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There are Children Here: Service Learning for Social Justice

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We describe what happens in a justice-oriented, service learning course and field experience and what university participants thought about it. Based on this examination, we consider promises and problems for service learning for social justice, and we suggest next steps for this kind of work. In this article, we consider one Alternative Spring Break experience. We ponder ways in which a service learning course and its field component shaped university students' perceptions of social justice. Two questions guide the article: (1) What happens in a service learning experience for social justice, and (2) What do students think about it? In response to our examination of these questions, we suggest pitfalls and promises of this service learning approach.

At a large university, college students participate in community service for an Alternative Spring Break. For several years, the authors worked as partners to develop and implement a spring break option at There Are Children Here (TACH), a camp for low-income, urban youth ranging in age from four to eleven. University students assisted with the after-school program, allowing TACH to remain open during spring break, when local volunteers dwindled. Additionally, the university students visited schools and community centers that served TACH, and interviewed local leaders who worked closely with TACH participants.

In the past, we wanted college students to become acquainted with children in poverty, to grasp their struggles, to cherish their promise, and to glimpse their resilience. We also wanted the children to enjoy respect, attention, and assistance from temporary college friends. Children are aware that college students come from far away and choose to be with them; it is a respect many are not used to. This year, we strengthened our focus on social justice; we wanted college students to study social forces that impacted children's lives, to question their assumptions about racism and poverty, and to consider taking action to redress injustice.

SERVICE LEARNING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is defined by Warren (1998) as the movement of society toward more equality, support for diversity, economic fairness, nonviolent conflict resolution, and participatory democracy. Aims for social justice reflect core democratic beliefs: the worth of individuals, the strength of cultural diversity, and the need for civic equality. Social justice education is a goal and a process (Bell, 1997). The goal is full, equal participation of all groups in democratic society. Individuals should develop a sense of personal agency and of social responsibility. An important aspect of social justice education is the analysis of oppression at individual, cultural, and institutional levels. Oppression, or pervasive social inequality, is seen as restrictive to personal ideas of possibility and to actual life chances. Another key dimension of social justice education is the connection of awareness to action. Without social action, critical awareness leads to hopelessness (Adams, 1997).

Dimensions of Service Learning for Social Justice

A social justice orientation redirects the focus of service learning from charity to social change (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). A "do good" sense of responsiveness to immediate needs is replaced by an analysis of power and oppression in the service learning course and field experience (Wade, Boyle-Baise, & O'Grady, 2001). Reflection upon service experiences addresses issues of racism, sexism, and classism with consciousness-raising, or personal awakenings as an aim (Adams, 1997).

Principles of partnership, connectedness, critique, and activism underpin service learning for social justice (Wade, Boyle-Baise, & O'Grady, 2001). Partnerships

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involve alliances of culturally, socially diverse individuals that "share control" (Boyle-Baise, 2002, p. 13) for the creation, implementation, and evaluation of service learning. Connectedness denotes strong links between schools or universities and communities; local leaders, family members, and teachers are valued as youth educators, and local information is regarded as legitimate knowledge. A critical orientation to the status quo and possibilities for social change are incorporated into service learning experiences.

Service learning for social justice involves interrelated, pedagogical dimensions (Wade, 2001). It is (1) student-centered and experiential, as students' experiences are recognized and valued as part of the curriculum; (2) collaborative, as students work together to serve, learn, grapple with social problems, and effect change; (3) intellectual and analytical, as students engage in inquiry and seek out multiple perspectives; (4) multicultural and value-based, as students address issues from diverse perspectives and recognize possible value conflicts; and (5) activist, as students engage in action that helps create more just conditions.

A complementary, but more critical, pedagogical approach to service learning for social justice is posed by Rosenberger (2000). Drawing on work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1998), Rosenberger proposes a three-step process. First, students focus on local concerns that are related to course content. Second, students talk with relevant stakeholders to define the problem and frame the potential action. Third, students engage in problem-posing and consciousness-raising around the social, political, and economic issues involved in the case. The process of raising one's consciousness and entertaining alternatives is seen as a prelude to activism. These meanings, principles, and pedagogies underpin the case study reported here.

Making Meaning from Service Learning for Social Justice

A conceptual framework for making meaning from service learning is proposed by Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000). Based on data from 104 European American and 13 African American, Mexican American, or Asian American preservice teachers, they identify four perceptions of service learning that supplemented their multicultural education courses: deficit, affirmative, pragmatic, and activist views. Deficit views—beliefs that children and families in poverty are faulty—are held by a majority of white respondents at the outset of service learning. Respondents rarely place difficult life situations within larger social contexts of inequality. Many respondents shift from deficit to affirmative views of the community in which they are placed. One perception, that kids are "all alike" is a weak recognition of commonality. Another affirmative stance "making connections" indicates a link with similar personal experiences of bias or deprivation. Pragmatic views are held by respondents who expect to use their new knowledge about diversity to increase their job effectiveness. Respondents who hold activist views perceive communities in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, locate communities in a societal framework, and commit to activism.

Respondents tend to come to service learning with certain views and then unsettle them a bit. Activist views are rarely held by white students, but commonly held by students of color. This framework might help explain the meanings students in this study make from their experiences in service learning for social justice.

Alternative Spring Break as Service Learning for Social Justice

Alternative Breaks are a growing form of service learning. Students take the week break from college classes to participate in service learning. The following two studies are among the few that describe what happens during Alternative Breaks and that document what students think about the experience.

Wade and Raba (2001) found that one week was inadequate to develop a deep understanding of inner cities, urban schools, or their students. These researchers use the metaphor of "border crossing" (Giroux, 1992, p. 28), which suggests profound engagement with culturally diverse "others," to describe what happened in "The Chicago Experience," an inner city experience in schools and community centers. A group of white preservice teachers engaged in "border peeking" (Wade & Raba, 2001, p. 3): They got a sense of children's lives, at least of their deprivations and problems, but they were unable to probe conditions on a deeper level.

Rhoads and Neururer (1998) studied 24 white college students as they served for a week in a rural, economically distressed, African American community. They looked for changes in students' insights about themselves, understandings of others, and meanings for community. College students and staff members slept and ate together in a rural mission, and worked at houses in need of repair. Students gained more self-confidence, situated themselves in a larger social picture, and re-awakened values taught in their homes and churches. As white students came to know black residents, they questioned their own assumptions about race and poverty, particularly about blaming the poor for their life conditions. Students described community as a sense of unity among themselves. Secondarily, they described community as bonds among local residents.

These cases focus on students' impressions of service learning, but neglect community perceptions of the efforts. Also, they focus on white students' reactions to

culturally diverse and low-income contexts. Our study begins to trace local views and to suggest ways in which students of color perceive justice-oriented service learning.

THE INVESTIGATION

The Alternative Spring Break course and trip took place in Spring 2002. The experience was part of a campus-wide initiative to engage (and retain) undergraduates through meaningful, service learning experiences. The co-authors participated in the effort for three years.

The Site

The site for Alternative Spring Break, There Are Children Here (TACH), is a 15-acre, wooded, camp-like facility. Though secluded, it is minutes away from low-income areas of a mid-western city. TACH offers safe after-school and summer activities for low-income youth, ages 4–11. Reflecting the city's demographics, children at TACH tend to be African American, Latino, and white. At TACH, or "camp" as it is commonly known, children are "treated with warmth and respect" and taught to "feel their own worth" (TACH, 2000).

The Course

Alternative Spring Break was organized as a six-week course: For three weeks prior to camp, university students met at the university, in a $2^1/_2$ hour seminar. After a week at camp, students returned for two more seminar sessions. The syllabus was developed to be responsive to the dimensions of service learning for social justice noted above. Course goals included: gain knowledge about the realities of families in poverty; consider the impact of social forces, such as racism, on children's lives; and reflect upon what individuals and groups can do to bring about social justice.

Assigned readings included, ". . . And Justice for All: Community Service Learning for Social Justice" (Wade, 2001) and *There Are No Children Here* (Kotlowitz, 1991). The Wade article defined and illustrated service learning for social justice. The Kotlowitz text described actual conditions of poverty, and its account motivated private citizens to create TACH. Students wrote three reflections on this text, framed by the following questions: (1) What realities do children and families face every day? (2) What is wrong with this picture? (3) How does injustice impact these realities? (4) How can citizens, like me, act to fix the problems, not the people? A graphic analysis of oppression, adapted from Sleeter (1995), was used as an analytical tool. It helped students consider explanations for inequality, such as a lack of individual effort, unfair structural rules, or stereotypic symbolic beliefs (see Figure 1).

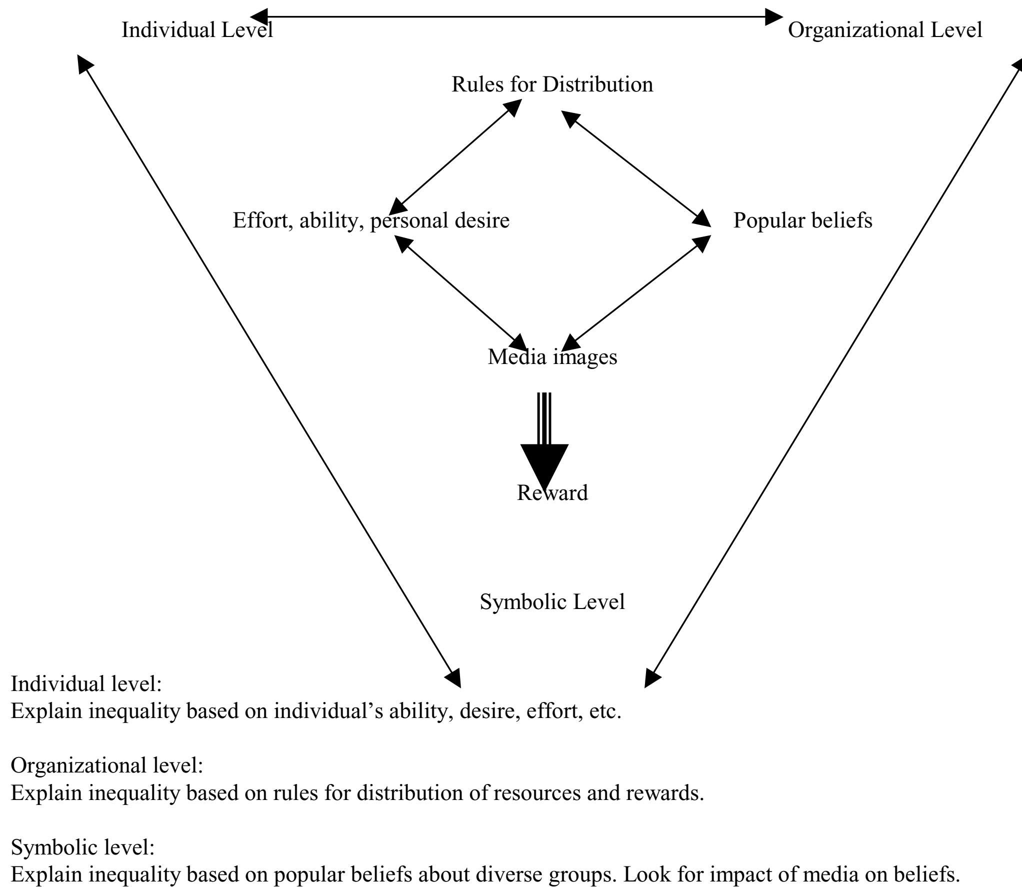
Students wrote a capstone, social action paper based on their experiences at camp. They selected a social issue and described it in terms of realities faced by children and their families. They explored the issue from in-group (community insider) and out-group (academic) perspectives. They identified several sources of power to effect change and considered what they, as individuals and in coalitions, could do to bring about more just conditions.

The second author (Langford) helped to develop a task-based contract that delineated field activities and structured their completion. The contract stipulated the following requirements: assist as an aide for after-school activities, interview the camp director, conduct community investigations, and participate in reflection sessions. Langford arranged community investigations with leaders of local organizations that served the children who came to TACH. The four guiding questions noted above served as the interview protocol for community investigations (see Figure 2).

The Participants

All eight university students in the TACH course elected to participate in the investigation and signed informed consent forms. Students who are quoted are provided with pseudonyms. Seven participants were of traditional college age, with a range of majors: nursing, public and environmental affairs, criminal justice, business management, education, and computer science. Seven students were women: five were white, and two were African American. The lone male was an international, South Korean student. One student was African American, 26-years-old, a mother, and a person who grew up in urban poverty. Two students were friends and formed a tightly knit duo from the outset.

Group members' motivations for taking the course and gaining academic status were noteworthy. Students took the course primarily to earn credits more quickly and easily than in the traditional case. They took the course also because it seemed interesting, a position students confirmed after learning more about TACH during the first seminar. Half of the students had low GPAs (at or less than 2.0); they were encouraged to take the course by their academic advisors in order to improve their grades. Three students had high GPAs (above 3.0); they took the course to fit extra credits into highly prescribed programs of study. One student, with a C average, needed extra hours, but was not "hard up for credits," as she put it. For the first class meeting, only one student had completed the homework—to read the article by Wade (2001). This student described service learning as a tool for social justice education. Others saw the experience



Adapted from Sleeter (1995) with permission of the author.

Figure 1
Analysis of oppression.

as a chance to learn more about themselves and others through cross-cultural and urban experiences.

The instructor was a doctoral student involved in scholarly study of service learning. The first author (Boyle-Baise) invited him to teach the course, and he accepted, partly to work closely on a teaching project with her. The instructor helped develop the syllabus, but took a secondary role. He later recalled that he felt quite comfortable with the course aims and means.

Data Collection

Donahue (1999) submits that case study is strongly suited to service learning research. It can probe ethical dilemmas, portray emergent thinking, and illustrate the potential of service learning to help students grapple with moral imperatives. The TACH experience was investigated as a case, through naturalistic field study (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993).

Boyle-Baise conducted the research. Once the course began, she took on the role of participant-as-observer (Gold, cited in LeCompte et al., 1993). A combination of methods—interview, participant observation, and collection of documents—was used to triangulate data and to reduce the limitations of any one method (Denzin, 1989). Boyle-Baise took field notes during the seminars. She collected student writings, including perceptions and meanings written on index cards during class, three sets of reflective essays, and one set of social action papers. At camp, she took field notes and made audio tapes of roundtable discussions, visits to community sites, and reflection sessions. She interviewed each university student at the end of the week for about 30 minutes. She communicated regularly with the instructor to discuss his perceptions of the students and of his teaching.

Instructors:
[Name], Course Instructor, School of Education
James Langford, Camp Director, *There Are Children Here*

50% of your grade is earned for the completion of the following:
- observe and participate for 20 hours at the camp;
- interview the Camp Director about aims of the camp, needs of the children;
- conduct community investigations of social problems faced by children;
- keep notes of interviews and investigations.

Suggested Questions for Dr. Langford:
- Why did you found the camp?
- What needs do you serve?
- What actions do you take to effect change?
- How, if at all, do you think your actions improve children's lives?

Interview Protocol: Questions for Community Investigations
- What are the realities children and families face every day?
- What is wrong with this picture?
- How does injustice impact these problems?
- How can we act to fix problems not blame people?

Service Learning Tasks		
General Task	Specific Description	Signature of Supervisor
Assist as aide for after school camp activities.		
Help prepare the camp for summer.		
Interview Camp Director. Take notes.		
Visit homeless shelter and community centers. Conduct community investigations. Take notes.		
Participate in a session of reflection at camp.		

I agree to complete the tasks listed to earn 50% of course grade.
Name: ________________________________Date:_______________________
I agree to supervise this student during the community service learning experience.
Name:________________________________ Date: ______________________

Figure 2
Task-based contract L200: Community service learning.

Data Analysis

Observation data were read to get a general description of what happened in the course and in the field. Then, moments that addressed social justice were highlighted. Also, data were read to determine emergent concerns. For example, "poor parenting" emerged as a student concern. Further, data were analyzed for critical incidents. For example, one student became quite upset about what she saw as stereotypic portrayals of low-income neighborhoods. Boyle-Baise typed up field notes nightly, reading them to suggest questions for student interviews at week's end.

Boyle-Baise transcribed the interview audio tapes, noting prominent themes in students' interviews. She collated interview responses by question and used constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to find divergent responses for each question. Distinctions related to respondents' gender, race, and national identities were noted. She analyzed each set of papers for their main points. Then, she looked for information related to the guiding course questions.

ALTERNATIVE SPRING BREAK

What happens in a service learning experience for social justice? This break experience is described chronologically. Three seminars prior to the field work are described, followed by the camp week, and by the last two seminars.

The Service Learning Course: Prelude

The first seminar probed students' initial perceptions of social justice. All of the students defined justice as equal opportunities and treatment for all. Four students identified a structural cause for injustice—resources were unfairly distributed. Three others thought poverty was caused by personal failure: people failed to take advantage of their opportunities. The nontraditional, African American student, Renee, had lived through poverty, and she linked poverty to personal flaws: "Just because you are low-income does not mean you have to act low-income. Opportunities are out there. Some people don't want a job. My sister-in-law gave up her kids to foster care. She is on the street." The second African American student, Tanya, concurred, "I agree, some people don't take advantage of opportunities." Several students described small town backgrounds where poverty was a small concern. The instructor suggested ways that a lack of low-income housing impacted people in poverty in their own college town.

This seminar helped students begin to make meaning of poverty and oppression as central to social justice education. Students wrestled with multiple explanations for poverty—some personal and some structural. The story of the street was sensational, turning students' attention to individual agency and downplaying social causes for poverty.

The second seminar focused on root causes for poverty. First, students jotted down their thoughts about *There Are No Children Here* (Kotlowitz, 1991), using the four guiding course questions. Then, they studied their writings in pairs to find examples of injustice. The graphic analysis of oppression (see Figure 1) was used to suggest three explanations for inequality: (1) individual effort, ability, or desire; (2) structural rules for the distribution of resources, and (3) symbolic influences of mass media or popular beliefs. In their writings, all of the students described children in poverty as facing harsh realities shaped by drugs, gangs, violence, and death. Half of the students linked injustice to structural limitations, such as a lack of opportunity or inadequate law enforcement. Renee emphasized individual effort; she wrote that people in poverty made poor decisions.

Students paired up, and Boyle-Baise sat in on the conversation between Renee and Janet, a white student. This conversation was rich with reflective possibilities. Renee told Janet, "This book hits home. That's why I got out of [the city]. I was just out of high school, a new mom, and recently married. I lost two brother-in-laws to violence within two months." Janet then asked Renee about how she got out. Renee told a story of the teacher who believed in her and helped her earn a scholarship. Renee considered her own story as evidence that individuals who work hard can raise themselves out of poverty. In the larger group, Renee consistently supported this bootstrap notion of individual agency, but did not share her personal reasons for doing so.

Students regrouped and shared their earlier conversations. Drug use was a main topic. Renee offered that parents could restrain drug use, participate in programs of assistance, or leave housing projects. She also thought that La Joe, a central character in the Kotlowitz (1991) text, could take charge of her situation. The instructor agreed that parents had power, but pushed students to consider outside forces that impacted La Joe's life, such as overloaded social workers and limited job opportunities. Several students followed the instructor's lead, wondering about inadequacies of welfare, yet Renee continued to emphasize La Joe's personal shortcomings.

Students came away from this session having considered multiple causes for injustice. They practiced the analysis of life experience—their own and that of characters in a journalistic account—through the lens of oppression. Again, the true life experiences of a student of color grabbed the group's attention and turned it toward personal agency.

The third class session focused again on the roots of injustice. This time, the instructor encouraged students to consider the ways in which their personal values and assumptions impacted their views of the world. First, he

asked students to identify their core values. Five said their parent or parents taught them to appreciate the small things in life and to "stick it out," or not to give up easily. The instructor then explained the symbolic level on the graphic analysis of oppression as a "background" influence, as unspoken beliefs about diverse groups. He asked them to consider how background ideas, rather than real information, shaped their views of people in poverty.

Once again, students worked in pairs to consider roots of social problems. One of the white students, Nita, questioned a racial divide in her home town. She realized that the better, safer side of town was the white side of town. When students regrouped, this student wondered why her city had changed over time. "When my parents grew up, there was a racial mix. Now it is all black in one part and white in another part. I don't understand why." The instructor raised possibilities: Did busing occur? Was a highway built? He urged Nita to bring her question about racial divides to the community investigations. Students then shared possible questions for community investigations, including queries about schools' responsiveness to poverty.

As students headed to the field, their consciousness of the roots of injustice seemed to be awakening. The seminar provided a foundation for using service as a tool to study social problems. Sheila, a white student, described service learning as "getting to the root of the problem, trying to fix that, not just what is immediately wrong. It is asking the centers, 'What are you doing besides meeting immediate needs?'"

The Service Learning Field Experience

On the first morning at camp, Langford asked each student to share his or her goals for the week's experience. In comparison to their initial thoughts, students' aims for service learning now tilted toward social justice. Five of eight students hoped to gain greater understanding of children's life circumstances and of the structural causes for their adversity. Three others still focused on learning through experience.

Langford explained how TACH worked. Children signed up for camp at several inner city community centers or at the Boys and Girls Club. Camp was a popular destination: Some centers/clubs used it as a reward for good behavior; others rotated their selection of children. Fifteen children from one location came to camp daily from 3:30 to 6:00 pm. The university students were expected to assist with after-school activities including: make and clean up a group snack, supervise and participate in recreational games, tutor with homework, and/or help with preparation for a dramatic play.

Langford expected children to welcome the newcomers as temporary friends, and they did. Most children had been coming to TACH for years, and Langford, not the volunteers, was their mainstay. However, in order to become acquainted with the children, Langford arranged for university students to eat lunch at school with TACH participants on several days during camp.

Community Investigations

Students met with local informants, who were culturally diverse and represented positions at a range of organizations, such as pastor, community center director, social agency staff, school counselor, assistant principal, or youth volunteer. Each informant had a stellar reputation for his or her work with low-income youth. Each day, university students participated in community inquiries. Students raised a few questions, but mostly informants talked and students listened.

What did students hear during these investigations? Community informants focused on changing individuals, with a subtle difference between respondents of color and their white counterparts. African American leaders stressed children's development of values, such as honesty and chastity, and of a sense of capability—a feeling that each could fight the odds. White leaders focused on improving school achievement through teaching study skills. Although sensational stories about alcoholic or abusive parents were told, parents also were described positively, as struggling to overcome poverty. Students were told that parents worked multiple part-time jobs, which limited their ability to participate in their children's lives. Informants said they wanted more parental involvement in their organizations, but they were stymied in their efforts to get it.

Systemic social change was discussed minimally. A pastor from a black church/community center lamented that he could not get parents to stand together to change their neighborhood. The white director of the Boys and Girls Club hoped for more job training. Also, community leaders wanted to increase the high school graduation rate of youth in poverty.

Students asked informants what they should do to help. To a person, informants responded: Volunteer! Donate Money! Give of your time! Citizen action was defined as individual volunteerism and charity. This focus contrasted sharply with the critical orientation of the seminar. Overall, from the community contacts, students heard compelling personal stories, both heartwarming and heartrending, but learned little about structural roots for or symbolic/media influences on poverty.

Critical Incidents at Camp

Early in the week, everyone piled into the camp's van and traveled to the neighborhood home of many camp participants. The van stopped at the local health clinic and at the Juvenile Justice Center, but mostly drove

though impoverished sections of town. Langford narrated the journey, pointing out churches and community centers that sent children to TACH. He spoke highly of Faith Church for its work in the toughest of conditions; gang members were welcome as long as they left their conflicts outside. Although the drive illustrated the economic adversity faced by the children who came to TACH, it proved to be a voyeuristic venture, especially for students of color.

The next morning, Langford led a reflective session. White students described the community investigations as eye-opening. Alternatively, African American students found the investigations racially biased and stereotypical. Tanya shared the following, illustrative comment: “We have looked mostly at African Americans in bad situations. What we have seen is degrading to me and to my race. I think African American kids are put into a category.”

Renee and Tanya denied a deficit perspective, but they held one, at least partially. They faulted parents, not racism, for children’s problems. For example, Tanya said, “Those [African American] kids need . . . a strong parent in their lives. You can’t blame society for bad parents.” Langford offered a systemic explanation for stressed families, saying: “I can blame society to the extent that something has to be done to get parents better education and jobs.”

The charge of stereotyping was a touchy subject. Langford was upset by it, leaving the room for a time after this discussion. He had arranged for workers on the front lines of poverty to speak with university students in order to help them grasp the conditions of children’s lives. The local drive was an unplanned addition to the day, meant as another journey into spaces where TACH participants lived. Yet, it was criticized, as were community investigations. Some criticism was valid, but, in this charge, the positive aspects of the informants’ remarks were discounted.

Immediately after the reflective session, we drove to an elementary school to have lunch with a number of the TACH participants. Upon our return to camp, Renee refused to get out of the van. After a time, Boyle-Baise joined Renee and listened to her concerns. Renee was troubled by ways in which camp brought up painful memories of her own poverty. Partly, she was upset by stereotyping from some community informants. She thought that community informants tended to blame parents and overlook loving families that lived in low-income neighborhoods. At the same time, she found camp to be a loving place for children, and she saw Langford as clearly dedicated to them. Boyle-Baise served mostly as a sympathetic listener, but she also encouraged Renee to further consider her negative judgments. For example, she recalled community investigations as complex—negative, positive, sensational, and accurate—sources of information. Renee was visibly heartened by this discussion and rejoined the group.

Renee’s concerns point to the real challenges for service learning for social justice. Tapping into local knowledge can have unexpected outcomes. Educators can, however, carefully select community informants and encourage them to describe local assets as well as problems.

Tensions within the Student Group

University students were interviewed at the end of the camp week. Student’s comments offer deeper understandings of critical incidents at camp. Most white students found the camp experience “eye-opening,” “upsetting,” or “nightmarish.” Their first exposure to poverty rattled their assumptions and began to reshape their worldviews. One white student, Beth, and the international student, Kai Lun, shifted from deficit to weakly affirmative views of youth. They found children surprisingly “normal,” in having child-like hopes, wants, and dreams, despite the harsh conditions in which they lived. While this “kids-are-kids” view affirms childrens’common humanity and honors their resilience, it glosses over differences in life circumstances that matter.

Another white student, Ellen, considered herself a troublemaker and a person with family problems. She made connections between her situation and the lives of camp participants. Another, Sheila, seemed to be an activist-in-the-making. She realized that, as a white person, she was part of the problem, but she wanted to be a person who confronted social ills. “It hurts to realize I’m part of the problem. I want to be a person like the community people we met this week.”

Students of color interpreted the experience differently. They conceptualized low-income communities in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. They worried especially about their white peers, concerned that they saw only problematic views of poverty, especially of African Americans in poverty. (They did not mention the international student.) Tanya offered, “I’ve had a problem with some white people in our group. I don’t know if they have been around minority groups or poverty. I don’t want this to be the only view they see of black kids.” They felt a negative tone was set, from drives through impoverished neighborhoods to community informants’ tales of adversity there. They wanted to hear more from “good and loving parents.” Tanya and Renee were convinced that love could turn lives around. As Tanya said, “Don’t make these kids into a poster child. Take a look at what they need. They need love from someone who is genuine.”

Racial differences strained the group, and the differences in motivation splintered it. The following statements illustrate these two types of tensions. Tanya noted, “Everybody is cliquing up. Renee is clinging to me because I am the only [other] black person.” Renee reported,

"I wish we could have gotten more involved with how each of us feels. When we leave here [TACH], everyone goes separate ways." Several white students spoke to this point. At night, students split into two separate groupings. For Janet, group interaction was hampered by housing in two cabins, off season, in a state park. She was scared by the remoteness and tended to remain inside after dark. For Beth, the cabin situation might have promoted unity, as students sat around the fire and discussed what they learned, but it did not. For Sheila and Beth, the problem was more one of motivation, or of different reasons for coming to camp. According to Sheila, "There are people who don't want to be here and they are very verbal about that."

The tensions continued during the day. According to Beth: "Being different is not a bad thing, but no one is connecting to make the group work as a whole." When asked to explain further, she replied, "It's frustrating. Some people sit at camp and do not participate. It makes us [all] look bad." Negative perceptions stymied students' ability to learn from and with each other.

THE SERVICE LEARNING COURSE: REFLECTIONS

Back on campus, the seminar reconvened. The instructor asked students to write briefly about their experiences in light of the graphic illustration of oppression. All of the students wrote about the multiple explanations for inequality: individual effort, structural rules, and symbolic beliefs. One of the most vigorous discussions of the course followed.

The issue that captured students' attention most was parental care. Some students modified the deficit stances they held earlier; others dared to challenge their peer's negative views. The following statement, from Nita, a white student exemplified a moderated view, "Not every parent is to blame, but a lot of parents aren't doing much to help their kids." The international student, Kai Lun, challenged this deficit orientation, "Parents can't solve the problems alone. The U.S. government . . . can rebuild inner cities. Politicians worry that if they make policies to help the poor they will not be popular." Nita persisted in her negative views, "In many cases, parents are making the problems worse. They aren't trying." Tanya challenged her, "How do you know parents aren't trying? Some might be trying. Also, the U.S. has a lot of resources. Nothing is being done to change the poorest neighborhoods."

The comments about the lack of government action indicate a heightened understanding of structural oppression. Additionally, students pondered issues of racial injustice. For example, one white student, Sheila, recognized that racism impacts change efforts. "In order for us to say change happens, people have to move our way. I never thought of this before, but why do people have to move toward what white people do, to change?" Tanya offered a complicated, dualistic view, "It should be both ways. It shouldn't be always looking down on one group."

The final seminar focused on social change. The instructor asked, "What will make change on a large scale? We can talk about 'they' and 'them.' Let's ask: What can I do to bring about solutions?" Students considered forms of advocacy for their careers. For example, Sheila, a nursing student, wanted to advocate for better healthcare for low-income families. Students thought about voting power. Most students acknowledged that they did not vote, but thought they should. Kai Lun wanted to elect politicians who cared about issues of poverty. Finally, students planned to spread the word about what they had learned, talking to friends and family. Also, as their final project students wrote a social action paper. They chose a range of topics: poverty, access to quality healthcare, poverty and racism, impact of churches on youth, mobility rates in schools, and effective juvenile justice.

Although systemic change was emphasized in the seminar, most students chose volunteer work focused on individual needs, as their preferred course of action. Three white students, Nita, Janet, and Ellen, the international student, Kai Lun, and one African American student, Tanya, hoped to mentor participants, providing guidance "one child at a time." These intentions reflected the purposes of TACH and the calls of community informant for increased volunteerism. Three of the eight students took positions of advocacy. Renee, intended to join an activist campus group and to start an organization that offered educational assistance. Sheila, planned to be a nurse for low-income communities. Nita preferred to volunteer, but also readied to take action, like Langford, on behalf of youth. These divergent responses attest to the powerful call of volunteerism, but also suggest hope for advocacy as an aim of service learning for social justice.

Students' expressions of meaning respond to the conceptual framework suggested by Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000). Their work indicates that activist views were rare for white students, but common for students of color. In this case, students from each group were activists-in-the making. Also, students of color held complicated, contradictory views. They simultaneously blamed individuals, as in a deficit posture, and faulted societal injustice, as in an activist stance. As suggested by Boyle-Baise and Sleeter, respondents came to service learning with certain views and then altered them slightly.

PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF SERVICE LEARNING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

What promises and pitfalls of service learning for social justice are suggested by this study? In this section, we consider three concerns that arose from the data: learning

from personal experience, learning from community, and motivation to serve. In the following section, "next steps" for justice-oriented service learning are suggested in response to these concerns.

Learning from Personal Experience

A promising aspect of service learning is the opportunity for students to learn from one another. This group, albeit small, brought a range of personal experience, including direct experience with poverty. The instructor organized the seminars to provide time for discussion. Although students shared personal stories in pairs, powerful life experiences sometimes failed to make it to the larger group discussion. Structured group-building exercises might have fostered a greater sense of security and a desire to share personal information.

The way in which talk was structured also impacted the consideration of life experience. Service learning often stalls in personal consciousness-raising; students gain insights into their own biases, but rarely into structural causes for them (O'Grady & Chappell, 2000). We were determined to prod critical, social inquiry, and we structured discussion accordingly. A trade-off occurred: Students studied social forces, but failed to deeply contemplate their own experience. They went into the field with limited awareness of their own privilege or oppression. As a result, Renee's marginalization was seen by most students as a product of her personality, rather than as an effect of her perceptions of bias in the field.

Learning from Community

This group did not form a friendly community of learners, as students did in the Rhoads and Neururer (1998) study. In our past years with this project, students easily formed bonds from living and working together. We did not structure evening activities or stay overnight with students. This study suggests that community-building activities are needed for students, in the field as well as in the seminar, to shake out perceptions of motivational differences and to affirm cultural and social diversity.

Critical inquiry into social problems is crucial to service learning for social justice (Rosenberger, 2000; Wade, 2001). The community investigations linked students with workers on the front lines of poverty. The information they shared provided the deep views of urban issues that Wade and Raba (2001) found missing from their study. Students, arguably, did more than "peek across borders"—they learned a great deal about the conditions of poverty. Two informants shared dramatic personal stories of success, and other informants pointed to positive exceptions to the rule. Still, sensationalist stories of troubled lives set a negative tone. We need to find ways to emphasize the strengths and survival strategies of people in poverty. For example, community investigations should include (and legitimate) a broad range of informants. As we arranged for informants, we overlooked an important constituency—parents. To provide a more realistic and balanced view, the voices of parents who were involved effectively in their children's education need to be heard.

Additionally, community informants tended to lecture students more than we anticipated. A few students raised most of the questions. We need to find ways to stimulate the engagement of the entire group, particularly the reticent students. Possibly, students need to gain more comfort in public conversation and more skills in interviewing. More discussions and more direct teaching might have improved this situation.

Motivation to Serve

According to Bell and Griffin (1997), students take social justice courses either because they are interested in the topic, must meet a degree requirement, or find it expedient (in this case, some students needed extra credits, quickly and easily). It should be expected that a campus-wide, service learning initiative will yield a diverse group of students, in terms of interest, background, and academic standing. In previous years, we disrupted this trend. In order to generate interest in a new course, we recruited participants, largely from the School of Education. This group was academically successful enough to be admitted to a professional school, and they were interested in service to a diverse public. As a result, we had not encountered problems in the past that we confronted here.

Further, students volunteer to participate in Alternative Spring Break, which usually leads to high motivation. We learned, after the fact, that some students were encouraged to take the course by their academic advisors in order to improve their grade point averages. Some students seemed to feel like "hostages" in the course and resented their time at camp (Bell & Griffin, 1997, p. 47). One response to this problem is to plan ways to foster motivation. Another response is to emphasize the voluntary nature of Alternative Spring Break and forestall its use as a grade improvement tool.

NEXT STEPS: RETHINKING SERVICE LEARNING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

- *Service learning for social justice should assist self-understanding, deepen knowledge, and encourage action*. It is very challenging to attend to all three goals in the restricted time frame of Alternative Spring Break. We emphasized critical, structural inquiry, at some cost to personal reflection. A balance has more promise. We addressed social action, at least as an intention, through the social action paper. Unfortunately, this assignment was due after the course ended. There was no time to critically

consider aims to assist as a volunteer or to work as an advocate for social change.

- *Service learning for social justice should attend to community*. We used a seminar setting to foster community, but it was not enough. We needed to explicitly build community across racial groups and in regard to different background experiences. We needed to address varied perceptions of motivation for service forthrightly. Also, we needed to provide more time for reflection in the field, especially to address critical incidents that arose there.
- *Service learning for social justice should attend to learning differences*. Chances to serve and learn are not, and should not be, restricted to the academically proficient. However, some criteria of eligibility might be considered. One pertinent question is: Should students on academic probation be allowed to represent the university in the field? The Internet is a form of recruitment—half of these students shopped the university's online catalog for a spring break course. Another pertinent question is: How can an on-line catalog description best explain the expectations for a course and for field work? It was our responsibility to shape seminars and field experiences to support students' needs. If students are recruited into service learning in order to improve their grades, then instructors need to be made aware of this aim and to employ strategies that assist this group of learners. For example, we needed to structure class activities to foster better discussion, to practice interviews to deepen community inquiries, and to assist with final papers to promote reflection and upgrade writing. Also, we needed to provide group-building activities to foster community among students with diverse needs and capacities.
- *Service learning for social justice should include local inquiry*. The outcomes of local inquiry cannot be predicted entirely. It is likely that community investigations will yield deficit views. In reality, students cannot be protected from biased perspectives. In some cases, negative perceptions are quite accurate. Students should be prepared to expect and interrogate such views. We suggest that the field be utilized as a site of preparation for and analysis of inquiry.

It was not the best of times. The student group fractured and members looked askance at one another. Students of color found parts of the experience stereotypic or degrading. Community informants shared deficit views as often as positive perceptions, yet most students gained insights into the realities of poverty. They left TACH awed by local informants' commitment to children in adversity, and inspired by the children they met. Being there as part of the scene can help service learning researchers grasp the nuances and complexities of service learning. Such research hopefully can push our thinking about service learning for social justice.

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