Chapter 15
Community–Based Field Experiences in Teacher Education:
Theory and Method

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes the value of offering teacher candidates an opportunity to participate in community-based field experiences during their teacher education programs. Community-based field experiences, in contrast to traditional, classroom-based placements usually offered at this stage in prospective teachers' professional preparation, enable beginning teachers to conceptualize their own learning and the learning of their students in new ways. As part of teacher education programs, the community-based field experience serves a distinct purpose and place, and one that is often underexplored. This chapter describes the integration of community-based field experiences into teacher education programs and discusses the unique quality of community-based settings as potential sites for teachers' learning.

COMMUNITY-BASED FIELD EXPERIENCES AS POTENTIAL SITES FOR TEACHERS' LEARNING

Early and diverse field experiences have been discussed as one of the keys to successful teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987; Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). Early field experiences exist to promote teacher candidates' understanding and practice of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2001), and in teacher education, field experiences, as a whole, bridge beginning teachers' reflection on the constructs of theory and practice present in the teaching act (Shulman, 2005). As field experiences in teacher education continue to be re-framed as important sites for teacher learning rather than merely spaces for prospective teachers to "try out," demonstrate, or apply things they have learned about (Zeichner, 1996), they move toward being conceptualized as

sites for teacher learning. Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) articulation that one's teaching practice is a site for inquiry reiterates that field experiences are, indeed, critical experiences for teacher growth.

Coffey (2010) suggests that community-based field experiences have the power to transform the ways that beginning teachers think about the effects of schooling in their students' lives, as well as the extent to which social factors influence students' success in school. Community-based field sites, often contrasted with traditional 'apprenticeship of observation' models of fieldwork (Lortie, 1975) within classrooms and schools, work toward the goals of broadening beginning teachers' conceptions of where student learning takes place as well as support the idea that teachers are not only part of a school but part of a larger community. These goals are accomplished through the ways in which such experiences encourage "beginning teachers to contextualize students' lives as part of the fabric of the larger community" as they "emphasize that familiarity with students' communities is important to the work of teaching" (Hallman, 2012, p. 243). Further, in the context of the broader community, students' school-based and personal identities often co-exist and prospective teachers are able to learn who students are beyond the school-based identity that they project in the classroom/ school.

Community service, more broadly, has been embraced by the academy in the form of service-learning and civic responsibility. Community service, as Flower (2008) notes, brings:

idealism and social consciousness into the academy; it brings a human face and complex lives into discussion of ideas and issues. But, it can also plunge teachers and students into its own set of contradictory and sometimes profoundly conflicted social and literate practices. (p. 153)

As Moore (2014) states, the concept of service-learning is often still fraught with 'mixed messages' (p. 109), and in common parlance is sometimes referred to as volunteerism. Service-learning's relationship with concepts of *server* and *served* demands a more complex and nuanced understanding of the goals of working with others in the community outside/ surrounding the academy. In teacher education, there is certainly a danger of pre-service teachers seeing themselves in the role of 'server' while seeing those they work with in the role of 'served.' Scholars in teacher education, including Wade (2000, 2001) have stressed the importance community service-learning, arguing that service is not just about meeting individual needs, it is about working toward the ideal of society that upholds the worth and potential of all its member (Wade, 2000). Similarly, Epstein (2010) describes social action literacy projects, projects that allow both teachers and students to advocate for civic action within their communities. In both of these examples, the community's needs are highlighted and the role of 'server' and 'served' is again problematized.

This chapter views community-based field experiences as drawing from service-learning's conception; yet, it also sees community field experiences as specific to teacher education in that field experiences promote an understanding of the processes of teaching and learning. Community-based field experiences, like service-learning, resonate with the notions of both 'service' and 'inquiry,' (e.g., Flower, 2002, 2008; Schutz & Gere, 1998) and aim to accomplish the goal of finding a balance between the two.

This so-called balance between service and inquiry is not always straightforward. Scholars in Composition Studies, such as Flower (1997, 2002, 2008) have problematized the server-served dichotomy within service-learning. Flower has worked toward service-learning's redefinition, articulating a more complex picture of the potential role reversals present in the act of service-learning, and her work (1997, 2002, 2008) features *reciprocity*—a concept that refers to both the interchange in roles between teacher and student as well as the interchange between university and community partnerships. Reciprocity is

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