

Chapter 14

In Search of Transformative 21st Century Pedagogy: A Call for Critical Service–Learning in the Elementary Environment

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown service-learning to be an effective pedagogy producing student gains in cognitive and affective domains; however, discrepancies in theoretical foundations and definitions of service-learning cause critics to also note its potentially damaging impact on students, communities, and societies. This chapter calls for the implementation of critical service-learning, a pedagogy that enlightens, empowers, and transforms communities, by explaining important elements and exposing existing tensions in our current education system. It also specifically details the learning that the pedagogy promotes, explaining how that learning takes place with young children. Because few studies have provided substantive data on the employment of critical service-learning in elementary schools, the chapter concludes with an analysis of existing research of critical service-learning projects, presenting case studies and implications for putting theory into practice so that more educators can integrate critical service-learning into the elementary curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the shifting contexts of a dynamic world, the goals and demands of educators in the United States (US) have become increasingly exigent and complex. As science and technology exponentially increase the amount and availability of information, transform the methods in which it is transmitted, and break down barriers of time and space to facilitate instant interaction among populations near and far, schools are expected to prepare students to be global citizens adept in communication skills and competent in cultural knowledge (Wiggan & Hutchison, 2009; Zhao, 2007). As the student population itself changes to reflect a highly mobile, diverse multicultural society, schools are compelled to connect and engage

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with communities and individuals with unique cultural, linguistic, economic, and psychological needs, to create safe spaces of cultural exchanges that promote inclusion and participation, and to employ curricula that value the voice and experience of majority and minority populations alike (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Mfum-Mensah, 2009). As neoliberalism infiltrates all aspects of life, dissipating boundaries of economics, politics, culture, and education, schools become reflections of the social and economic inequalities it produces, and yet they are appealed to provide avenues of social mobility, community development, and conflict resolution (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Wiggan, 2011).

Given these significant contextual shifts in current education, there is an increased emphasis for teachers, schools, and universities to utilize curricula and employ pedagogical methods that are multi-faceted and comprehensive in effectively improving not only the cognitive, academic performance of students, but also in adequately addressing their social and emotional development (Barber, 1991; Billig, 2004; Kuh, 2008). Furthermore, the complexities of increasing divisions among racial, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic lines present in our society today implore the holistic education of these students to extend beyond the betterment of themselves as well-rounded individuals; their learning should be embedded within a greater purpose of creating a more just and fair global community (Alexander, 2014; Freire, 1994; Vally & Spreen, 2014). While this perspective of the function of formal schooling to offer civic education for social justice is not revolutionary in the sense of offering original insight, since, after all, its pretense dates back to early 20th-century philosophies of Dewey (1916) and numerous others since then (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1996; Gutmann, 1987; Wade, 2007a; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), it *is* revolutionary in the sense of inciting controversy, challenging the status quo, and empowering youth of diverse populations, as advocates of such critical pedagogy intend it to be (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2003). Jacobsen, Frankenberg, and Lenhoff (2012) describe the complexities of striving for “democratic education” under current contexts:

Developing citizens has long been a core goal of public schools, and recent public opinion data reveal that Americans still believe schools should teach citizenship and community responsibility (Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008), though this is certainly not the only goal the public has for its public schools. Moreover, in the desegregation era citizenship education played a prominent and often polarizing role, as it was understood that school desegregation was necessarily tied to notions of community and citizenship. Today’s rapidly changing demographic context again raises the question as to how schools promote engagement, with whom, and which notions of community are advanced. (p. 813)

Thus, it seems that not only does our current educational climate call for a transformative 21st century pedagogy to engage students in a vibrant democracy for the future our nation, but also that such a pedagogy in American educational institutions cannot be separated from critical rhetoric and a focus on social justice.

In recent decades, service-learning has emerged as a popular methodology that specifically addresses these current needs of education. As mentioned, its theoretical foundations can be traced back to the social and educational theories of Dewey (1910, 1916) which were inextricably related; he recognized the “problematic distinctions between doing and knowing, emotions and intellect, experience and knowledge, work and play, individual and the world, among other forced dichotomies” (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001, p. 151). Dewey (1938) advocated for pedagogical methods of inquiry and experiential learning that valued the application of knowledge, not just its acquisition, for the development of the individual was inseparable from the development of society, and vice versa (Rorty, 1998); his espousing of democratic learning was

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