



# Undergraduate Journal

## of Service Learning & Community-Based Research

### Looking at Education Differently: Community Teaching

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In the fall of 2019, as a participant in an innovative model of teacher preparation at Ball State University, I stepped out of my comfort zone and immersed myself in the Whitely community. For sixteen weeks, I worked with students in the local school, tutored a student in the after-school program, and attended religious services and other events in the community. I also built a close relationship with two families in the community who helped me see the beautiful and rich culture of Whitely community. I entered this experience thinking I would help the community and teach students, with the overall goal of making an impact. However, I could not have imagined the impact this community and the people would have on me and my growth as an educator and as an individual.

The teacher preparation model I participated in, Schools Within the Context of Communities (SCC), focused on the importance of actively engaging with the communities that students are growing and learning in as part of being a culturally responsive and sustaining educator. In traditional models of teacher education, we read about how to interact with families and communities and we discuss it. However, we rarely can put this into practice. With SCC, we had the opportunity to practice this and explore the benefits that connecting with students' communities have. Furthermore, we researched and discussed in-depth the factors that affect students, families, and communities locally, politically, systematically, and globally. This included topics like oppression, immigration, and mass incarceration. These are all topics that are not typically covered in-depth and in this context in a traditional program but are essential to understanding our students and the world around them. In this community-engaged program, we not only learned about these topics but were able to reflect upon their relevance to the students and families with whom we were working, making them even more meaningful.

At the start of this experience, I was paired with a mentor family from the community, with whom I would grow very close. However, before I even had a chance to spend time with the Isoms' in their community, I started a practicum in my fourth-grade classroom and met one of their sons. He was quiet and reserved with me in class and I struggled with finding a way to connect with him to better help him in school. However, as soon as I began spending time with the Isoms' in their community, his comfort zone, I quickly discovered what interested and excited him. I took this new knowledge with me back to the classroom and felt the tension disappear when I worked with him on math problems and other content areas. I could now relate what we were working on to his prior interests. Because I had spent time with him in his community, I could also more easily recognize when he needed a break and when we needed to switch gears. For instance, I knew he loved playing games, was competitive at them, and engaged in more conversations with me when he played them. One morning I worked with him in a group and created card or board games with math problems he needed to solve, and his goal was to "beat me". Of course, I never won the game and I always helped guide him in problems if he was stuck. However, after a few turns, he usually was able to begin to figure out problems on his own. I could see that his confidence was building with each move and he was enjoying the

challenge with me and his peers. After this, he was much more willing to hold a conversation with me inside and outside of class and, since we had built a relationship, we started working together in other subjects with much more ease and comfort.

Before I knew it, I was realizing these same benefits with all my other students. Students were excited to talk to me about seeing me in the community or what they did over the weekend because they knew that I would recognize the places they were talking about. I could relate content to them and their interests. I could make lessons relevant to them. For example, I taught a math lesson on word problems using a jeopardy game in which questions specifically used each students' name along with activities that they liked to do and places around the community that they knew. This provided a fun way to practice the content we needed to cover and showed my students that I paid attention to them and their interests and hobbies. But this went beyond just academics. My students and I built relationships in which we could openly and honestly communicate. If I recognized that the method I was using to teach was not working for a student, I could pull them aside and say "I see this is not working for you, what else can I do to help you?" and they appreciated an opportunity to guide their learning and tell me what they needed. This semester provided the most rewarding experiences I have had in a classroom. Immersing myself into my students' community and their lives opened a whole new way of thinking about my classroom and what I wanted it to be. I realized I cannot ask my students to step into my world and my way of thinking. Instead, I must immerse myself in their world and build trust between us. I must take the time to create authentic caring relationships, or I will never be able to effectively teach all my students.

As valuable as this connection was, Whitely community taught me far more than just how to connect to my students and their lives. I also learned that a school cannot function at its best without the community. Within Whitely, there are people with a range of occupations and talents, and plenty of these residents are eager to help the students in their community. There are religious and community leaders who influence the children in their community and offer their services wherever they can to ensure their students succeed. As an educator, I will be a trained professional in my field. But as a professional, I realize that I am not an expert in all fields. With an abundance of resources and willing volunteers in the community, I need to take advantage of these opportunities and provide my students with learning experiences that go beyond the curriculum. This also provides an opportunity for me to bring my students' communities into the classroom and allows them to share parts of their lives from outside of the school building. Students connect to the people they see living and working in their community and by bringing these people into my classroom, a deeper, more enriching experience happens. However, I first must go into the community and develop these relationships myself. I cannot wait for opportunities to come to me, I need to actively seek them.

My immersive experience may be over, but I have not lost sight of the lessons I learned in Whitely or the relationships I built. In my present practicums, I dive deeper into the experience than is required by my professor's rubric. I ask questions about the community my students come from. I talk to the students about what they do outside of school. I conduct my own research on the demographics of the students and the area and what resources are available. I look for opportunities to help not only in the classroom but also in my students' communities.

I realize that as I leave the university and move into the field that my experience in the schools, I will teach in may be different. As much as I would like to, I may not necessarily be able to invest as much of my time in immersing myself in the community. However, as an educator, I will make it a priority to engage in community events and visit the community centers that are a part of my students' lives during the school year and before the year even

starts. Families and the community need to be able to trust their children with me and that trust is not earned without making the effort to engage and involve them inside and outside of the classroom. Attending community events such as plays and festivals at students' churches and games for community recreational teams they may play on will provide me with a window to children's lives outside of school. Extending myself into the community will also be an excellent way for me to learn about the resources in students' communities and discover ways that I can bring families and community members' expertise and skills into my classroom.

I have not forgotten about Whitely. I still maintain my relationship with the Isoms, I attend religious services in Whitely whenever I can and talk to the community members about how they are doing and if there are opportunities for me to help their community. I have even started to pay more attention to the school district I grew up in and the communities involved, actively looking for opportunities to improve my schools and their engagement with the communities around them. The lessons I learned in Whitely were a formative experience for me, and I will work diligently to ensure I am doing all I can to continue to grow to be the best community educator I can be.

I lived just twenty minutes away from the Whitely community for two years before this experience. At the time, it was just another point on a map and an area I was told to avoid. It was not until I immersed myself in the community that I realized how rich this community is in their cultural wealth and history, how welcoming and affirming the community is, and how the community comes together to help its residents succeed and prosper. I would never have learned about all of this by looking in from the outside. My experience in the community has already helped me become a better educator, and I will use the lessons I learned there as I continue to grow into this profession.