

Community Arts and Preservice Educators: A Study in Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Preservice educators reevaluated teaching methods, engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy and reflected upon social and economic constraints within an afterschool community arts program for children of low income. Open-ended lessons and a fluid attendance structure gave the children agency to voice opinions and to make choices that may not have been possible within a school setting. Preservice educators adapted teaching methods and attitudes towards learning to accommodate these choices. A qualitative action research study determined that a volunteer service-learning project that promoted a pedagogy of collaboration, experimentation, and caring enabled preservice educators to both enhance and question traditional, institutionally based methods of learning and doing.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, community arts, low income, service-learning

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“We have a big teaching university on the other side of town. It should be using the Boys and Girls Club as one of its prime resources,” (Boys and Girls Club Director, personal communication, April 3, 2009). The Director wanted a permanent art program for her members, one that would last for more than a few weeks. To fill the gap Art Education and Theatre Education faculty and Art Education graduate students collaboratively established the Boys and Girls Club Friday Arts Experience (BGCFAE), creating a university-community relationship that would benefit all parties involved. The BGCFAE is now in its third year of existence.

The number of children living in poverty has increased over the past decade (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2011), a number that overwhelmingly represents children of color. School districts struggle to cover costs, cutting special programs and faculty; increased class size and reduced funding for materials and resources mean that children have to do with less, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds in poorer areas (Kennedy, 2011). Without additional outside resources, such as community programs, these children are often denied the benefits of extracurricular activities that tap into hidden potential and build a sense of self.

The racial and economic divide is also felt within teaching faculty. The racial and socio-economic make-up of a majority of K-12 teachers and pre-service educators is White and middle class (National Education Association, 2010), creating a disconnect in understanding. Greater cultural competency skills are needed for teachers to appreciate the children whom they may serve (Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008).

University arts faculty and graduate students instituted BGCFAE to enable preservice teachers to develop beginning cultural competency while working with students of low-income. Culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and the commitment to the experimentation, creativity, and interdisciplinary nature of the arts for young children provides the BGCFAE curriculum focus. An experiential approach to learning enables Club members and preservice educators to establish their own ways of knowing and doing (Dewey, 1938). After its first year of operation BGCFAE founders undertook a year-long action research study to ask *“What impact does civic engagement with an after school community arts program have on the development of preservice educators?”*

Art Education and Community Involvement

Public education is only one site of praxis. Art Educators’ involvement within community-based settings helps to redefine their roles as agents of possibility and change (Naidus, 2009, Hurtzel & Resler, 2010). According to Daniel and Drew (2011), “community is a collection of people who are unified by locality (or not), similar circumstances and/or history, shared interests and/or spiritual inkages” (p. 37). Community-based Art Educators work with community members to identify needs, centering their actions on building participatory social relationships and dialogue that involves all actors (Campana, 2011). Art Educators have worked with and within communities to build playgrounds (Daniel and Drew, 2011), to create murals and public sculpture (Chicago Public Art Group, 2011), and to teach (Heise & MacGillivray, 2011), among other things. Community settings provide places for Art Educators to experiment, to stretch teaching practices, and to build relationships without the weight of institutional mandates (Washington, 2011).

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Students come to teacher preparatory programs with preconceived notions about race and social class, based upon personal experience and limited interaction with people outside of their own social spheres. Preservice teachers of the dominant culture often assume their own interactions are similar to those of their students (Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisill, 2007). Students need to be guided in critical reflection to become aware of their own privilege and to understand how race and class relations result in inequitable opportunities for others. The media pathologizes people of low income, failing to see the systemic reasons behind their dilemma (Kunjufu, 2006; Wise, 2008). Challenging preservice teachers' notions about children of low income through experiential-based learning is a reflective, progressive process that can have mixed results (Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008). The goal of this process is to enable preservice teachers to teach in a culturally relevant way.

According to anti-racist educator Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant teachers see teaching as an art, have high self-esteem and hold their students in high esteem. They believe that all students can succeed, and that teachers and students are part of a collaborative learning community in which students are encouraged to take leadership roles. Culturally relevant teachers form connections with their students that extend beyond the classroom, seeing the interconnectedness of family, faith, and friends. These teachers build upon their knowledge of the students to create culturally relevant curriculum in which students can see themselves and know that their real life experiences are legitimized. These lessons enable students to extend their thinking and their abilities through active research that helps them to grow cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

Culturally relevant teachers value students for who they are and recognize the battle they have to face against the status quo.

Service Learning and Civic Engagement

A volunteer civic engagement project like the BGCFAAC is the first step for many preservice educators to gain cultural competence and to become a part of the community in which their university resides. This service learning or community-based learning is a form of civic engagement; it is a structured out-of-classroom learning experience that actively address community challenges. Students integrate classroom knowledge with real world experience and then critically reflect upon these experiences to grow cognitively, morally, and socially (Flannery & Ward, 1999). Service learning programs incorporate the following characteristics:

- They provide valuable service to the community
- They integrate classroom and real-world activities
- They facilitate reflective practice; they incorporate student voice in planning and implementing the learning activities
- They ensure collaboration so all benefit, the community and the students
- They assess progress towards learning and service goals

(Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008).

Service-learning derives from the educational philosophy of John Dewey (Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008) who believed that education should develop all citizens to be active contributors to their communities. Dewey felt that education should contribute to social intelligence so all persons could use their fullest capacities for the greatest good of society (Dewey, 1916). Experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation are parts of

this learning process. Knowledge is a social construction that is created from and reflects our individual experiences (Kuhn, 1962). This philosophy underlies the learning and the art making of the BGC FAC study.

Study Locations

The study took place at a large Midwestern university and a local Boys and Girls Club.

The Boys and Girls Club describes itself as follows:

The Boys and Girls Club is a facility based youth enhancement program providing after school and summer activities to serve the educational, recreational, emotional, cultural and social needs of young people (ages 5-18), especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since 1992, the Club has served the community by providing life-enhancing experiences for local youth, encouraging them to develop positive self-esteem and become responsible, self-reliant adults. The Club plays a necessary positive role in the lives of young people who face a myriad of socio-economic difficulties, letting them learn and play in a safe place where caring adult professionals and volunteers oversee a wholesome environment. (Boys and Girls Club, 2011)

Over fifty-five percent of Boys and Girls Club participants' yearly household incomes are \$15,000 or below. Seventy-seven percent of the Club members are African-American, almost 13% are mixed-race, and 10% are Caucasian or Hispanic (Boys and Girls Club self-published data, 2010). Seventy-three percent of the members are ages twelve and under. Sixty percent of the members come from single-parent homes. On any given day the Club houses forty to seventy members. The Club is located in a well-worn building over three miles from campus, next to public housing, in the shadow of a dog food manufacturing plant that produces a constant buzz of machinery and a stench of cooked chicken. Most

university students travel to an unfamiliar part of the community to be a part of this volunteer arts activity.

Boys and Girls Club Friday Arts Experience

The principal researcher's course involvement with the Boys and Girls Club began in the Spring 2009 semester when she led members of her university Art Education class in teaching Friday art lessons at the Club. The Club Executive Director asked that the classes be continued in the fall, as the members had no other formal after school art instruction. In Fall 2009 an Art Education graduate student agreed to assist with the project and took on the role of BGCFAE organizer, co-planning seven weeks of open-ended lessons each semester, organizing materials, and recruiting student volunteers. An Assistant Professor of Theatre Education assisted with drama activities within five of the sessions. Together the team trained volunteers to interpret and teach each week's lesson in a small group format, enabling preservice educators to have hands-on experience instructing children of various ages and abilities within one setting. During training sessions, the researchers suggested ways that volunteers could successfully respect the community and meet the needs of children of low income. At the request of the Club Director, at mid-year the researchers staged an exhibition of members' artwork in the children's room of the local library.

Over the course of one academic year, forty-nine preservice Art Educators, Theatre Educators, and Elementary Educators voluntarily participated in the BGCFAE that serviced twenty to forty Boys and Girls Club members each session. Several preservice students used the experience to fulfill ISU College of Education clinical diversity requirements in Art

Education, Theatre Education, Curriculum and Development, and Educational Administration and Foundation classes; others simply volunteered.

The goals of this civic engagement project were as follows:

- Promote an empathetic understanding of K-8 student learning through active teaching
- Promote pre-service teacher-student on site social relationships using arts-based curriculum
- Promote a strong sense of social equity among pre-service teachers
- Expose and evaluate preconceived notions of low-income students
- Promote a desire for continued involvement with community service

The researchers resumed the BGCFAE in the 2010-2011 academic year with the same number of volunteers, teaching seven arts lessons each semester, and executing an exhibition of members' artwork in the local library's children's room. With the support of the university's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Civic Engagement Small Grants program the team initiated a year-long study to discern the impact that involvement with the BGCFAE had on preservice educators.

Methodology

The research team engaged preservice educators in a qualitative action research study. Educators use qualitative action research, often collaboratively, to assess and reflect upon their pedagogy with the primary intention of improving their own practice (Daniel & Drew, 2011, Ferrance, E., 2000). The researchers received permission from the university's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. To avoid coercion the Art Education and Theatre Education

researchers did not collect data from students who were taking classes within their Areas.

Participants' names were changed to protect their privacy.

To ascertain participant demographics, each semester researchers administered an entry survey that noted a participants' age, ethnicity, class standing, previous experience with children, and previous experience with children of low income and children of an ethnicity different from their own. The survey also asked participants to list classes that they had taken or were taking that addressed the needs of children whose families have socio-economic difficulties and to list what issues were discussed in those classes. Finally, the survey asked participants why they chose to attend BGCFAE and what they hoped to gain from their involvement with this community arts program.

At the end of each semester, participants completed an exit survey that asked how many times they attended BGCFAE that semester and what sessions they attended. The survey asked students the following open-ended questions:

- Tell me of a specific moment that has made a lasting impact.
- As a result of your work at the BGCFAE what has made you think in a new way, if at all?
- How will the information and experience at the BGCFAE affect your teaching or work in the future?
- What questions do you want to explore as a result of your work at the BGCFAE?

Participants agreed to have their artwork photographed and were asked to voluntarily share clinical reflection papers that they had written about BGCFAE in other classes. To triangulate data (Cresswell, 1998), the researchers collectively wrote and cross checked field notes immediately after the end of each BGCFAE; they noted participants' and

members interactions and critically reflected upon the teaching practice. The researchers compared and analyzed descriptions, themes, and assertions that arose from resulting data (Stringer, 2007). Conclusions determined what preservice students learned as a result of this civic engagement project, how they will use this knowledge within their future classrooms, and how or if their previous perceptions had changed.

Study Participants

Twenty-four preservice educators, ranging in the ages of 18-23, nearly half the number of total student volunteers, engaged in the two-part study that continued for two semesters, Fall 2010 and Spring 2011. Most participants engaged in the study for one semester, although five participants engaged in the study for two semesters. In total 11 students participated in the Fall study, and 18 participated in the Spring study. Of this number, 22 participants were Caucasian, one participant was Hispanic, and one participant was African American. An overwhelming majority of the participants were in their junior or senior years of study. Fifteen Art Education Majors, two Theatre Education majors, five Elementary Education majors, and two Early Childhood majors participated. Participants were either in classes taught by the faculty researchers or were Art Education or Theater Education majors. BGCFAE was not connected to a specific course, although one of the Art Education classes taught by the principal researcher accepted the clinical hours spent at BGCFAE as partial fulfillment of course requirements. Students receiving clinical placement hours wrote reflective essays about the experience for their respective courses.

All participants had previously worked with children in out of school settings: over half of the participants had worked in after school programs and in community arts programs, including the previous year's participation in BGCFAE. Within a university

setting over 80% of the participants had interacted with children through observation, one-on-one instruction, non-instructional assisting, and small group instruction. Over one-half of the students had engaged in whole class instruction.

All participants but three had worked with children of low income, half of whom had stated that their interaction had come from previous experience with BGCFAE. Other involvement with children of low income had come through participation in afterschool daycare, clinical placements, tutoring, summer camps, and a preschool special education class. All participants but one had worked with students whose ethnicities different from their own prior to engaging in the study.

In the Fall less than half the study participants either took or were taking university classes that addressed the needs of children of low income. In the Spring over three quarters of the students had taken classes that included this material. Over half of the participants specifically volunteered for the program to work with students other than themselves or to give back to the community. When asked what they hoped to gain from involvement with BGCFAE most participants wanted to gain more experience with children; one participant wanted to meet clinical requirements; another wanted lesson plan ideas; and three wanted to understand more about the arts.

Friday Arts Experience Structure

Prior to attending each BGCFAE session, volunteers, including study participants, attended a one-half hour training session within a university School of Art classroom. The researchers briefed the volunteers on that week's art project, the context of the artwork and artist to be reviewed, and the suggested outcomes for the project. The researchers collaboratively designed open-ended culturally relevant lessons that often began with a developmentally

appropriate discussion of the works of artists of color, such as Whitfield Lovell, Kadir Nelson, Betye Saar, Sokari Douglas Camp, Mardi Gras krewe members, and African-American rug weavers. Volunteers often re-crafted the researchers' original examples for the projects when they made their own examples. Researchers took seriously volunteer suggestions for changes in project presentation or implementation, reflecting the inclusive nature of service-learning. It was also during the training sessions that researchers spoke to volunteers about culturally relevant teaching practices and attitudes. Volunteers understood that they were guests in the Boys and Girls Club and that BGCFAE was grateful to be included within this community.

Because of the shifting nature of BGCFAE member participation, researchers planned curriculum to accommodate multiple developmental levels and a range of abilities and needs. BGCFAE member participants ranged in age from five to thirteen and also included Club volunteers, staff, and, occasionally, parents. Most regular BGCFAE members were from five to ten years of age. On average, 35 Club members participated in each session. Because of scheduling conflicts, only six BGCFAE sessions were held in the Fall, while seven sessions were held in the Spring.

Each BGCFAE session occurred in an older gym just off the facility's front entrance and lasted between one and two hours, beginning at 4:30 p.m. with group instruction in the gym's front, led by Art Education graduate students or the faculty researchers. Volunteers sat on gym mats with members, often holding the younger members in their laps. The group instruction included discussion about the artist, the materials, and that day's project and incorporated members within the question and answer and demonstration processes. Members and volunteers broke into small groups at rows of cafeteria tables that volunteers had equipped with supplies. Members were free to choose which volunteers with whom they wanted to work and could

change groups as needed; many volunteers were able to facilitate one-on-one instruction. Volunteers were free to instruct and to help each other out, as the researchers were able to change roles between facilitators and instructors. Members were free to come and go as they wished, and often, additional members would join the lesson mid-process. As parents came to pick up their children, they were able to interact with volunteers and researchers and give feedback on the projects. Some members made more than one project, and others took more time than was allotted. Volunteers and the researchers stayed so that these members could successfully finish. Researchers sent additional materials home with members if they requested it. Both researchers and volunteers initiated and helped with clean up.

Discussion

The study began each semester with a group of participants who had multiple types of teaching experiences with young children; almost everyone had worked with children of different ethnicities than their own. A majority of participants had some experience with students of low income; some had gained this experience through the previous attendance at BGCFAE sessions. A majority of participants volunteered either to give back to the community or to work with children different from themselves; this was possibly due to the fact that they had taken courses that addressed issues of diversity. Participants had hoped to gain more experience working with children, and their reflective responses indicated they not only gained this experience, but they had also developed an appreciation of students of low income. Service-learning strengthened academic learning and academic experience reinforced service-learning (Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009).

During an exit interview when asked for a moment that made a lasting impact, students wrote about social relationships and child development. Darlene wrote,

“During rag weaving an 11 year-old and seven year-old were helping each other understand how to weave. It really shows what Boys and Girls Club is about. These kids are a big family.” Her statement reiterated a dawning awareness of Club values and the cooperative nature of learning valued by BGCFAE, aspects of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Joe noted that “Seeing the students begin to understand the principles of weaving at their own pace” was an impacting moment. BGCFAE provided more time than the average school art period, which allowed for experimentation, mistakes, and renewed effort without the fear of assessment, all factors that are essential to enabling the creative process (Perlmutter, 1991). Through small group instruction, Joe was able to perceive how multiple age levels successfully and uniquely tackled the same problem in an atmosphere devoid of bell schedules.

A memorable moment for Karen occurred when she enabled a young girl to become excited and confident about making art. She assisted the girl in making one paper community building during a community mural project. The girl became confident enough to make one on her own, and it was superior to the assisted building. Karen stated, “It was just a great moment of her realizing that she couldn’t do anything wrong. It was her art, and as long as she liked it, it was right and really very cool.” BGCFAE participants, using culturally responsive teaching methods, acted as project facilitators and gave members agency to make their own decisions. Karen was able to see the positive outcome of this process. Participants also transmitted skills, knowledge, and encouragement that allowed members to succeed.

When asked what made participants think in a new way as a result of their work with BGCFAE, Karen stated that she felt she could be relaxed within this setting and joke

with the members to make them comfortable enough to ask questions and to ask for help.

She wrote:

This style works great in this environment and is a really great break to all of the classes I was taking where they were teaching strictness and control in the classroom...It really has made me more confident in my decision making with kids.

The service-learning environment allowed Karen to share in pedagogical decision making and to be more intuitive and relaxed with her teaching style. She was not observed and graded within this environment, as she was with other university teaching clinicals. Other participants also applied and reflected on material that they had just learned in their methods classes, assessing through experience whether it was really applicable (Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009).

Ashley wrote that working closely with a group of three students enabled her to authentically experience members' different levels of interest. When two of the members did not want to complete the project, she stated,

That left me with one student who was so engrossed in the project that we sent him home with a packet of materials because he was unable to finish the buildings he had planned in the time that we gave him. I felt that this was the most authentic experience I have ever had into what being an art teacher will be like. Some students will take the project and go, others will need a little nudge, and sometimes a nudge won't even be enough. It really opened my eyes to how much I will really learn when I begin student teaching.

Through direct experience, participants were able to learn how to motivate or encourage members and value members' responses as personal choices. Debra stated that the real

world nature of BGCFAE that made her think in a new way, “I think Boys and Girls Club helped to keep me grounded and realistic. Sometimes I feel like at observations and (Saturday Art) experiences are idealistic and Boys and Girls Club always brings me back.” She felt that the process would inform her teaching in the future, “I think it will help me to be more understanding of students in urban areas. Working with these students has exposed me to some of the things they deal with and approach.” Joe also developed more of a sense of teacher responsibility when asked how BGCFAE would inform his teaching, “It encouraged me to modify my teaching style; if the lessons aren’t working then it falls on the teacher to meet the needs of the students.”

Members were free to come and go in BGCFAE as they liked, giving them a sense of agency that they did not have within a school setting (Ferguson, 2001). If a project was too prescriptive, or if the participant had trouble engaging or explaining the project to the member, the member could change the project or change instructors at will. Darlene noted:

Working at the Boys and Girls Club has taught me patience. It has also taught me to think on my toes and change up instruction in an instance. I also learned that some hands off instruction is the best kind that allows students to explore and manipulate materials on their own which may lead to a better end result than you as a teacher envisioned for the student.

Participants gained respect for members who preferred to work on their own terms, realizing that teaching is not always one way. Participants were also able to experience members having difficulty and to decide when to help, when to adapt the lesson, and when to allow members to figure things out. BGCFAE emphasized process over product and encouraged members to experiment through studio inquiry.

Participants saw members as individuals, rather than masses to be managed (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007). Some members said that a school art teacher's discipline had turned them off the subject, and BGFAE participants had to work to encourage these students to take part. There were very few classroom management issues at BGCFAE, even though the experience took place late on Friday afternoons. Participants wrote that they were able to build relationships with members, working with the same members each week as they shared stories and made art. Participant reflections stated that they noted how much members asked for, received, and were pleased with the attention that was given to them. Participant reflections posited BCFAE as a reciprocally positive learning environment; a feeling of community emerged among the regular volunteers. An ethic of caring evolved as members, participants and researchers affirmed each others' efforts (Noddings, 1994).

Some participants began to develop a sense of critical reflection of what was needed to exist within mainstream education. Carol commented, "Yes, it (BGFAE) will definitely make me more empathetic towards students from other backgrounds that maybe have not adapted (to the dominant culture) yet." Debra wrote within a class reflection:

My experience at Boys and Girls Club, and even in this course, has made me rethink the school system... I have an abundance of opportunities given to me and taken from someone else just because my skin is light and my family is middle class. When asked what they have learned from working with children of a different ethnic background than their own, Tiffany responded, "A lot about culture. Also kids of different cultures learn and respond differently." She demonstrated a beginning awareness of children of low income: "Simple stuff I've taken for granted like having colored pencils at

home. They may not have that resource.” Because volunteers did not meet regularly within one class, BGCFAE relied upon consciousness raising efforts conducted in other classes, BGCFAE used project preparatory times and discussions riding to and from the site to promote culturally relevant teaching that dispelled stereotypes and promoted self-reflection. The researchers realized that to become totally effective, culturally relevant teaching and learning needed to be a university-wide effort. As BGCFAE continues to evolve, its organizers seek to make its efforts more effective.

The Club Director stated that one of the best things about BGCFAE was its continuity. We were a steady group with some of the same faces, and the members have learned that we will continue to come back. BGCFAE was trying to even the playing field by giving children experiences with the arts and attention that they might not get at home if the families were stressed. She said that many groups would come for a semester and leave. At the time, BCF AE was in its second year.

When participants were asked what questions they wanted to explore as a result of their work at BGCFAE, participants wondered such things as “would members would stick with art”, “how BGCFAE effected the community,” and “if they would be effective urban educators.”

Conclusion

Civic engagement with an after school community arts program had a positive impact on the development of preservice educators. Within the bounds of a structured, but nurturing community setting, preservice educators tested and reevaluated prescribed teaching methods, experimented with teaching styles, and worked cooperatively with peers and faculty to enhance members’ creativity and sense of accomplishment. They

adapted lessons for different learning styles and observed how multiple age levels approached the same challenge. They respected members' choices. Preservice educators recognized that students of low income do not have the resources that middle class students take for granted and that public education does not have an even playing field. At the same time preservice educators began to engage in reflective, culturally responsive teaching as they worked and valued children within an atmosphere that defined them beyond grades, discipline, and bell schedules. An established civic engagement project developed with a community partner reaped benefits for everyone involved and both enhanced and questioned traditional, institutionally based methods of learning.

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