

# Leaning into Discomfort: Understanding Educationally Marginalized Children & Youth through Service-Learning

Dr. Lee Anne Block  
Faculty of Education

## Abstract

“Educational Leadership within a Service-learning Framework” is a course structured to create opportunities for developing a teaching identity through service. Its effect on our students’ understanding of their experiences of marginalized children and youth involves complex issues of identity and social position. “Leaning into the discomfort” of social settings that are often unfamiliar and sometimes difficult allows students to pay attention to their own assumptions, question stereotypes, and experience empathy. A critical understanding of their own identities and of social issues that permeate schooling becomes possible.

## The Service-Learning Course

- The Faculty of Education has a mandate to prepare teachers to work in the inner city.
- Required for all first-year students; includes 15 hours of coursework at the University and 40 hours of service in educational sites.
- Objective is to “[lead] students to broaden their horizons and to change their perspectives on their participation as citizens of a diverse democracy.”
- Introduces students to field experience and the role of the teacher, and links them to the culture of inner-city students and schools.
- Through their placements in community and education sites, education students begin the journey of working effectively and meaningfully with educationally marginalized children and youth.

## Method & Sample

- Participants were students, site supervisors and course coordinator Professor Mark Kuly.
- 60 students participated in start- and end-of-term surveys.
- Of these, 11 were observed, interviewed, and in focus groups.
- Data were analyzed and triangulated.
- Portraits were constructed of three representative students which explore aspects of their experiences.
- An ethnographic approach that is embedded in the lived experience of the participants and the researchers.

Typical Activity at a  
Service-Learning Site



## Grant's Portrait

Grant (pseudonym) was placed in an inner city school working in three classrooms, a Grade 1, a Grade 2/3 split and a Grade 4. Grant's perceptions of the students he worked with were complicated by the unfamiliar context. For example, he had not experienced on-going absenteeism in his own schooling and it was a persistent problem in his placement school.

“Because attendance . . . attendance was often not great, you know. The morning bell would ring and there'd be four students in the classroom and then they would slowly trickle in throughout the morning . . . And so then by lunch we'd have pretty much the whole class. But right at the beginning of the day there'd be like six students. So the fact that they were there, that they woke up in the morning oftentimes by themselves —and got themselves there or had their older siblings make sure that they were up and got themselves to school. I think that was a triumph in itself. **And it just took me a while to see past the hardship that was so visible.**” (Grant, Focus Group 30/3/16)

What did Grant see when he “leaned into discomfort”?

**He saw children who wanted to learn and understood that he had much to learn in order to be able to teach them.**

## Key Findings

- ❖ Students are predominantly female, White, young, rural and middle-class (Office of Institutional Analysis, University of Winnipeg, 2017).
- ❖ In a start-of-term survey, 56 of 59 first-year students considered themselves privileged. Only one had ever been termed “at-risk”.
- ❖ Many experience “culture shock” when first negotiating their roles in inner-city service-learning sites.
- ❖ Coordinator Mark Kuly encourages Education students to “lean into the discomfort” and learn from it. Kuly is concerned that as the beginning teacher identity starts to develop in an inner-city context, it can grow into one of two roles, the saviour and the nurturer, neither of which is sustainable.
- ❖ As they experience themselves interacting there, learning to see from the perspectives of their supervisors and participants, an identity shift may occur, as described in portraits.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

- ❖ The service-learning course provides opportunities for education students to better understand marginalized children and youth and to develop a teaching identity.
- ❖ This negotiation of identity is often uncomfortable due to the tension between what is familiar and what is being learned, and conflicting perspectives.
- ❖ The discomfort that many experienced was produced by witnessing the effects of poverty. They rarely identified poverty as a systemic problem, and they did not communicate about the effects of race.
- ❖ Developing a critical consciousness of identity can help students recognize the agency of marginalized children and youth.
- ❖ Fostering a critical awareness of education as both sustaining and resisting dominant culture can support an understanding of marginalized children and youth.

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