potential social and political risks to migrant families. We also wondered whether indirect participation, despite being theoretically defensible, would allow us meet the goal of supporting our students in work to meet the needs of diverse populations.

Not all of our students viewed the service learning work with migrants as potentially beneficial to their future careers. For example, some students stated that they were unwilling to engage in service learning projects that involved undocumented migrant workers. We were made aware of this when students who objected to fundraising for migrant farmworkers asked for an alternative assignments in order to avoid the conflict between the service learning project and their political views. Despite being reminded that about half of migrant workers are documented, some students nevertheless preferred to avoid the controversy altogether. Moreover, not only were we asking our students to engage in projects to assist migrant farmworkers, we were also encouraging them to act as advocates for ELLs and migrant children both in the classroom and outside of school.

Our belief that students must learn to be responsive toward this population came up against the realization that attempts to bring students and farmworkers together might endanger one half of this partnership. On the one hand, should any of the migrant families or children become jeopardized in this work, the program, for all its good intentions, would be unsuccessful—and worse by far would be the impact this would have on families. On the other hand, neglecting an opportunity for working with migrants would only serve to perpetuate the marginalized status and invisibility of the migrant workers within the community.

Service Learning in the ESOL Class

Early in the semester, Phil conducts a workshop with students in which he presents migrant farmworker data and describes the mission of the Foundation. He uses stories of families and workers whom the Foundation has assisted to illuminate the complexity of social, economic, and political issues that migrant farmworkers experience. Students are then asked to role play what a migrant farmworker family faces when the children must relocate so that parents can work. Following the role play, students are encouraged to think about advocacy for migrant farmworkers in school and beyond. For some students, engaging in work that would benefit undocumented people is inconsistent with their political views. For these students, we have established a number of alternative projects.

Fundraising Events for Migrant Workers

The fundraising events were varied and included such activities as car washes, yard sales, and ice cream socials. All suggestions had to be vetted by us and we allowed class time for students to discuss their project ideas. Students also discussed how they

would document their work so that it could be presented to the class at the end of the semester. Assessment involved individual reflections detailing personal contributions to the group. Below we describe four events, a dog wash, bake sale, scrapbooking event and sorority dinner to demonstrate how, in spite of not interacting directly with migrant workers, students became voices of the migrant population by virtue of their role as advocates for and representatives of migrant workers in the local community.

Four students chose to organize a dog wash. The event took place for three hours on a Saturday morning, and students took several weeks to plan the event, interact with representatives from the local dog park, and organize the requisite supplies and materials. Students also decided to hold a raffle at the dog wash. Patrons could purchase tickets for \$1.00 each for a chance to win a basket of dog supplies; those materials were donated from local vendors and organized by the students. The students advertised for the event with the assistance of Phil Kellerman, who had the event announcement broadcast locally. Phil was also present at the event, as he was with most events, as he distributed flyers and buttons from the Harvest of Hope Foundation. Between washing dogs and selling raffle tickets, students interacted with the community by answering questions about migrant farmworkers and the Foundation. As we learned during their end of semester presentation, students felt that they had become, in essence, advocates for migrant workers when they described to patrons the purpose of the Harvest of Hope Foundation and how the money they were collecting would be distributed.

Another event in which students participated was a bake sale. In this event, students approached local bakeries and restaurants for donated goods and set up a stand on the main street in the university town (the students also baked some of the items

themselves). The event took place late Friday evening, from 10 till 12, a lively hour for students on campus. The four students announced the bake sale with posters and flyers. Harvest of Hope brochures and buttons were laid out with the baked goods. Within a short time, the students found themselves answering questions regarding migrant workers; one man asked about the farm workers in the community and noted their invisibility in the local town. Like the prior dog washing event, students stated in class that they had become voices for migrant workers and were pleased to discover that the public was widely supportive of their work; some patrons contributed money without taking sweets in exchange. Students further noted that many patrons inquired about additional information on local migrant workers.

The third fundraiser we discuss was a scrapbooking event. This was held at a shop specializing in creating fanciful scrapbooks. The shop owner, who was sympathetic to migrants, donated space. As students reported, one patron, “came to the event in hope of helping an additional family.” Later, the patron had an opportunity to meet Phil. In their reflection of the even, the students noted that “this was a triumph in our eyes because we were able to get another migrant family additional assistance.” We cite this incident because it illustrates how, despite indirect connection with the recipients of service, these events can allow students to be agents, however unexpectedly, in bridging two distant communities.

We point finally to a group of four sorority women, who put out a call to nearly four hundred sisters to help migrant families. Phil gave his presentation at two sorority houses during a Monday night dinner. As our student reflected, “His speech brought the migrant workers closer to our lives than we ever thought possible. He told us even the

lettuce on our plates and the strawberries in our deserts that night were probably picked by migrant workers. It made us all truly realize their importance.” Through talks and flyers, the sorority students’ fund drives and consciousness-raising campaigns continued for two weeks, culminating in “cinema night,” held in a garden of one of the sorority houses. The eighty women who attended the movie brought along thirty guests, thus forging links beyond the sorority houses. Our students commented that migrant workers were not the only beneficiaries of the event. They noted, first, that “it helped us to gain experience working together for a common goal.” Second, it made them conscious “of the responsibility to... share this knowledge [of migrants] with our future colleagues.” Finally, students realized that “this type of project was something we could do in our future classrooms,” with elementary students drawn into social action. Thus, “we would also be continuing to spread information on the migrant worker population.”

Advocacy to Benefit Migrant Children

To document implications of this course on students’ future work as teachers of English language learners and migrant farmworker children and to help provide direction for future courses, we administered a survey to our class. Our decision was prompted, in part, by our understanding that some students would not advocate for the children of migrant farmworkers but would advocate for English language learners from other backgrounds. We were also curious about how students’ views had changed as a result of the course and its service learning component. We used a self-administered questionnaire with students in the undergraduate class to understand their beliefs about how working with ESOL students had been affected by the course. We used a pre- and post-test with students, the latter asking students if their views had changed and, if so, how.

Preliminary data collected after one semester show that 49% of the students stated that their views did not change regarding advocacy of migrant children. In the open-ended question section of the survey, for example, one student stated, “They [beliefs] haven’t changed, but I have become more aware of what the backgrounds and needs of these students may be.” Another stated, “I don’t believe in illegal immigration, or for people to be in this country illegally, but I will stand up for my students no matter what.” Thus despite reporting that their views did not change, it is clear to us that students have at least reflected on their role as teachers of immigrants in a way that they would not have done otherwise.

Slightly more than half the students (51%) stated that their views had somehow been affected and changed as a result of their coursework and service learning fundraising project with the Harvest of Hope Foundation. One student commented, “I want to help students more and it can be fun while earning money or other things”; another noted, “They [beliefs] changed a lot. Now I am sure on where I stand... Before, I didn’t have a clue. Now I feel that all students and all people deserve whatever I can offer them.”

Of course we cannot ensure that our preservice teachers will become advocates for migrant children in their own classroom, nor if they will incorporate service learning or advocacy into their own elementary classroom curriculum. However, we believe that the service learning experience of fundraising for migrant farmworkers has raised students’ consciousness regarding the political, social, and economic hardships faced by migrant workers and children. Students have the experience of becoming advocates and

representatives of migrant workers as illustrated by the service learning fundraising events; this has perhaps shed light on their work as future teachers of those children.

Ongoing Tensions

One tension that remains concerns the large number of students in our course, who participate in the fundraising activities. Having large classes makes our own schedule and organization a management challenge. For service learning events to be thoughtfully developed and implemented, the number of students in each class should be relatively small.

Second, we find that students often express the desire to have direct contact with migrant workers. In their final course reflections and presentations of their fundraising event, a number of students wished, as one expressed it, “to put a face on the event.” Thus some students expressed frustration over the buffer we placed between them and those they serve. Indeed, some said that their work was not as beneficial to migrant workers as it would have been had they worked directly with families. While we agree that working with migrants face to face could add an important dimension to the project, we disagree that direct contact is more useful than indirect contact. Ultimately, we see that students did benefit from indirect service learning by becoming advocates and a voice for migrant workers in the community.

Summary

As with many preservice teachers across the US, the students in our ESOL classes are not representative of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the students that they are being prepared to teach. One way we have addressed this incongruence is to use service learning in our classes. The “indirect” service learning experience of fundraising with the

Harvest of Hope Foundation, attempts to accomplish two goals: first, to provide our students with an opportunity to learn about and respond to the complex political, social, and economic factors that impact the education of migrant farmworking children; and, second, to create a “buffer” to shield vulnerable migrant workers from malicious or unintentional exposure. While the buffer has certainly distanced students from the population they serve, it has also positioned them as the representatives of migrant workers. Thus migrant issues have moved from the fields to the street, the campus and college dorms.

This work is not without ongoing tensions, however. We understand that direct interaction with migrant workers would inevitably bring additional complex issues such as language, culture, and communication (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Dunlap, 2005). Moreover, the number of students we work with impacts these service learning experiences, and at the end of the semester many students express their frustration with not having actually met a migrant family. We maintain that while the buffer reinforces the distance between these students and migrants, it simultaneously allows students to become representatives of migrants in the community. In either case, we believe service learning for preservice teachers is one way to bridge the backgrounds of our students with the linguistic and cultural diversity they will inevitably and increasingly encounter in US schools.

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