

A Community-Based Learning Approach for Changing Students' Beliefs about Poverty Tools & Strategies

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Abstract

This mixed-methods case study examined the effect of a community-based learning course on students' beliefs about poverty. Twenty-four undergraduate students enrolled in an Urban Education course designed to foster an understanding of the social challenges to teaching in urban environments. Students were exposed to multiple aspects of poverty through novels, documentaries, and radio podcasts, in addition to out-of-class experiences such as working at a local community center with low-income populations. These course components were intended to enhance students' understanding of what it means to live in poverty and increase their exposure to out-group members. After the course, students' perception of their own civic responsibility was raised, their perception of impoverished people was more positive, and their endorsements of cultural and structural attributions for poverty were strengthened, while their belief in individualistic causes of poverty remained lower than their cultural and structural attributions. The importance of academic content that is personally relevant to students is discussed.

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The United States Census Bureau recently reported that in 2012 more than one in seven people nationwide lived in poverty. In addition to the overall poverty rate, 21.8 percent, or approximately every fifth child under the age of 18, lives in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2013). These statistics signify the need to contextualize the issue of poverty as a societal problem affecting individuals across income brackets. Economically, the more people who live in poverty, the more people use social services. The cost of social services increases with higher demand, necessitating higher taxes across income groups so the government can earn the revenue necessary to support such programs. Socially, institutions such as public schools are primarily financed through state and local tax funds. People living at or below poverty level often do not own homes with associated property taxes so schools in impoverished areas have fewer resources from which to draw. The state must supplement those missing resources, thus reducing the per pupil expenditure across all public schools regardless of neighborhood socioeconomic status. Despite these realities, Americans tend to externalize poverty by situating it within an individualistic framework—e.g., “It’s their problem, not mine.”

Early work in the field established three attitudes about, or attributions for, poverty: individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (Feagin, 1972, 1975). People with individualistic attributions for poverty believe that impoverished people are poor because of their own decisionmaking that may limit their opportunities for upward social mobility (e.g., using drugs or not going to college). On the contrary, people who endorse structural attributions for poverty cite societal norms (e.g., racial and

class discrimination, the need for a college degree to obtain many jobs) as limiting certain demographic groups from accessing educational and employment opportunities that may lead to economic advancement. Finally, fatalistic attributions reference reasons such as illness or bad luck as the primary cause of poverty. For 40 years there has been empirical evidence that of the three attributions, Americans favor individual attributions for poverty over structural and fatalistic attributions (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Smith & Stone, 1989).

It is well documented that attributions for poverty vary according to group membership (Furnham, 1982; Nasser & Abouchedid, 2006). Social characteristics such as age, gender, education level, income, and race influence beliefs about the causes of poverty (Hunt, 2004; Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004; Wilson, 1996). For example, Bullock (2006) found that welfare recipients were more likely than middle-class respondents to support structural attributions of poverty. Hunt (1996) reported that Black and Latino participants rated individualistic and structural attributions of poverty as more influential than did White participants.

Some research (e.g., Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993) includes a fourth attribution: cultural. Cultural attributions include intergenerational poverty, under-resourced schools, and neighborhood crime as primary causes of poverty. The inclusion of cultural attributions instead of fatalistic attributions in research represents an acknowledgment of how different demographic groups experience vastly different social contexts throughout life,

although they may share beliefs about fate and fortune, especially if they are of the same religious faith. For example, Schieman (2010) found that differences in fatalistic beliefs between economic groups disappeared with increasing levels of religious involvement. Fatalistic attributions are therefore not as likely to differ between demographic groups as are cultural attributions that more closely reflect day-to-day lived experiences.

While *what* we believe about poverty is fairly clear, it is less clear how we come to possess these beliefs. Some scholars have attempted to address this question by investigating the influence of schooling on the development of intergroup attitudes (Chang, 2002; Hattery, 2003; Wright & Tolan, 2009). This line of study is important because exploring how students develop attitudes through their education could reveal teaching methods that encourage students to develop more comprehensive understandings of social issues.

Experiential Learning

A broad pedagogical tool often employed to help students learn about social issues is experiential learning. Experiential learning is the process through which students' knowledge is developed and contextualized through engagement with course content beyond traditional textbooks. Experiential learning components involve the investigation of academic content in community settings to help make what is being taught more relevant to students (Cantor, 1998). Mooney and Edwards (2001) outlined six types of experiential learning, paying close attention to the most commonly used type, service learning. This is a method of teaching where students are asked to volunteer to provide needed

services within their community for academic credit.

Previous work found that service learning pedagogy may in fact have adverse effects, including student resistance, logistical issues, lack of connection between classroom discussion and the service, stereotype reinforcement, and even a sense of hopelessness (Meisel, 2008; Sullivan-Catlin, 2002). Further, the positioning of students as "providers for others" creates a hierarchy where community members are indebted to volunteers, thus reinforcing negative beliefs that marginalized groups are incapable of helping themselves. For example, some research notes that students seemed to perceive themselves as "agents of charity, coming down from the campus to help people who were utterly different from them—the victims of poverty" (Crassons, 2009, p. 101). Other students looked at their work as a way to tour a subculture, where they could see some "real live poor people" (Crassons, 2009, p.101). While volunteerism can be valuable, it can also be a superficial mechanism that prevents one from fully learning about other social groups. The level of social interaction with community members is minimal and the context in which interaction may occur can be inauthentic, thus undermining the purpose of experiential learning.

A more promising method of experiential education is community-based learning. This pedagogy is derived from theories of sociocultural learning set forth by Vygotsky (1978) and refined by Rogoff (1990). The purpose of such experiences is to provide students with opportunities to learn from not only texts, but also *people*. More specifically, sociocultural theorists advocate for learning within a specified social context where knowledge is co-constructed within a framework of shared

values, beliefs, and behaviors. In contrast to theories of constructivism (Piaget, 1964), the premise of socioculturalism is that information cannot have meaning in the absence of social context.

Rogoff (2003) introduced a particular type of sociocultural learning called intent community participation. According to this theory, learning happens through students' observations of, and participation in, authentic community settings. Unlike models of service learning, community-based learning occurs through a bidirectional relationship between learner and expert (e.g., the community member). By developing personal and emotional commitments to the community, the learner begins to interact with, not just observe, the economic and social realities endemic to that space (Corbett, 2004; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). Consequently, students take the initiative to accomplish goals relevant to the community instead of goals only relevant to themselves.

Critical to students' successful integration into the community is their ability to view themselves as members of that community. This requires a restructuring of self-concept in addition to a reframing from the self as an individual, to the self as a social participant. To do this, community-based learning courses require ongoing reflections that ask students to analyze experiences in the community both in relation to course texts and in relation to their own identity matrix. Seaman and Rheingold (2013) found that reflections helped students confront their positionality and remain accountable for their role in upholding social structures. It is through reflection that students are offered a space to use the social as a mirror for the self (Shor & Freire, 1987).

Methods

Following a methodology of an embedded single-case study design, we sought to understand how an intense community-based learning (CBL) course about urban issues would affect students' beliefs about poverty and their own role in affecting social change. To address this question, we analyzed pre- and post-course data pertinent to students' perception of if and how they can affect social change, their stereotypes about impoverished people, and their attributions for poverty. Our second research question relied on qualitative data to ascertain the importance of community engagement in an experiential learning course. Student comments from in-class discussions, quizzes, and papers provided insight into the role synthesis of experiences and academic content played in altering their perception of self and others.

Participants

Institution demographics. The school is situated in the West but attracts students from across the country and globe. Serving approximately 2,200 undergraduates, the student body is 54% women, 19% American ethnic minorities, and 5.4% international. In this private liberal arts college, the curriculum is designed to foster exploration of multiple disciplines with little emphasis on vocational training.

Classroom demographics. Twenty-four students enrolled in the course. There were 16 females and 8 males, ages 19 through 22 (mean age of 19.75). Despite its 200-level designation, there was a mix of academic levels including 13 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 7 seniors spanning 10 academic majors. Most relevant majors to the course included four education majors, four sociology majors, and one race and ethnic

studies major. The racial composition of the class was similar to that of the institution: 1 Asian student, 1 Black student, 2 Hispanic students, 17 White students, and three who self-identified as “Other.” Two of the 24 students previously attended an urban high school similar to those discussed in the course. Ten attended suburban public high schools, 10 others attended private high schools, and the remaining 2 students attended rural public high schools.

Course Description

At its conception, Urban Education was not a community-based learning course. After the first time teaching the course, it was clear from students’ course evaluations that they were not truly connecting with the material. They viewed the course as a collection of extreme examples to tell the story of urban schooling. To better help students connect text to real life, the course was transformed into a community-based learning course with 10 CBL components and 15 associated reflective/reflexive activities (Appendix A). In the course catalog, the description of Urban Education is as follows:

In this course we will explore the context of urban education from both students’ and teachers’ perspectives. We will investigate where and how urban students live, analyze recurring themes present in urban classrooms, and examine successful strategies for teaching in urban settings. A goal of this course is to move beyond the surface level discussion to ones that get at root causes and outcomes associated with analyses of learning contexts such as oppression, marginalization, inequality, and inequity.

The course is a 200-level foundations course required for the major, and is meant to be an introduction to urban schooling for students who may or may not be interested in classroom teaching. As such, the goal of the course is not to teach students how to teach in urban schools; it is to inform them of the challenges of teaching in contexts affected by poverty and racial and economic segregation. Due to the academic model of the institution, this course met for 18 consecutive weekdays for 2.5–3 hours every morning.

Instructional Methods

The course was divided into two parts: academic and experiential. Students met Monday through Friday from 9 to 11:45 a.m. The typical structure of a class meeting would include an ungraded pre-quiz to assess students’ comprehension of readings, answering lasting questions from the prior day, review of readings guided by discussion questions, connecting readings to out-of-class experiences, a video or activity, an ungraded post-quiz, and identification of lasting questions.

Academic content revolved around the following sociological and educational themes: racial segregation, gentrification, juvenile incarceration, social stratification, power and privilege, various forms of capital, the achievement gap, school closings, tracking, school funding, school violence, culturally relevant teaching, and classroom management. These themes were not discussed in isolation of one another, though each course meeting was assigned a specific theme to guide discussion.

In-class activities were done to help students examine complex course themes. Before the first day of class, students were required to complete an application for

social services (participation in WIC or admission to Section 8 housing) in order to maintain their spot in the course. In addition to setting the tone for the course, this was done so students could experience the bureaucracy many impoverished families undergo to obtain a resource that they need. To explore how poverty affects social mobility, we played a modified monopoly game that limited which properties players could buy depending upon their randomly assigned socioeconomic status. An activity in which students were given a single paper clip for each piece of capital they possessed (e.g., having a car, having a family member who went to college) was done to help students acknowledge how certain types of capital are often associated with specific identity characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, race). Students simulated an education board meeting about allocating school funding to help identify the stakeholders involved in educational policy. Each student was assigned a role (e.g., parent, teacher, principal, mayor, business owner, land developer) and expected to participate from the perspective of their character.

Each activity was prepped and debriefed in relation to course content. Readings included two texts, *Savage Inequalities* (1991) and *A Hope in the Unseen* (1998) along with academic journal articles by renowned scholars such as Michelle Alexander, Gloria Ladson-Billings, James Banks, Pedro Nogueira, and Jay MacLeod. To complement readings, students viewed three documentaries: *Interrupt the Pipeline* (2009), *Education Under Arrest* (2013), and *The First Year* (2004). Students also listened to a two-part podcast on school violence aired by NPR.

The out-of-class portions of the course included direct engagement with

community members in community settings. Students were required to take the public bus to their assigned community centers twice (including finding the correct bus, route, time, and cost) and to work at the community center for at least four hours per week (though most students worked six hours a week). In each of the experiences, students spoke with community members about their perception of the city (e.g., segregation, discrimination) and their daily lives (e.g., where they worked and lived, their primary mode of transportation, etc.).

Community center engagement.

The primary sites for students' experiential learning were located in low-income communities at five nonprofit community centers (given pseudonyms) developed and staffed by community members. Because each center had different needs, students worked in a variety of capacities across and within community centers. Students at three of the sites engaged in a combination of the following activities during afterschool and weekend programs: homework help/academic tutoring, paired mentorship with two to three children, free play supervision, interviewing families and center staff about community needs, event planning, and leading academic workshops. Alternatively, students working at Familias Sanas (see below) were deeply involved in program development and implementation for recently immigrated Hispanic families and were therefore fluent in Spanish. These programs included workshops pertinent to domestic violence, financial planning, and child-rearing. Lastly, unlike their classmates working with youth and families, students at Washington Park engaged solely with aging adults. In addition to participating in afternoon recreational activities with seniors, they also went to neighborhood venues (e.g., grocery store, senior living facility, local schools) to collect survey data

from community members about the types of programs they'd like Washington Park to offer.

Discovery Hills. This center is the oldest community center in the city and is located southeast of the College's downtown location. Originally built in the 1970s, it has had two renovations. Discovery Hills provides a food pantry, community garden, half-day preschool in the mornings, and afterschool programs for children in grades 1–5. There is also a teen drop-in center twice a week for two hours. Families are required to pay an income-based monthly fee of \$20–\$40 for preschool and afterschool programs. Five students were assigned to work at Discovery Hills.

Familias Sanas. Located in central downtown, this center was established in 1996 in response to the changing demographics of the city. The mission of the center is to provide free information and resources to help recently immigrated Hispanic families as they adjust to living in a new culture. The bulk of the programming consists of parenting classes, crisis intervention, counseling, and support groups for domestic violence and child abuse. Five students chose this location for their community engagement.

Heather Carol. Built in 1990, Heather Carol community center is southeast of downtown and provides preschool and afterschool programming for the community. It also provides Friday night activities for middle-school students as well as full-day programs when students are out of school. Families participating in the half-day preschool program are required to pay a monthly income-based fee of \$120–\$210. Afterschool programs for elementary students cost \$15–\$60 depending on the

family's income and the time of year. Five students worked at this site.

Millennium. Millennium has been serving families living east of downtown since 1987. This center has less programming than the other sites, primarily providing afterschool programming for children in grades 1–6. Monthly fees for the afterschool program range between \$22.50 and \$60. Five students worked at Millennium.

Washington Park. Built west of downtown in 2010, Washington Park is the newest community center in the city. While also offering afterschool programs, the bulk of their services are for aging adults ages 55 and over. There are book discussion groups, fitness classes, arts and crafts, and bridge club, among other offerings. Four students were placed at Washington Park.

Community-based learning versus service learning. Engagement with community centers differed from traditional service learning in three critical ways. First, students did not go to their centers with a preplanned course of action for what they would do to “help.” Students were intentionally not told anything about their community center to limit bias and prejudice. Students' first interactions with their assigned centers occurred on the third day of the course, during which students met with the center director to learn about the history and purpose of the community center. In accordance with community-based learning ideals, students' roles at the centers were determined in concert with center directors and staff, and based upon both center needs and students' demonstrated knowledge and skills. Students approached the partnership from a perspective of inquiry instead of advisement.

Second, students' engagement with community centers was not in addition to course content; it was integrated with course content. Students were participant-observers engaged in both reflective and reflexive analysis of their experience. In the former, students thought about the experience itself: how it was similar or different to prior experiences, what was exciting or challenging, and ways it could have been improved. In the latter, the emphasis was on analyzing one's self as the object of interest. Students answered questions such as: How have I changed because of this experience? What did I re-think and why? What did I contribute? How can I be a better partner?

Course readings and videos were examined alongside students' work at the community centers to identify how theoretical and empirical work translates to real life. For example, after viewing *Interrupt the Pipeline*, reviewing data on juvenile incarceration, and completing readings on gentrification, students were asked to consider how these social issues affect urban schooling. As the conversation unfolded, students cited community center youth as examples of people displaced from their communities and schools because of housing renewal programs and an overly punitive juvenile justice system. Their experiences at the centers were treated as living texts and reexamined daily. The careful analysis of their time at the community centers made their learning iterative in that their evolving beliefs affected their interpretation of their next experience, which would again change their thinking and their future interactions at the center.

The final and most distinctive way this experience differed from traditional service learning is that upon completion of the course, students gave each center a

deliverable. The six projects students completed were a culmination of their time spent inquiring and participating at the community center. Each student group designed a requested program that their respective center could implement. For example, students created a six-week life skills curriculum for workshops for children of recently immigrated families at Familias Sanas. Another group helped create a partnership between their community center and a local food bank to ensure students had healthy snacks after school. Unlike traditional service learning, the effects of students' engagement with community centers extended beyond the bounds of the course.

Primary Assessments

Three-part journal. Every Friday students were required to submit a three-part journal entry detailing (a) a description of a specific experience at the community center, (b) an analysis of how course content connected to that experience, and (c) commentary on what they learned/realized from the experience and how it affected them as individuals. There were a total of three journal entries throughout the course.

Book clubs. Twice during the course students were asked to meet in groups of four to analyze course themes as they appeared in *Savage Inequalities* and *A Hope in the Unseen*. Students were given four discussion questions (Appendix B) and each asked to write two pages responding to one of the prompts (one prompt per student). In these reflections, students were required to discuss *why* their responses to a particular prompt differed from another group member's response.

Map and reflection. During class, students walked downtown to explore the

neighborhood surrounding two urban high schools. They were required to draw a neighborhood map portraying the location of schools, housing, and local businesses. They were also asked to write a two-to-four-page reflection about how the neighborhood surrounding the school might affect school functioning.

Group action project. After listening to a podcast detailing gang violence in a public high school in Chicago, students were asked to form groups of four and develop a program for addressing a specific aspect of gang violence in the school described in the podcast. Students were expected to utilize information garnered from governmental data about juvenile incarceration rates, two documentaries about the school-to-prison pipeline, and empirical articles about culturally responsive pedagogy to complete this assignment. Because students were not qualified to develop an effective intervention program, assessment of the project was based upon their ability to synthesize course content in an accurate and coherent fashion. Students were asked to reflect on the quality of their program idea and the difficulty in addressing complex social issues through a single program.

Reflexive essay. As the first of two final assignments for the course, students were required to write a 10-page reflexive essay detailing if, how, and why their thinking about urban schools and/or issues of poverty changed throughout the course. This assignment was meant to be a synthesis of their experiences in the course, while also detailing how they view their social position in relation to course themes.

Community center program proposal. In accordance with CBL theory, students were asked to work with one or two

classmates assigned to the same community center to develop a program proposal that could be implemented at their specific center. These deliverables were to address a need or desire expressed by the community center and be realistic in their scope. Program proposals were submitted to the Parks and Recreation Board of Directors comprised of all community center directors, four community members, and three local business owners.

Data Sources

This case study included multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative evidence. In addition to survey data, information was gathered through participants' observational field notes, open-ended interviews, and documents pertinent to the course (e.g., student work). On the first day of class students were given a paper survey asking them to respond to a series of questions assessing their perceptions of their own civic responsibility, of people living in poverty, and of the cause(s) of poverty. Students were informed that this data was being collected for possible inclusion in a study on community-based learning and that their participation was entirely voluntary and would not affect their grade in the course. All students chose to complete the pre-course survey.

Throughout the course, students were reminded that anonymous qualitative data was being collected both during class discussion (they witnessed the professor taking notes on their comments) and through submitted coursework. They were offered opportunities to decline participation in person, through email, or by indicating such on their coursework. If quotes were of interest to the professor, students were asked individually (in person or through email) if specific quotes from class discussion or

from their written work could be included in the study. At the end of the course the same survey was administered to students during the second-to-last course meeting. Students were again reminded about data collection and their right to refuse participation. No student refused.

Data from student surveys (pre- and post-) were assigned an identification number so that student responses could remain anonymous. These identification numbers were recorded by a student worker in the Education Department, so the professor could not match surveys to specific students. Data were entered into SPSS by an undergraduate research assistant and analyzed by the professor.

Measures

All measures for this study were adapted from existing scales. The scales were modified from other published works containing similar scales and constructs related to this study. Each measure included a six-point Likert-type response scale: disagree very strongly, disagree, disagree just a little, agree just a little, agree, and agree very strongly. Alpha reliabilities for both the original scale and the present study are presented below.

Civic responsibility. This measure was adapted from Furco, Muller, and Ammon's (1998) civic responsibility survey for high school students. This 11-item measure was used to evaluate the extent of students' investment in, and awareness of, the local community. A higher score indicated a greater degree of civic responsibility. Sample items include: "I often discuss and think about how political and social issues affect the community," "I am aware of the important needs of the community," and "Becoming involved in

political or social issues is a good way to improve the community." The original civic responsibility scale produced an alpha reliability score of .93. Reliability for the pre-test was .87 and .90 for the post-test.

Perceptions of impoverished people. This 20-item scale was used to evaluate students' perceptions of "poor people" (as stated on the scale). The respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with 10 negative and 10 positive adjectives as descriptors of poor people. This study contains 20 of the original 38 characteristics used by Cozzarelli et al. (2001). Eighteen words were eliminated because they were deemed too similar to other words on the list (e.g., sick and unhealthy; friendly and nice). Negative adjectives included words such as "criminal," "promiscuous," "unmotivated," "dirty," and "drug abusive." Positive descriptors included "moral," "intelligent," "responsible," "healthy," and "capable." Negative and positive descriptors were measured separately, producing two scales for this study: negative perceptions of impoverished people and positive perceptions of impoverished people. Alpha reliabilities for the pre-test were .73 and .87 respectively. Post-test analyses yielded reliabilities of .83 and .87 respectively. Cozzarelli et al. (2001) reported an alpha coefficient of .87 for the combined scale.

Attributions for poverty. This scale measured students' beliefs about the causes of poverty. Items were designed to assess whether students endorsed structural (e.g., "prejudice and discrimination in hiring," "failure of industry to provide enough jobs"), individualistic (e.g., "no attempts at self-improvement," "lack of effort and laziness by the poor"), or cultural (e.g., "having to attend bad schools," "being born into poverty") attributions for poverty. Five structural items, six individualistic items,

and four cultural items were selected from the original seven-, six-, and five-item scales. Items were dropped because they lacked face validity with the corresponding construct (e.g., “not inheriting money from relatives” was dropped from the structural scale). Cozzarelli et al. (2001) reported alpha reliabilities of .79 for structural attributions, .75 for individualistic attributions, and .65 for cultural attributions. Pre-test reliabilities for the present study were .74, .83, and .91 respectively. Post-test reliabilities were .72, .86, and .70.

Additional data. On the post-test survey, students were asked to indicate all CBL components of the course that influenced their thinking about urban schools and about impoverished people (in two separate questions). Students could check as many of the following eight CBL components they found influential:

neighborhood map, public bus rides, in-class documentaries, podcast, *A Hope in the Unseen*, *Savage Inequalities*, completing an application for social services, and community center engagement.

Findings and Discussion

Changes in Students’ Beliefs

Students seemed to process course content and experiences in light of their own identity characteristics. While whole-class analyses yielded interesting results, a more nuanced investigation of the influence of age, prior knowledge, gender, and race offered insight into how students were differentially affected by course experiences. Table 1 summarizes changes in students’ beliefs.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Matched Pairs t-test

Scale	<u>Pre-course</u>	<u>Post-course</u>	t test
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
Civic Responsibility	4.62 (0.60)	4.76 (0.63)	-1.73 [†]
Structural Attributions	4.59 (0.86)	4.84 (0.76)	-1.60
Individualistic Attributions	2.57 (0.82)	2.53 (0.86)	0.00

Cultural attributions	4.70 (0.76)	5.01 (0.70)	-2.05*
Negative Descriptors	2.76 (0.56)	2.49 (0.66)	2.25*
Positive Descriptors	4.19 (0.67)	4.38 (0.67)	-2.22*

Note: † $p < .10$. * $p < .05$

As a class, students' beliefs about their own role in affecting social change were strengthened, though the outcome was not statistically significant at the .05 alpha level ($p = .10$). Prior work suggests that short-term experiential learning courses can affect students' awareness of civic issues and their connectedness to community (Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, Donahue, & Weimholt, 2007; Patterson & Hulton, 2012), but experiential learning over an extended period of time is most effective in changing civic behaviors (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). It may be that a course lasting three weeks was not long enough to capture most students' changed behavior during the course; however, students' qualitative comments suggested that despite elements of the "White Savior" mindset, they were forward thinking with respect to their own civic engagement:

In third world countries there is a concept called "poorism." This is where tour companies take tourists into slums and walk them through the slum, let them take pictures of the hungry disheveled kids, and maybe they even take the local form of transportation. These companies give tourists a glimpse of poverty so that they can return home and exclaim to all their friends that they know poverty, how it changed who they are, and then they can share that picture of a cute African child. However, two months later, they are back to where they started.... I don't want this class to

be poorism in America for me. I intend to carry this course into all I do in the future. (White woman; Upper income; Sophomore; Biology major)

I want to support youth by providing the social services to develop their communities, to interrupt the cycle of poverty, to empower them to empower themselves and to ultimately create real, sustainable change in their lives. (Other-identified woman; Upper income; Sophomore; Undeclared major)

I think I am angry at people like myself, because before this class I was part of the problem, I was a free rider on the coattails of those actually seeking change and to solve these issues.... But I still want to give back to the community, that's why I wanted to become a teacher. ... I want to break the school to prison pipeline on the criminal justice side. I could help those that the urban education system has failed get a second chance. (White male; Upper income; Junior; English major)

In a lot of ways, I want to be a teacher so I can change all that, so I can teach students in high poverty urban schools the life skills that are so intentionally given to students in affluent schools. My goal is to broaden their horizons, both in their mind and in the world. (White male; Middle income; Sophomore; Undeclared major)

Though whole-class scores did not change significantly, when students' scores were disaggregated by demographic groups, there were distinct patterns of change. The students whose beliefs about civic responsibility were most affected were seniors ($p = .10$). The seven seniors being the most affected age group in the class is logical given that the civic responsibility scale assessed students' behavioral intentions. Seniors are the age group closest to entering the "real world" where their behaviors will have significant impact beyond a college campus. They, more than undergraduates, are poised to affect societal change sooner and are therefore more likely to envision their own civic behaviors.

Equally as interesting was that when students were divided by major, the sociology majors exhibited the most change in beliefs about their own civic responsibility ($p = .06$). This finding is likely due to sociology majors having had the most content knowledge about poverty, oppression, privilege, and power. Indeed, the sociology curriculum at the college requires students to take at least two courses on inequality (Racial Inequality, Gender Inequality, or Global Inequality) and at least one course on

Seven positive descriptors were supported by more students after the course, while two descriptors were more weakly

how social context affects social life (Self & Society or Associations and Institutions). Sociology majors had the strongest foundation and the most informed lens through which to analyze course experiences and content.

Qualitative comments indicate that while students' thinking about their own responsibility for addressing issues of poverty changed, many of their thoughts highlighted their endorsement of individualistic attributions. Though some students noted the role of the "urban education system" and the "school to prison pipeline," these structural endorsements were often bracketed by implicit individual attributions wherein the student is positioned to provide "life skills" and "empowerment" that presumably, impoverished people lack.

Despite their seemingly subconscious beliefs about people living in poverty, all students appeared to change their explicit perceptions of impoverished people by the end of the course. In the post-course survey, fewer students endorsed eight negative descriptors of people who are poor, with no change in the endorsement of the remaining two (Table 2).

endorsed, and the remaining descriptor exhibited no change (Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptor Endorsement

Descriptor	<u>Pretest</u> Percent Students	<u>Posttest</u> Percent Students	Percent Change
Negative			
Criminal	33	25	-8
Promiscuous	13	4.2	-8.8
Unmotivated	29	17	-12

Too Many Kids	54	42	-12
Dirty	21	21	---
Mentally Ill	25	9	-16
Stupid	0	0	---
Uneducated	79	58	-21
Drug Abusive	58	33	-25
Positive			
Moral	79	100	+21
Intelligent	74	79	+5
Responsible	67	67	---
Proud	58	79	+21
Happy	50	55	+5
Strong	96	87	-9
Healthy	21	26	+5
Capable	96	92	-4
Family Oriented	92	96	+4
Hardworking	75	96	+21

When these data were analyzed by gender, there were no significant differences between the number of male and female endorsements of positive and negative descriptors before the class ($p = .47$, $p = .12$ respectively) or after ($p = .16$, $p = .61$ respectively). There was however, a shift in the *strength* of those endorsements on behalf of women after the class. On the post-survey, women agreed wholeheartedly that positive words describe impoverished people and that negative words absolutely do not describe impoverished people. Men on the other hand, moderately agreed with positive descriptors and

moderately disagreed with negative descriptors both before and after the course. There is little prior research on gender differences in people's perception of out-group members, but there is a longstanding body of neuroscientific literature suggesting that women experience and report emotions more intensely than men (Canli, Desmonds, Zhao, & Gabrieli, 2002; Kring & Gordon, 1998; McRae, Ochsner, Mauss, & Gabrieli, 2008). It may be that women in this study felt more strongly about the validity of positive descriptors and the inaccuracy of negative descriptors than did men because women especially process interpersonal

emotions differently than men (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Grossman & Wood, 1993).

Despite discrepancies in strength of beliefs, both women's and men's respect for people living in poverty was greatly enhanced by three course components: working at the community center, riding the public bus and completing an application for social services. After such "tedious" experiences as riding the bus, students began to recognize the systemic barriers faced by impoverished people (Hong & Wernet, 2007; Patterson & Yoo, 2012). Indeed, after the course, students more strongly endorsed cultural attributions ($p < .05$; Table 1) and structural attributions ($p = .12$; Table 1) for poverty, while their endorsement of individualistic attributions for poverty remained low ($p = 1.00$; Table 1). More specifically, White students' beliefs in cultural and structural attributions of poverty increased significantly ($p < .01$, $p < .10$ respectively), whereas beliefs held by students of Color remained stable ($p = .80$, $p = .87$). As a final interesting point, students of Color more strongly endorsed individual causes of poverty than did White students both before ($p < .01$) and after ($p < .001$) the class.

Students' overall attributions for poverty and their perceptions of impoverished people were most likely altered because this course was the first time many students worked so closely with people outside of their racial and/or class background. Prior work on implicit biases and prejudice finds that even short-term exposure to out-group members can reduce automatic stereotypic beliefs and implicit prejudice (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Dasgupta & Rivera, 2008). Even exposure to counterstereotypical media images can decrease prejudice and internal attributions for perceived failure (Ramasuhramanian, 2011). Because many of the students in this course had goals of working in public schools, it is especially interesting that students' enhanced endorsements of structural and cultural attributions after the course were consistent with other findings investigating inner-city teachers, whose endorsements of cultural causes of poverty rendered them more likely to work and remain at a poor school (Robinson 2007, 2011).

White students' reluctance to endorse individualistic causes of poverty was aligned with previous work demonstrating that Whites are less likely to endorse individualistic causes of poverty than ethnic/racial minorities (Hunt, 2004) and that not living in close proximity to people who are poor decreases the likelihood of attributing poverty to individual characteristics (Rodgers, 2009). Analysis of qualitative data revealed that prior to the course, many of the White students were unaware of the factors that affect urban student learning:

Affecting change significant enough to remedy issues that many urban schools face would require vast reformation to the United States' criminal justice and social services system. I believe that the issues in urban schools are indicative of the larger issues ignored by mainstream America today: the establishment of a socioeconomic caste system that also closely follows racial lines. (White male; Upper income; Senior; Geology major)

I eventually concluded that the United States has institutionalized laws and policies—including those regarding public urban education—hindering those of lower socioeconomic status from upward socioeconomic mobility, effectively trapping them into a lower caste. (White woman; Upper income; Senior; Psychology major)

I began this class in the thought that one day I may become a teacher in an urban school. ... But this class has made me reconsider. I am no longer sure I want to be a teacher. In particular, the studies we read that link the lack of cultural relevance between students and teachers would greatly hinder me as a teacher. I didn't realize how important knowing and understanding students is to their learning. (White woman; Upper income; Sophomore; Music major)

I thought I had some insight into the failures of the schools—I attributed it

largely to drugs and the destruction of the large housing projects and the rise of gang violence—but this class showed me it was a much more systemic issue; that the issue was even comparable to segregation policies before Brown vs Board of Education. I just didn't know what all was working against public school students. (White woman; Upper income; Senior; Sociology major) Prior to this class I thought underperforming urban students lacked the self-discipline and motivation to do well in school but now I understand how systemic inequalities, racial discrimination, lack of social mobility, and the perpetual cycle of poverty entraps students in a revolving door. (White woman; Upper income; Sophomore; Education major)

Given that high socioeconomic status (SES) Whites are unlikely to live near low-SES people of Color (Iceland & Wilkes, 2006), it is likely that both these students' race and their economic status prevented personal experiences with racism and poverty. Consequently, the documentaries, podcast, and community centers were especially influential to their learning about the intersection of race and class—content with which the two students of Color may have already been familiar. Research demonstrates that people of Color, unlike Whites, are likely to live in proximity to people of the same racial group even when there are socioeconomic differences (Iceland & Weinberg, 2002; Pais, South, & Crowder, 2012). It is possible that the seven students of Color, despite possibly coming from an upper-income family, may have been exposed to the realities of poverty through neighbors or family members. It may also be that by virtue of being a racial minority, these students had experience with racialized systemic oppression and therefore were already aware of how social policies work against marginalized groups. Indeed, an Asian student adopted by White parents spoke about the intersection of her racial and class identities:

I never really thought about how being and looking Asian might change how

people treat me. I am surrounded by White people and my family is White. We are fortunate to be well off economically but people don't know that when they meet me. They just see an Asian girl in a sea of White faces. I never thought about that before this class but now that I do, I can remember being treated differently. Now I know why. (Asian woman; Upper income; Sophomore; Psychology major)

Importance of Community Participation

The redesign of the course was done to integrate community-based learning components into students' exposure to academic content related to urban living and schooling. At least half of the students indicated that all but one nonacademic component (the neighborhood map) were influential in changing their thinking about impoverished people and urban schools. Especially important were students' extended and multifaceted interactions with people in low-income communities. Students' experiences at the community center had the strongest effect on students' understanding of privilege. Though not a primary research question, it is interesting to note the importance of personal interaction to students' self-reflexive learning. Unlike the other constructs in the study, no demographic patterns emerged in students' statements about how their time at the community center affected their perception of self. In their final paper, nearly every student juxtaposed their lives and the lives of the community members in the context of racial, class, or geographic privilege.

The course prompted the most personal change/reflection for me minutes after my first day volunteering. After learning about the poorer demographics that many kids in center came from and hanging with them for the day, I went back to relax in my dorm room. I looked around as I sat on my comfy couch checking out the TV, Xbox, stereo, Mac computers, and educated friends that surrounded me. I began to think about a few kids who I connected with especially at the center. While wondering if they

would ever have the same opportunities I do, I reluctantly understood they likely wouldn't. During this course I have observed and talked with many different people, but I haven't affected anyone more than this course has affected me. (White male; Upper income; Senior; Economics and business major)

This class is one of the first times I've really been asked to address and assess my privilege, what it means, and how it affects me. It has been a daily struggle to come to terms with this reality ... especially when I have to do so while interacting with people who have so much less than I do. (White woman; Upper income; Junior; Environmental studies major)

On an intellectual level I understand that political and economic processes that creates social injustice, but emotionally I don't feel the cycle of poverty, I don't feel how difficult it must be to live and learn in this environment. Nothing in my surroundings indicates that there is a problem, so I struggle to feel the issue to my core. Being out in the community and meeting people has helped me feel these issues and feel my privilege. (Other-identified male; Upper income; Junior; Education major)

I struggle to really access the material meaningfully in an emotional way. Moreover, my attempts to make emotional connections were often backed by bias and my context as an outsider. But the more I talked to the kids, the more I saw how we are similar. (Hispanic woman; Upper income; Senior; Sociology major)

Consistent with prior work investigating social issues through experiential learning methods (Teranishi, 2007), it was clear that this community-based learning course enhanced students' ability to connect with course material. Requiring students to do more than read academic texts helped them become active

participants in the learning process. Through reflective activities, students were able to connect their learning to their evolving sense of self as a social agent. After only three and a half weeks, students' perceptions about people living in poverty and the causes of poverty were altered significantly. Interestingly, there was no single catalyst for change as students indicated that 9 of the 10 CBL components were influential in their learning. This course provided a holistic experience in which students were encouraged to situate themselves as *members of a community* (albeit temporarily) through time spent building relationships as opposed to *volunteers in a community* there to meet a single need. Such in-depth engagement was complemented by multiperspective academic content, thus engendering a big-picture conceptualization of the intersection of poverty and education.

Taken together, these findings suggest an order in which educators can design courses aimed at changing social attitudes and beliefs, and ideally initiate more socially just actions resulting from these changes. First, it is critical that educators provide students with foundational knowledge to understand social issues from a theoretical perspective. This background information will provide the context for "sense making" of more nuanced content and experiences. Next, students' social characteristics and life experiences should be used as a guidebook for structuring community-based learning activities. An increasing body of research highlights the importance of counterstereotypic exposure to changing people's implicit attitudes about social issues such as gender, race, and sexuality. Last, it is critical that students have consistent opportunities to engage in reflective and reflexive thinking that challenges them to find the intersection of academic content and self-identity.

Limitations

This case study provides suggestions for how to affect students' beliefs about poverty and social issues; however, the limited sample size and restricted demographic makes it difficult to

generalize these findings to larger populations. The short duration of the course provided a snapshot of students' social cognition, but a longer course could depict a more detailed narrative of cognitive and behavioral change. Additionally, data gathered in this study was

restricted to the students' perspective. It is important for future studies to also collect information from community members to ascertain their experiences of the students' involvement and behaviors throughout the course.

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Appendix A

Experiential Learning Components and Associated Reflective Activities

<u>Component</u>	<u>Reflective Practice</u>
Neighborhood Visit	Map and Reflection
Public Bus Ride 1	Group Oral Presentation to Class
<i>Interrupt the Pipeline</i> (2009)	Complete a chart identifying specific aspects of the readings and how they are represented in the movie
<i>Education Under Arrest</i> (2013)	Complete a chart identifying specific aspects of the readings and how they are represented in the movie
<i>The First Year</i> (2001)	Class discussion
Social Services Application	Describe your frustrations with the application
Radio Podcast	Group Action Project Presentation
<i>Harper High School</i> (2013)	
Public Bus Ride 2	Structured Journal
<i>A Hope in the Unseen</i> (1998)	Book Club
<i>Savage Inequalities</i> (2008)	Book Club
Community Center	3 part journal (3 entries)
	Reflexive Essay
	Community Center program proposal

Appendix B

Book Club #1 Prompts

In your group of four, please discuss the following, allowing everyone an opportunity to express his/her sentiments. Be certain to take notes:

- Our country is struggling across social institutions. Compared to other social issues (e.g., healthcare, environment, homelessness, national security), how high of a priority should education be? Why?
- Compare Cedric's experiences at Ballou, MIT, and Brown. How do we see race, power, privilege, **or** social mobility function *differently* in each setting? Why?
- Per pupil spending, lack of qualified teachers, limited resources (buildings, textbooks, school supplies, lab space in science class) and geographic isolation are at the crux of Kozol's reasoning for why urban schools perform lower than wealthier and/or suburban schools. Which of these do you think is most to blame for the underachievement of urban schools? Provide reasoning/evidence (from other course readings, documentaries, or experience at community center) to support your claim.
- Cedric overhears a White professor, in discussing affirmative action, saying, "Are we really doing a service to young people to boost them above their academic level and then not offer the services they need? Because who really can? There's no choice but laissez-faire, sink or swim. They should be going to middle-rung universities." Do you agree? Would urban students benefit more from attending a middle-rung university than a top-tier school?

*After your discussion, each group member is to choose 1 of the aforementioned prompts and do the following (**one prompt per group member**) within 2 double-spaced pages:*

- *Compare your response to your chosen prompt with that of another group member.*
 - *What ideas were similar? Different?*
 - *What motivated your individual responses?*
 - *Why did you have similar or different viewpoints? What about your identities, cultures, values, or experiences may have influenced those opinions?*
 - *Are both arguments sound? Were they supported by evidence?*

Book Club #2 Prompts

- Suskind composes his text around narratives and counternarratives. In what ways does this text represent both types of thought? How are the voices/positions of Cedric, Barbara, Zayd, and Rob intermingled to present a blend of narratives? With regard to urban schools, how would we access counternarratives? And in doing so, would that help us "fix" what's wrong?

- On page 292, Cedric reflects about the LGBTQ community at Brown. He realizes that “actually knowing people ... has made it increasingly difficult to remain as judgmental as he once was.” Why are personal connections integral to personal growth? How has your evolving knowledge of urban schools affected you? In other words, how has this course prompted personal change?
- In a description of the social scene of Brown, Cedric notes that almost everyone has identified with a particular affinity group—everyone except the White males. How is it that White males, though not directly identifying with a particular group, remain the thread of the social scene? How does this reflect our discussions of privilege? What group(s) is(are) the thread(s) of urban schools (i.e., if this group didn’t exist, the structure of the school would crumble)?
- On page 327, Cedric recalls a famous quote from W. E. B. DuBois in which he describes Double Consciousness as: “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Recalling our discussions of urban students, how does this quote apply to them? How does it apply to teachers in urban schools? What affect does having such Double Consciousness have on student and teacher motivation in urban schools?