Preparing Culturally Competent Teachers:

Service-Learning and Physical Education Teacher Education

by
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Abstract

Following the devastation of hurricane Katrina, a university located in the southeastern United States created a service-learning program. This program was established so that physical education teacher education (PETE) students could provide physical activities to children living in a temporary, government-funded housing community. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the service-learning program shaped preservice teachers’ cultural competency. The participants were 16 PETE students in a curriculum development course. A questionnaire was used to assess changes in the students’ cultural competency. Reflective journals and interviews were qualitative data sources used to identify significant elements of the service-learning program that elicited thoughts about the role of cultural competency in teaching. Findings revealed that there were changes in cultural competency. Triangulation of the data suggested that the service-learning participants identified consistent engagement, exposure to another culture, and an engaged instructor as key contributors to cultural competency within the service-learning program.
Finding meaningful and relevant ways to successfully prepare prospective teachers for the growing cultural diversity of schools in the United States is an eminent challenge facing teacher education programs today. The stark reality is that while the number of minority students in K-12 schools continues to rise (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006), the teaching force remains to be mostly White, middle-class females (NCES, 2005). Combining these discrepant trends with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (NCATE) commitment to diversity education (NCATE, 2006) and the fact that most job placements for beginning teachers are public schools with predominately low-income, minority students (NCES, 2006), highlights the responsibility of teacher education programs to prepare teachers who are capable of teaching diverse learners in diverse contexts.

Service-Learning: A Derivative of Experiential Learning Theory

The connection between theory and practice, especially in terms of learning in the formal education context, dates back to Dewey’s (1938) lifelong campaign for experience-driven education. He predicated that individuals have difficulty retrieving information learned outside of experience because of the lack of a relational connection to the information. Therefore, the hallmark of experiential learning theory is that active participation in the curriculum provides learners with rich opportunities to link experiences in the world to the “the inner world of the person” (Beard & Wilson, 2006, p. 19). As a result, the conscious or unconscious processing of lived experiences contributes to an expanded understanding of previous experiences or knowledge in the learner. Ordinary didactic teaching methods fail to provide learners with the opportunity to actively engage in the content; however, this is not the case for service-learning.

Grounded in the theoretical tenets of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), service-learning is a community-based method of education in which students fulfill the academic goals
of their courses while simultaneously contributing to the welfare of the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). The hyphenation of the terms “service” and “learning” strongly suggests a codependent relationship between achieving learning goals and service outcomes (Zlotkowski, 1998). Service-learning provides a real-world setting for actively applying and understanding the course material in a powerful and authentic way. The academic context enriches the service experience by raising awareness of public needs, social concerns, and the civic responsibility of community members.

**Components of Service-Learning**

In order for a university course or program to qualify as service-learning, three criteria are essential: (a) relevant and meaningful service with the community, (b) enhanced academic learning, and (c) purposeful civic learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Howard, 2001). The first and most obvious criterion indicates that the service provided must be germane and worthwhile to the purposes of the local community, the course objectives, and interests of all stakeholders (e.g., service recipients, university students, course instructor). Second, the service-learning program must be able to enrich the academic learning experience in ways that traditional classroom or book-based pedagogies could not do so alone. Finally, purposeful civic learning that signifies students are directly and intentionally prepared to assume the duties of active democratic citizenship in various communities must be evident. Community-based student activities that fail to meet these three criteria, such as volunteering, community service, internships and practica, should not be considered models of service-learning (Howard, 2001).

A key pedagogical ingredient for the fulfillment of these three service-learning criteria is thoughtful reflection. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) defined reflection as the purposeful consideration of an experience based on the specific learning objective. Dewey (1933) argued
that when reflection is missing, the challenges and novelty of lived curricular experiences can create internal and/or external disagreements to those involved, making it difficult for learning to occur. Therefore, failure to reflect on a service-learning experience may actually be counter-productive to the learning goals, and result in a lack of compassion or openness toward the experience and community partners.

Service-Learning in Physical Education Teacher Education

Only three studies to date have documented the implementation of service-learning in physical education teacher education (PETE) programs. Kahan (1998) designed a service-learning project for preservice teachers at an “at-risk” high school and found that the experience increased PETE preservice teachers’ perceptions of their ability to teach in similar settings after graduation. Similarly, LaMaster (2001) incorporated a 6-week long service-learning program in an urban high school physical education unit plagued with low student participation, poor test scores, and discipline problems. Results indicated that the participating PETE preservice teachers perceived an improvement in students’ responses to physical education (i.e., participation, interest, enjoyment, positive attitude, motivation), as well as their overall competency as a teacher. Lastly, Watson, Heuglin, Crandall, and Eisenman (2002) provided a descriptive tutorial on ways to integrate service-learning courses in university PETE curricula, and the potential outcomes obtainable for both the preservice teachers and the local community.

Outcomes of Service-Learning Models

The empirical evidence available documenting the benefits of quality, reflective models of service-learning is plentiful. Apart from contributing to the common good, improving university-community relations, and raising faculty’s satisfaction with students’ learning, the bulk of research has shown that service-learning enhances the personal, social, career
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development, and academic learning outcomes of students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al., 1998). However, the utilization of service-learning in teacher education programs can also empower preservice teachers to challenge social inequalities (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007). This feat is achievable through the deconstruction of previous attitudes about individuals or groups and the reconstruction of more socially just ideologies. Thus, service-learning can contribute to an individual’s awareness about culturally relevant pedagogy, while providing students with an opportunity to become more culturally competent citizens and educators.

Cultural Competency

Stuart (2004) defined cultural competency as “the ability to understand and constructively relate to the uniqueness of each [individual] in light of the diverse cultures that influence each person’s perspective” (p. 6). Reich and Reich (2006) added that individuals must continually strive to become more culturally competent through continually gaining knowledge about particular “experiences and patterns of another culture” (p. 54). Hence, for a person to become more culturally competent, s/he must gain a significant understanding and appreciation for cultural differences relative to their personal identities, values, and beliefs (Wachtler & Troein, 2003). Inherent in these descriptions is the notion that cultural competency is an evolving, accumulating process; an individual may never achieve complete cultural competency, but through exposure to diverse worldviews one can show signs of noticeable improvement.

The homogeneous teacher workforce and the growing culturally diverse student populations underscore the need for teacher education programs to focus on cultivating culturally competent teachers. According to Gay (2002), the majority of preservice teachers today do not receive sufficient exposure to ethnically and racially diverse classrooms in their teacher
education programs. Hence, researchers have taken a vested interest in discovering how to adequately prepare teacher candidates for diverse teaching contexts. Teacher educators have utilized case studies (Kleinfeld, 1998), diversity workshops, and sociocultural courses (Leavell, Cowart, & Wilhelm, 2007) to develop culturally responsive preservice teachers. The most recent method adopted by researchers has been the use of structured field experience placements in diverse teaching settings with diverse learners (e.g., Barnes, 2006; Phillion, Miller, Lehman, 2005). The results clearly suggest that through appropriate and multicultural field experiences, teacher educators can equip prospective teachers with a cultural perspective different from their own.

According to Baldwin et al. (2007), “[Service-learning] serves as a vehicle through which to examine in depth personal bias and racism and to better understand the meaning of diversity” (p. 315). Those personal biases can overtly or covertly appear in physical education contexts through the inclusion of activities or sports with Euro-American roots (Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006). It is not uncommon for educators to have higher comfort levels when teaching activities they have previous experience with. This becomes problematic when the content does not reflect the interests of the students they are serving (Stringer, 2004). With current trends indicating that the teacher workforce consists primarily of middle-class, White, females teaching in schools with culturally diverse student populations, this problem becomes more exaggerated due to potential gaps in understanding various cultures.

Teacher education programs that focus on cultural competency provide a starting point for preservice teachers to gain concrete insight into students’ societal and economical circumstances. This heightened awareness and knowledge about social injustices is consistent with the service-learning framework, and numerous researchers have reported findings that
confirm the significance of such responsiveness (Ladison-Billings, 2000; Baldwin et al., 2007). The implication for preservice teachers is they become more mindful of avoiding teaching practices that reinforce the hegemonic marginalization of students, thus teaching becomes a transformative process (see Nieto, 2000) with social justice at the forefront. The reflection component of service-learning allows for this transformation to occur, as previously conceived thoughts about individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds are exposed (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1998). Through introspection, preservice teachers can experience an ideological paradigm shift from naively accepting the status quo to challenging it, especially in teaching and learning environments (Baldwin et al., 2007).

Given that field experiences with ethnically and racially diverse student populations can promote culturally competent prospective teachers, and that service-learning activities may infuse teacher candidates with a greater cultural and racial understanding, it is possible that the incorporation of service-learning in PETE programs may be one method for improving future physical educators’ cultural competency. Pang and Sablan (1998) reported that teachers were more confident in their ability to instruct students from culturally diverse backgrounds when they learned pedagogical discourses, which were culturally responsive. Unfortunately, the limited service-learning scholarship available in PETE (Kahan, 1998; LaMaster, 2001; Watson et al., 2002) has yet to establish how service-learning activities contribute to preservice teachers’ cultural competence. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how a service-learning program shaped PETE preservice teachers’ cultural competency. The two research questions guiding this study were: (a) Did the PETE students’ cultural competency change over the course of the semester? and (b) What were the cultural competency experiences and insights of the preservice teachers participating in a service-learning program? Investigation into the
research questions may help PETE teacher educators understand how participation in service-learning may enhance the development of more culturally competent future physical education teachers.

Method

Participants

The participants were a cohort of 16 senior physical education undergraduate students (10 males and 6 females; 15 Caucasians and 1 African American) within a PETE program at a large public university in the southeastern part of the United States. All students were enrolled in the same nine-hour block of courses (i.e., physical education elementary and secondary methods, curriculum construction in physical education) that PETE students must complete prior to student teaching. The two methods courses provided the students with fieldwork experiences, while the curriculum construction course was devoted to inform preservice teachers about ways to construct appropriate physical education curricula models for elementary and secondary schools. The service-learning program was an optional component of the curriculum construction course. As one component of the course, students who volunteered to participate in the service-learning program were assessed based on the completion of all written reflections for the teaching and assisting sessions. Students were assured that the content of these reflections would not influence their course grade in any way, and therefore, were asked to reflect openly and honestly. The students who volunteered to participate in the study, but not the service-learning program, were assessed based on an alternative assignment (i.e., development of a block plan). The open sampling technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was utilized to allow for maximum student participation. That is, all willing and interested students who met the selection criteria (i.e., enrollment in the course, voluntary involvement in the study) were asked to participate.
Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in order to protect their anonymity. Permission to conduct this study was obtained by the university’s Institutional Review Board.

The Service-Learning Program

The service-learning program occurred at a government-funded housing community created for evacuees of hurricane Katrina. The community was established in a former cow pasture and housed almost 2000 displaced residents, including 700 children. The residences lived in compact, travel-trailers that were positioned merely feet apart, and there were minimal opportunities for physical activity on site. To address this issue, a daily, structured physical activity program entitled, Lifetime Exercise and Physical Activity Service-learning (LE PAS) was established for the K-5 children living in this community. LE PAS was identified as a service-learning program by the university and its ongoing success is dependent upon the continued volunteerism of undergraduate PETE students. The instructor coordinated the visits, while the service-learning participants were responsible for developing and implementing the physical activity lessons.

The number of K-5 children participating in LE PAS when this study was conducted ranged from 10 to 30 each day. The children reflected the same characteristics evident in the government-funded housing community (i.e., economically poor, African-American). The facilities available for the program were one cement basketball court, and an adjacent, temporary, 10-by-20 foot canopy tent for inclement weather and shade. The equipment available for the program included basketballs, footballs, soccer balls, foam balls, flying discs, hoops, jump ropes, and a parachute.
This study was a quasi-experimental design due to the fact that the students volunteered to participate in the service-learning program, thereby not allowing a true control group to be established. At the end of a pre-determined class early in the semester, the lead researcher, who was not involved in the curriculum design course in any way, asked all enrolled students to complete a consent form. Students were informed of the study’s purpose and assured that their participation in the study would have no direct bearing on their course grade. After informed consent was provided, the participants completed a questionnaire that measured cultural competency.

The instrument employed to measure preservice teachers’ cultural competency was the initial 14-item Multicultural Teaching Competencies Scale (MTCS; Spanierman et al., 2005). This scale included a 6-item multicultural teaching knowledge subscale (e.g., “I am very knowledgeable about a variety of instructional strategies that are effective with diverse populations”) and an 8-item multicultural teaching skill subscale (e.g., “I integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of racial and ethnic minority groups into my teaching”). Items were recorded on a 6-point scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (6) “strongly agree.” A total aggregate score was computed for the entire scale with higher scores reflecting a more culturally competent preservice teacher and lower scores indicating a less culturally competent preservice teacher. After this study was conducted, Spanierman et al. (2007) expanded the MTCS to a 16-item scale to ensure both subscales consisted of 8-items. Cronbach’s alpha for both versions of the MTCS were above .84 and the subscales were highly correlated.

During the third week of the semester, the entire class visited the service-learning site. The instructor and the students were introduced to the social service employees on site, given a
brief overview of the living community, provided details about the after-school programs available, and shown the facilities used for LE PAS. Afterward, the instructor and the students reflected on their experience, thoughts, and observations from this initial visit in a journal entry.

During the class immediately following the trip to the service-learning site, the instructor gave the students two options: (a) to volunteer to participate in the LE PAS program, or (b) to develop a block plan. Of the 16 students enrolled in the course, eight volunteered to participate in the LE PAS program (6 males and 2 females; 7 Caucasians and 1 African American). The two groups will be referred to as the “service-learning participants” and the “non-service-learning participants” (4 males and 4 females; 8 Caucasians).

The service-learning participants were responsible for organizing and leading a minimum of three activity sessions and assisting others in at least three additional activity sessions. All the sessions lasted two and a half hours, which totaled 15 total hours of service through teaching and assisting. Detailed instructions for these sessions ensured that quality activities were provided for the children and class goals were met through the design and implementation of appropriate PE content. Service-learning participants were expected to complete reflection forms specific to the duty they fulfilled during each visit. The leader reflection form included 10 questions relative to the demonstration of goals (e.g., “Did you achieve maximum participation? Explain.”), assessment of effectiveness (e.g., “Comment on the effectiveness of your management of the session.”), adjustments made or needed (e.g., “What changes would you make next time you were to teach these activities?”), and personal and professional understandings gained (e.g., “At this point in time, describe your comfort level with leading activity sessions in this setting?”). The 5-question assistant reflection form gathered comparable information regarding the adjustments needed (e.g., “What changes would you make to improve the overall effectiveness of the
session?”) and personal and professional understandings gained (e.g., What did you learn about the children overall and how they might learn best?”). Additionally, after their last visit, service-learning participants completed a 9-question final reflection form of their overall personal (e.g., “What kind of experiences did you receive that would not have been provided in a non-service-learning program?”) and pedagogical development (e.g., “What insight did you gain in regard to teaching PE?”) from the program.

Throughout the semester, the instructor attended numerous service-learning activity sessions, facilitated class-wide discussions of the service and academic learning experiences from LE PAS, and recorded field notes of his personal observations from site visits and class discussions in his journal. During the last week of the semester, the lead researcher returned to the class to administer a post-test of the MTCS to the participants.

Finally, the lead researcher conducted one interview using a general interview guide (Patton, 2002) with each service-learning participant to clarify or further elaborate on information shared in the reflection forms. The last interview was completed three months after the preservice teachers’ final grades were posted. This time period was determined based on the unavailability of the participants during winter holiday and the difficulty faced when attempting to contact them during their student-teaching assignments. The guide approach was chosen to keep the interactions focused while allowing the interviewer freedom to build on emerging issues concerning the topic of service-learning. Interview questions reflected students’ overall reactions to the service-learning program, specific memories, and possible reasons for changes in cultural competency. The audiotaped interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.
Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analyses were performed after the students’ final grades were submitted. A 2 (group) by 2 (time) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was used to quantitatively examine how cultural competence evolved during the service-learning experience. It is acknowledged that the preservice teachers were not randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition due to the fact that they volunteered to participate in the service-learning program. Therefore, an ex post facto design was used to explore group differences between those students who volunteered to participate in the service-learning program and those who did not, as well as to examine how their cultural competence changed over time.

The researchers individually coded the initial journal entries, students’ reflections, and interview data using the naturalistic methods of inductive analysis (Patton, 2002). It is important to note that the lead researcher had previous experience organizing and implementing service-learning experiences for preservice teachers, but in this study maintained a researcher-only position. The second researcher was the instructor of the course. A total of 285 individual units of data (IUD) were identified from the initial open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Examples of initial IUD coding included but were not limited to: management issues, student-teacher interactions, planning culturally responsive content, positive/negative experiences, accommodating students, comfort level, and the role of the instructor. The researchers met and collectively collapsed these IUDs into 28 mutually exclusive subcategories (e.g., management concerns, cultural competency, security issues, feelings about the program). These subcategories were repeatedly sorted and resorted, combined and integrated until consensus was reached on the most salient categories. The researchers solidified five major categories (i.e., service-learning environment, teaching methodology, cultural competency, reflection, other), each containing
four to eight subcategories. Guided by the study’s research questions through the use of constant comparison (Straus & Corbin, 1998), three critical themes emerged from the final categories and subcategories. Both researchers agreed that these analytic procedures saturated the data.

Trustworthiness was achieved by implementing six techniques identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985): triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, reflective journaling, and member checks. Triangulation was established through the collection and analysis of multiple data sources (i.e., reflection forms, journal entry, questionnaire, interviews). A peer debriefer was employed to ensure that the participants’ reflection and interview responses were appropriately placed during the open coding process (Straus & Corbin, 1998). During the triangulation of the data, the researchers identified one negative case that disconfirmed the thematic patterns. The interviewer kept a personal journal throughout the interviews that was periodically checked by the peer debriefer for empathic neutrality (Patton, 2002). Member checks were employed to ensure all eight service-learning participants approved the final transcripts and interpretations.

Results

Relative to the first research question, individual changes in cultural competency scores for both the service-learning and non-service-learning participants are displayed in Table 1. The 2 X 2 repeated measures ANOVAs yielded significant group \[ F (1, 14) = 4.60, p = .05 \] and time effects \[ F (1, 14) = 10.56, p = .006 \]. The group means and standard deviations for the cultural competence inventory are reported in Table 2. The overall Cronbach alpha coefficients were .88 for the pretest and .91 for the posttest. The group by time interaction was not significant \[ F (1, 8) = .585, p = .457 \]. This indicates that the students who volunteered to participate in the service learning program scored higher, overall, on the cultural competence inventory than those who
did not, and that all students, overall, increased their cultural competency over the course of the semester. The absence of a group by time interaction, however, suggests that the service-learning experience was not more powerful than the other class experiences with regard to improving cultural competency. It is important to note here that the absence of a group by time interaction may be result of a service-learning experience that comprised only 15 teaching/assisting hours.

To address the second research question, three themes emerged that describe the cultural competency experiences and insights of the preservice teachers participating in the LE PAS program. They include: (a) cultural competency: a matter of time (b) diverse teaching experiences are essential, and (c) “he could have helped me:” the role of the instructor.

**Cultural Competency: A Matter of Time**

The factor of time, which in this study was an entire semester, aided in how the service-learning participants perceived the service-learning experience with regard to cultural competency. Consistent engagement in the program allowed them ample opportunity to make relationships with the children, community, environment, peers, and instructor. It appeared that two major subthemes associated with engagement in the program stimulated the service-learning participants’ awareness of cultural competency. First, ongoing reflections were necessary for the recognition of cultural competency within the service-learning program. Second, through consistent engagement, the service-learning participants had the chance to recognize their shifting perceptions of the children they were working with in LE PAS.

*Reflection is essential.* A culturally competent individual is cognizant of an individual’s unique needs, while distinguishing that those needs are relative to the culture surrounding the individual. The data showed that through the LE PAS program the service-learning participants were made aware of the needs of the children. Evidence of this awareness, which was made
possible through consistent engagement and reflection, was apparent across the pre-service teachers’ reflections. For example, Eric reflected,

In the beginning I remember feeling that I wasn’t making a difference, but I also realized that it takes a lot of time and dedication to make a significant impact. I have a feeling that I might feel this way once I have my first teaching job, so this was a good learning experience for me.

Another service-learning participant’s reflections focused on trying to understand the needs of the children and how those needs could be met. Justin stated in his first reflection, “After observing the kids today, I feel like all it takes is time. I feel that by the end of the semester these activities will have made a lot of kids happy.” When the semester came to an end, Justin’s final reflection disclosed that if teachers can look beyond stereotypes about people from various socioeconomic environments then they “can make a difference in any type of educational environment.” This insight was echoed by other preservice teachers.

Reflections revealed that over time, the service-learning participants had shifts in focus from initial concerns with the physical environment (e.g., safety, “substandard living” conditions, space to be physically active) to concerns about how they could provide the “best learning environment” for the children. Rebecca reflected,

When I wrote my final reflection, I remember going back and looking through all of my reflections. I wanted to see what I talked about the most. On the first day, I was scared and nervous. By the end of my involvement, I had stopped writing about my fears, instead, I was writing about how what I saw or did affected the kids. You know, I have developed special little friends that [sic] I will always remember. I find myself thinking about Jeremiah throughout my day.
The data clearly suggested that service-learning participants reflected out of their own volition, and it seems this reflection was essential for them to realize the role of cultural competency in the program.

Self-identification of shifting perspectives. Over time, the preservice teachers’ initial perceptions of the children changed. For example, John’s first reflection revealed that he believed the children to be “not very trusting of people from the outside” causing the children to not “listen very well.” However, in his final reflection, John stated that “the students were no different from students in a ‘normal’ setting, especially considering what they had been through.” Rebecca expressed a similar transition process. She recognized that in spite of their relocation after hurricane Katrina the children had the same basic needs as all children. She reflected,

Each time I attend [LE PAS sessions] I am reminded of the motivation and determination I see in the kids’ eyes. I realize they are in a time of great need, but through all their hardships they are facing I can see a light of hope and determination in their eyes. Kids are kids no matter where they live or grow up.

This conscious awareness that the displaced children had the same basic needs as all children did not occur at the same rate for all the service-learning participants. Kevin stated,

I feel so much more comfortable with the kids than when we started. These kids deserve a well-designed physical activity program. It took the final day for me to realize it, but I really am glad I decided to be part of such a wonderful thing.

Likewise, after Sarah’s first experience with the children, she wrote, “I was totally broken. I was saddened to think that most of these students never get to do activities like this. It was a hard reality, seeing those students.” She realized that her participation in LE PAS allowed her to
understand that “like any student, these students just want someone to pay attention to them and their needs.” In her final reflection, Sarah concluded that the children living in the governmental housing community were no different than children who live in non-governmental housing communities.

Diverse Teaching Experiences are Essential

Two subthemes surfaced within this theme. First, through involvement with LE PAS, the participants became aware of the importance of having preservice teaching experiences that include demographically diverse student populations. Second, exposure to new and different cultural perspectives allowed the service-learning participants opportunities to critically analyze conflicts they encountered during the program. Their receptiveness to and understanding of the conflicts were crucial to understanding cultural competency in the service-learning program.

Demographically diverse placement. The service-learning participants frequently noted that the demographics (i.e., socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity) of the population of children were significantly different from their previous PETE placements in public schools. Specifically, Mark recognized a disconnection in regard to his field experience placements and the service-learning environment. He said,

It [LE PAS] gave me insight into ways to go about teaching inner city students. It was great that I got the chance to work with some at-risk [sic] students because I may end up having to teach in their [sic] school district and this was the first time I got to work with students from an urban setting.

Additionally, Justin stated that “the environment in which these kids have grown up is nothing like the environment in which we are being educated to teach in.” In support of Justin’s perspective, Eric discussed LE PAS as an opportunity to gain exposure to teaching students from
a lower socioeconomic status. He wrote, “This program offered situations that student teachers
don’t experience, it gave us a big advantage to be able to handle more aspects of diversity as well
as not taking things, such as education, for granted.” Similarly, John said, “I think that my
experiences may help me to be more compassionate and understanding when dealing with
students who have extraordinary situations.” Reflections on the disconnection between the
service-learning program and field experiences imply that the preservice teachers recognized the
need for preservice teachers to be more cognizant of the importance of being placed in a
culturally diverse setting.

The service-learning participants met the specific needs of a community in ways that the
students who opted out of LE PAS were unable to contribute to or benefit from personally. John
said,

I learned many things from the students that I do not think could have come from any
other setting. The students and the situation at the site [LE PAS] were different from any
other teaching experience that I have had while in college.

The participants’ recognized their involvement in LE PAS as providing meaningful teaching
experiences that they would not have had if they decided against participating in LE PAS.

Kevin and Justin were the only service-learning participants to discuss their perceptions
of the role of race within the service-learning program. Kevin, the negative case, was the only
service-learning participant whose cultural competency score decreased from pre- to post-test.
The decrease in his cultural competency score may be explained by his observations of the
students’ responses and reactions to Justin. He stated, “Today was literally ten times better than
yesterday. I observed that the kids responded with a lot more respect towards Justin than anyone
else.” He went on to say,
The one thing that I learned from the kids is that they are more likely to listen to a person of color than a White person. No offense to anyone, but it just seems like these kids respond better to someone of their own race. At this point in time, I feel very comfortable with leading as long as I am with Justin.

Like Kevin, Justin also reflected on his perceptions that the students responded better to him because he was African American like the children. He suggested that “in an environment where Caucasians are the minority, the kids have a hard time relating to some of my peers.” These comments provide insight into how race, rather than other cultural factors (i.e., customs, heritage, language), can take precedence when relating to and understanding the uniqueness of a culture. Race appears to be the most salient characteristic of culture competency for Kevin, and thus perhaps blinded him to any possible improvements in cultural competency relative to the service-learning program.

Being receptive to significant experiences. The service-learning participants entered LE PAS from diverse backgrounds (i.e., socioeconomic status, city size) and with various life experiences (i.e., parental/guardian expectations, physical activity interests). It became apparent that the service-learning participants had to recognize and be receptive to key events in order to recognize their own cultural competency within the program. For instance, Rebecca’s cultural competency was acknowledged through her understanding that her childhood was “different and not necessarily better” than the students’ childhoods. Her discussion of the role of the parents in the service-learning program provides further clarification. She was initially surprised that more parents did not come out to observe their children being physically active because her “parents were involved in everything” she did as a child. However, by the end of the semester, Rebecca began interacting with the parents who came to observe their children and realized her initial
perception was inaccurate. She said, “Some of them [parents] told me that the other children’s parents were working. I realized that I had just assumed that they did not want to be there. I was wrong.” As a result of these significant interactions and conversations, Sarah was able to expel preconceived notions about the students and parents.

Through peer observations, the service-learning participants’ revealed the function of cultural competency when interpreting significant events their peers encountered. This was the case for a service-learning participant from a similar childhood environment (e.g., predominantly African American, lower socioeconomic urban community) as the children living within the government-funded housing community. Justin explained that his own level of cultural competency became apparent through observing his peers. He considered his peers to be “even less aware of the students’ needs” than himself. Specifically, Justin described a situation where the students were quickly slapping their hands together in a game of balance. In this game, one student tried to cause another student to lose his or her balance by using only their hands. Justin said, “This [situation] was hilarious because I knew what was going on, but Mark had never seen kids play like that before and he just panicked. I played that same game when I was a kid.” Mark was unfamiliar with this type of play behavior. He essentially assumed that the children were fighting and immediately called for the security guards.

“[The Instructor] Could Have Helped Me:” The Role of the Instructor

In regard to cultural competency, a significant contributing factor of the service-learning experience may be explained by the professor’s level of involvement in the program. Findings from the data revealed that while the majority of the service-learning participants were satisfied with the level of on-site involvement by their professor, Rebecca and Kevin’s reflections and interviews implied that they could have benefited more from the service-learning experience had
the professor been present during every teaching session. Kevin voiced his frustration with the students’ behaviors, and said that “…[the instructor] could have helped me to teach them more effectively.” Rebecca proposed that her concerns with safety issues may have decreased had the professor attended all sessions.

As mentioned previously, Kevin was the only service-learning participant whose cultural competency score decreased. In the beginning, Kevin mentioned the student’s inability to “be involved with structured activities” due to their “overly competitive nature.” He thought their behavior problems were a result of a lack of “structured discipline around them.” Kevin said, “I will be completely honest when I say that I have no intention of wasting my breath. I can assure you that these kids could care less [sic] about life-long physical activity.” In the end, Kevin had a teaching experience with the professor which shifted his thoughts about the students. He said,

Since working with the instructor, I feel so much more comfortable with the kids. He used a powerful voice and demanded respect and the kids’ attention. I was previously nervous about taking this approach because I did not know how these kids would react. I now know that this approach would have probably been the best.

It appears as though both of these students were uncomfortable in the unfamiliar service-learning environment, and the instructor’s presence may have served as a security blanket for them. Perhaps, for cultural competency to develop, instructors may need to help preservice teachers build stronger connections to the students they are serving rather than to the instructors.

Justin realized his cultural competency was altered due to his continuous reflection on experiences within the classroom and service-learning contexts. He wrote, “I came to understand how I could contribute to their [both the service and non-service-learning participants] improved cultural competency by contributing my insight into what activities and methods I thought would
be the most effective for our program and the instructor allowed this to happen.” Perhaps, this realization was able to occur because the culturally responsive instructor facilitated numerous discussions throughout the semester.

Discussion and Implications

Many institutions of higher education in United States are dedicating considerable attention to designing and implementing service-learning components into various courses across their campuses (Kobrin, Mareth, & Smith, 1996). The incorporation of service-learning programs, rooted in experiential learning, into physical education teacher education programs appears to be on the rise (Watson et al., 2002); however, there is limited research available that focuses on how cultural competency is influenced by preservice teachers’ involvement in such programs. While the quasi-experimental design of this study did not allow for a cause and effect relationship to be established, it serves as a first attempt to understand aspects of service-learning that create opportunities for PETE students to recognize the role of cultural competency in teaching physical education. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature by investigating the relationship between a service-learning program and cultural competency within a PETE course.

In regard to the first research question, the results provided insight into changes in cultural competency across the two groups. The usage of the MTCS with a small sample \((N = 16)\) was a significant limitation to the methodology of this study; therefore, reinforcing the need to utilize both qualitative and quantitative data to aid in triangulation. First, non-service-learning participants’, those with lower initial cultural competency scores, may be less likely to participate in a service-learning program as a result of fears, hesitations, unwillingness to change their personal schedule, and/or a disconnection to the service-learning program. In courses with a
service-learning component, instructors can address these factors prior to the actual initiation of LE PAS through dialogues that focus on the benefits of service-learning for the individual and the community. Second, the participants’ cultural competency scores increased from pretest to posttest for both groups of participants. This was potentially a result of all participants’ involvement in the course and the field experiences provided by the two methods courses. The preservice teachers’ participation in numerous in-class and out-of-class discussions about the service-learning program may have contributed to an increase in the groups’ mean cultural competency score. Generalizations are limited, but the findings suggest that the service-learning component of the course was a valuable element for all students enrolled in the course.

With regard to the second research question, the results of the study provided insight into aspects of the service-learning program that the participants acknowledged as eliciting thoughts and insights into cultural competency. Three conclusions are presented. First, the preservice teachers’ perceptions of their semester-long engagement in LE PAS provided them the opportunity to relate cultural competency to continuous reflection and enhanced insight into the universality of children’s needs, regardless of their circumstances. According to the literature, the duration of service-learning programs contribute to student outcomes (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Mabry, 1998) and specific to this study—cultural competency. Reflecting on their perceptions of the program, peers, significant events, environment, interactions with children, PETE placement, and the instructor was an element necessary for them to recognize the importance of cultural competency while teaching physical activities. This finding was consistent with previous studies that emphasized the shifting concerns of new teachers (see Fuller, 1969) and identified reflection as an essential element of service-learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997), which provided students the opportunity to relate their experiences to
the course curriculum. Findings from this study reinforce the need for researchers to focus on the role of reflection in PETE programs, especially since reflection is the aspect of physical education that receives the least amount of attention (Graber, 2001).

Service-learning experiences can encourage preservice teachers to challenge personal assumptions (Baldwin et al., 2007). Through regular participation in LE PAS, coupled with reflection, the preservice teachers were able to recognize a transformation in their initial perspectives of the children. The findings support previous evidence that service-learning can have a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating heightened cultural and racial understanding (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999). The students heightened sense of cultural competency reinforced the reality that cultural differences do, in fact, exist. Through a deeper understanding of those differences preservice teachers can be more culturally sensitive and inclusive, while also learning to focus on similarities across cultures.

However, Ladson-Billings (1994) acknowledged that in her encounters with preservice and experienced teachers, many white teachers had difficulty recognizing and discussing differences among the students, especially with regard to racial disparities. Evidence of this phenomenon may have been present with the preservice teachers’ potential oversimplification that “kids are kids no matter where they live or grow up.” While this is not to suggest the preservice teachers were displaying conscious forms of ethnic or cultural biases, there must be consideration for privileges that some students receive and others do not when the privileges are based on social constructs (Ladson-Billing, 1994). This cognizant transformation that the preservice teachers experienced may be the first step in overcoming stereotypes about gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, and culture, thus promoting cultural competency (see Helms, 1984).
The findings support previous evidence that service-learning can have a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating heightened cultural and racial understanding (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999), therefore leading to more culturally competent preservice teachers. The students heightened sense of cultural competency reinforced the reality that cultural differences do in fact exist. Through a deeper understanding of those differences preservice teachers can be more culturally sensitive and inclusive, while also learning to focus on similarities across cultures.

The second conclusion suggests that awareness about cultural competency may have been possible through exposure to another culture; based on the service-learning participants’ previous PETE placements and personal backgrounds. The service-learning program bridged the gap between seemingly “idyllic” student-teaching experiences and teaching environments that more accurately represented the diverse student population of the United States. The preservice teachers recognized that the demographics of their field experiences were not necessarily representative of schools in which they will be teaching once they exit their PETE program. The findings emphasized exposure to a variety of teaching contexts (e.g., school settings, service-learning sites) and diverse cultures as significant and essential, but perhaps not enough for cultural competency awareness. Preservice teachers need to feel a meaningful connection to the community through service initiatives if cultural competency is to be promoted. Recent evidence suggests exposure to diversity in service-learning experiences impacts students’ identity development and cultural understanding (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al., 1998). Therefore, exposing preservice teachers to diverse teaching experiences in service-learning programs can more effectively prepare prospective teachers for multiple teaching environments.
Throughout the study, the service-learning participants reported significant happenings (i.e., internal conflicts, perceptions of differences between the children and the preservice teachers) as they emerged. Recognizing the role of cultural competency in those situations was dependent on the degree to which they processed specific revelations. According to Hatcher and Bringle (1997), “Service-learning extends the classroom into the community, and students frequently encounter unfamiliar situations that challenge and contradict their perspective” (p. 156). For many of the preservice teachers, an eye-opening experience had to occur before they could begin to think critically about how misconceptions about an incident or community are problematic on multiple levels. Instructors can design effective service-learning experiences by preparing the preservice teachers for situations they may encounter during the service-learning program and how to address or think through these situations critically and appropriately (Kleinfeld, 1998).

The rhetoric Kevin used to suggest that Justin could reach the students more effectively due to his race implied a discourse of difference (Wodak, 1996). This ideology permits Caucasian Americans to justify labeling non-white racial groups as the ‘other’ and different, which enables color-blind racism to occur. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) recommend that the whistle must be blown on color-blind racism by revealing “how their [individuals’] views, arguments, and lifestyles are (White) color-coded” (p. 78). This unveiling process may be difficult for teacher educators and preservice teachers, but can yield more culturally competent practitioners who see beyond color.

In this particular service-learning program, LE PAS was positioned in the center of a living community, giving the preservice teachers the unique opportunity to learn about various facets of the community through engagement with the children and parents. Specifically,
Rebecca’s discussions with parents were valuable encounters that allowed her to confront her misconceptions. Exposure to different familial interactions provided the preservice teachers with opportunities to recognize that their future physical education classes will reflect contextually fluid communities (Nanda, 1991), each with their own set of rules, methods, ways of communicating, interacting, and routines. PETE professionals may not have access to service-learning venues that position preservice teachers in government-funded housing communities. However, based on the study’s results, any opportunity for preservice teachers to serve in a culture different from their own might be beneficial for enhancing cultural or racial understanding. One strategy for PETE professionals to incorporate service-learning would be to plan programs similar to LE PAS for children who live near a community center or park.

The instructor’s level of involvement in the service-learning program played a critical role in contributing to the preservice teachers’ awareness of cultural competency and emerged as the third theme. Dodds (1995) reported, “A single dedicated professor…can help some preservice teachers become reflective teachers” (p. 81). For students who face struggles similar to those of Rebecca and Kevin’s, having their instructor present more often could influence their cultural competency by allowing them to realize that teachers can reach any and all students if methodology is consistent, effective, and appropriate. However, physical education teacher educators may not always have the means to be present during all service-learning sessions. Thus, instructors’ potential for engagement needs to be made apparent and carefully considered when designing the service-learning components of a course. Outside of the classroom, instructor involvement may include, but is not limited to, teaching actual lessons, observing the preservice teachers, providing feedback, pairing students together, and facilitating reflective activities/discussions. In this study, the design of the service-learning program allowed the
preservice teachers the opportunity to always teach with two other preservice teachers, which provided for regular, ongoing interaction and observation. While the results clearly establish the role of the instructor (see Leavell et al., 2007), it is important to mention that all instructors do not necessarily possess an inherent and altruistic interest in cultural competency or the development of cultural competency.

Additionally, it is important to report that service-learning experiences do not necessarily lead to more civically-minded individuals (Cohen, 1994); therefore, instructors must carefully select activities that will complement the mission of the service-learning program (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). When preservice teachers are exposed to notable situations (e.g., Kevin and Mark watching the children slapping hands) that may affect their development as culturally competent teachers, preservice teachers should be encouraged to discuss the situations with peers and teachers during class or privately. Dialogue focused on significant experiences will provide the instructor the opportunity to offer his or her advice and or support to an individual or the class as a whole. Further discussion about a situation may allow a student to come to understand the situation in a way that she or he previously had not considered. This finding confirms the result of previous studies in which feedback from instructors had a positive impact on students’ personal outcomes (Greene, 1996; Greene & Diehm, 1995; Subramony, 2000).

Future Work

This study was a first attempt to examine the relationship between cultural competency and service-learning in a PETE setting. Through a comprehensive analysis of the data it became obvious there are many possible options for future lines of research that can further transmit the role of service-learning and cultural competency in physical education teacher education programs. Future studies should include interviewing all participants prior to any involvement in
the service-learning program to establish a baseline viewpoint of the preservice teachers’ initial perspectives of culturally competency and service-learning. A breadth of useful comparison data would be available if future researchers included reflective journals and interviews for all participants, regardless if they opted for the service-learning component or not. These data would provide a more complete account of the interrelationship between a service-learning program and preservice teachers’ cultural competency. It would also be advantageous for future research to focus on the effects of PETE service-learning courses rather than just service-learning programs within a course. In addition, a focus group design may allow researchers to gain an enhanced understanding of the role of service-learning in cultural competency. A longitudinal research design could provide evidence of how cultural competency shifted over a prolonged period of time. Finally, a significant contribution to the field of physical education teacher education can be accomplished through studies designed to examine instructors’ perspectives of cultural competency in PETE service-learning courses or those that implement service-learning as a component of the course.
References


Harkavy, I. (2004). Service-learning and the development of democratic universities,
democratic schools, and democratic good societies in the 21st century. In M. Welch & S. H. Billig (Eds.), *New perspectives in service-learning: Research to advance the field* (pp. 3-22). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.


Table 1

*Preservice Teachers’ Changes in Cultural Competency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Change in CC</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service learning participants (n = 8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>75</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
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<td>Mark</td>
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<td>71</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dexter</td>
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<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>+16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-service-learning participants (n = 8)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Ryan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>+7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>Jessica</td>
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<td>Roland</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-2</td>
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*Note.* CC = cultural competency. Response set range for the cultural competency measure was 14 to 84.
Table 2

*Cultural Competency Means and (Standard Deviations)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service-learning group (n = 8)</td>
<td>63.00 (6.12)</td>
<td>68.25 (9.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-service-learning group (n = 8)</td>
<td>56.13 (8.22)</td>
<td>59.38 (6.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N = 16)</td>
<td>59.56 (7.85)</td>
<td>63.81 (9.24)</td>
</tr>
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*Note.* Response set range for the cultural competency measure was 14 to 84.