Using Service-Learning as a Low-Risk Practice to Develop Critical Pedagogy Awareness and Growth in Early Childhood Teacher Candidates

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Purpose

This case study examines complex settings experienced by early childhood (EC) teacher candidates (TCs) completing various coursework activities meant to develop their awareness of and growth in critical pedagogy (CP) understanding and responsibility throughout a teacher education program. The study focuses on comparisons and evaluations made by eighteen ECTCs about Service-Learning (S-L) activities in various community settings as part of their field experience requirement for a literacy methods course (Course L) and a variety of other instructional practices used in other EC courses throughout their teacher education program. The overarching goal of this study is to inform teacher educators about low-risk practices that encourage and do not threaten ECTCs’ emergent transformation into critical pedagogists.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of CP, constructivism, transformative learning, and S-L. Within the context of teacher education programs, the objective of instruction in and discussion about CP is to generate a desire and ability to ask questions about relationships observed in society (Freire, 1970). Further, CP embraces the perspective that education should be a liberating experience, designed to spur TCs to seek social and economic justice (Freire, 1970) for their future students. This liberation can occur when TCs make meaning out of knowledge gained during transformative learning experiences in teacher education programs.

Within constructivist approaches to education (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978), the idea of constructing meaning from knowledge is often discussed. In the context of transformative education, meaning would be constructed from knowledge that required TCs to critically reflect on how they think or act in order to recognize and analyze assumptions previously taken for granted (Brookfield, 2000). Transformative learning is therefore defined as “the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self” (Clark & Wilson, 1991).

Including S-L as part of ECTCs’ coursework can ensure that becoming critical pedagogists is accurately characterized as a transformative learning experience. This study defines S-L as a teaching method in which students learn through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the educational needs of a community service program, helps foster civic responsibility, enhances academic curriculum of learners, and provides structured time for learners to critically reflect on the service experience (The National and Community Service Act of 1990, p. 5).
All four of these theoretical frameworks are brought together by Cone and Harris (1996) who use both Dewey (1938) and Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning advocacy and incorporate Friere’s (1970) call to “empower” communities in order to present a Lens Model for S-L educators. The Lens Model has teacher educators guide learners through cognitive and pragmatic definitions of the task, experiences, critical reflections (both oral and written), and mediated learning in order to arrive at newly integrated concepts (Cone & Harris, 1996, p. 34)

**Methods**

This comparative case study (Stake, 2005) employed two paper-and-pencil, structured-response format reflections in order to understand complex settings of Course L (i.e., two S-L activities) and a single paper-and-pencil structured-response format reflection comparing the complex settings of Course L to the complex settings of other courses (e.g., traditional field experiences, in-class discussions) in order to better understand a phenomenon.

The two reflections specific to Course L's S-L activities each contained four identical, open-response items. Each was completed in class by all eighteen of the ECTCs who were enrolled in Course L. Open-response items asked ECTCs to evaluate each of their S-L experiences within the categories of "Struggles [with the execution of the S-L activity]," "Triumphs [during the S-L activity]," "Applications [to future pedagogy]," and "Reflection [on the entire experience]" (STAR). The final reflection asked ECTCs to compare Course L's S-L activities to experiences in other EC courses.

After the completion of Course L, five students from Course L were randomly selected to participate in a collective focus group. "The ideal size of a focus group for most noncommercial topics is five to eight participants" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 69). The 45-minute focus group used a structured-response format in order (1) to allow students the opportunity to clarify, extend, and discuss collective responses from their previous in-class, paper-and-pencil reflections; (2) to elicit participants' comparative analysis of traditional vs. S-L activities' impact on their learning outcomes in subject matter knowledge/skills, civic awareness, perspective transformations, community involvement, and their own CP; and (3) as collective retrospections about the impact S-L pedagogy had on their learning outcomes in subject matter knowledge/skills, civic awareness, perspective transformations, community involvement, and own CP. With participant permission, focus groups were tape recorded for accuracy.

Later, to get "the story" behind the focus group participants' experiences, they were each individually interviewed. The interviews allowed the researcher to pursue in-depth information around the topics and were useful as follow-up to previous responses (McNamara, 1999). Each interview lasted approximately 35- to 45-minutes. The interviews were semi-structured retrospections in which participants was asked to reflect on their learning experiences throughout a teacher education program with focus being given to experiences with S-L
activities, transformative learning experiences, and CP. With participant permission, interviews were tape recorded for accuracy.

Over a span of two semesters, five data collection points were employed in order to allow ECTCs multiple opportunities to describe and explain their attitudes and beliefs about various learning activities meant to develop their awareness of and growth in CP. As outlined by Saldaña (2009), in order to honor the students' own language ("in vivo") and to make connections between categories ("axial coding"), two levels of coding were used to analyze the qualitative data from the various open-ended responses (i.e., written reflections, focus group responses, and interview responses).

**Data Sources**

Participants were 18 undergraduate ECTCs who participated in S-L projects in an EC literacy methods course (Course L) at a large, urban university in southern USA. While the university is situated in a predominantly African American city, nearly 78% of ECTCs in the course identify as Caucasian. Issues of racial and economic inequality are well-documented elements of the city's history and still impact matters of education and other civic settings today. Course L was co-taught by this study's researcher. Course L and other courses in the ECTCs' program of study provided subject matter content knowledge and shared experience necessary for all ECTCs to complete three reflections and for select ECTCs to participate in a focus group and individual interviews.

ECTCs in Course L completed two S-L projects for two distinct community settings in neighborhoods surrounding the university. For the first project, each ECTC created book bags for use by mothers and their young children temporarily residing at a local Salvation Army. Each book bag contained culturally-appropriate children's books with age-appropriate activities. Bags were designed in response to the Shelter Director's suggested themes and were based on content knowledge learned in Course L and community knowledge constructed from two preliminary visits involving ECTC-led read-alouds to shelter families. For the second project, ECTCs worked in small groups to design a centers-based family literacy night at a local Head Start. Center themes were determined by Head Start teachers' responses to a survey and content was guided by applied knowledge from Course L and formal observations of the Head Start classrooms.

Prior to starting each project in Course L, ECTCs engaged in on-site observations, discussions, and other interactions meant to familiarize them with the settings, needs, and individuals that comprised the two partnering community organizations. Informal class discussions self-characterized this group of ECTCs as naturally inclined towards service; subsequent conversations during one interview described this phenomenon as "just the 'early childhood heart and head'." During both projects, ECTCs were guided to make connections to course content and encouraged to discuss their project planning and initial reactions to the communities and S-L experiences with instructors and/or their peers either in-class or via a course website. After the completion of
each project, ECTCs completed written reflections using the STAR format. At semester’s end, ECTCs completed the final comparative reflection. During the following semester, five ECTCs volunteered to participate in research-guided reflections about their experiences through a focus group and individual interviews.

The same group of eighteen ECTCs also completed other activities in four other EC courses in semesters leading up to and during completion of Course L. This study focuses on those activities that ECTCs and courses' syllabi characterized as focusing on themes associated with social justice --- including reflections on personal belief systems and inequality in EC instruction, classroom practices, and assessment.

Results

Of the 18 ECTCs enrolled in Course L, 100% completed all three reflections as normal coursework assignments. Subsequent discussions (i.e., focus group and individual interviews) about responses from the written reflections were conducted post-class and included five of the original 18 ECTCs. Highlights of the analyzed qualitative data collected from the reflections is presented here as a brief summary of these ECTCs' attitudes and beliefs about the effectiveness of Course L's S-L practices as compared to a variety of other instructional practices used in other EC courses for the purpose of developing awareness of and growth in CP understanding and responsibility. Selected quotations are presented in exact participant wording for an emic (insider’s) perspective (Saldana, 2009) representative of the whole group.

"(hash tag) service-learning."

Taken collectively, analysis of responses indicates that among the many approaches that instructors can take when tackling CP awareness and growth, ECTCs generally believe that class discourse is only effective when they feel it is a truly open and safe space to share their emerging understanding of critical topics. These ECTCs feel that a commitment to an asset-based approach to student learning fell short in other courses (not Course L) because instructors shaped discussions --- dominating dialogues with their own biased experiences and thereby suppressing self-discovery and development amongst ECTCs. At one extreme end, many ECTCs complain that they feel that their opinions, beliefs, and practices were under attack in courses in which instructors took the lead during in-class discussions about issues of justice in education. Additionally, they feel that texts assigned for reading in these courses were not balanced, because they only presented negative views about "white privilege." As a result, many ECTCs claim that post-reading, critical self-reflections felt more "critical" (in the negative sense) than "constructive" or "transformative." One ECTC laments that "assumptions were made about racist practices of white Southerners without basis or discussion" and that the instructor's assumptions created a hostile learning environment in which ECTCs were always on the defensive (open-ended response, written reflection).
Conversely, ECTCs believe that the S-L projects in Course L promoted safe and positive spaces in which they could individually and collaboratively construct their own meaning --- free of instructor-bias or expectation --- towards understanding and responsibility to CP. Most ECTCs feel that the S-L projects allowed them to create their own meaning of inequality through authentic, direct interactions with diverse populations. One ECTC characterizes the S-L projects as "going beyond a classroom text" (open-ended response, written reflection) to bring new awareness of and understanding about their place and responsibility as future educators in their communities -- without condemning them for not having prior experiences with inequality. As one interviewee sums it up, "I feel like you learn more about whatever content you are doing and you learn more about the people you’re gonna be working with in the future, but you also just learn more about yourself and the people in your community. #service-learning."

During the focus group, participants were asked to identify from a pre-selected list those teaching practices that they believe effectively improved their academic knowledge, civic awareness, community involvement, understanding of diverse student populations not previously worked with, comfort-level with building relationships with diverse students, and commitment to invest in future students' lives. Participants rank "assigning traditional textbook readings" as the least effective teaching practice to accomplish these categories, while "reading non-traditional texts (e.g., young adult novels)" ranks second-most effective. Overall, the pedagogy of service-learning is the only teaching practice to receive 100% participant validation in 100% of the categories. Additionally, across six categories of typical S-L outcomes, 80 - 100% of the focus group participants believe that their S-L experiences in Course L did improve their personal and interpersonal development; understanding and application of knowledge; engagement, curiosity, and reflective practice; critical thinking; perspective transformation; and citizenship. And 100% of focus group participants believe that S-L was the only teaching practice that could accomplish all six of these categories! A few of the ECTCs conceded that other courses' activities (specifically, guided article readings about racism in education and an instructor's sharing of experiences of racism in personal and professional settings) could potentially raise their "awareness" about inequality in EC learning settings; however only S-L experiences promote positive, emergent understanding of and responsibility towards action for justice (i.e., CP).

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Taken collectively, analysis of responses throughout the various data collection points indicates that ECTCs did exhibit growth in CP understanding and responsibility as a result of their S-L experiences in Course L. By enabling ECTCs to put course content knowledge into direct, immediate practice in personally meaningful spaces (i.e., their own city) faced with authentic issues of racial and economic injustice (e.g., inequality in educational access), Course L helped them become more confident in their content knowledge while also helping them to naturally discover and examine their current awareness of the needs and potential of
future communities of learners. Evidence of transformations includes growth in ECTCs' "schema" regarding who they "thought would be there [at the Salvation Army]" (open-ended response, interview) and how they thought TC-family interactions would play out during S-L experiences.

Many of the ECTCs in Course L grew up in the city in which the University is based; however, written reflections indicate that many were not aware of the Truths of their hometown. One ECTC shares in her reflection that prior to completing S-L experiences in Course L, "... I honestly never put much thought into how many children do not have stable homes in [city]. It is something that I think 'I knew' in the back of my mind but since I have never had to experience it, it just was not something that I really grasped until I saw the faces."

Many of the ECTCs' written reflections and informal class dialogue reveals their surprise at seeing "so many people [at the Salvation Army] that looked just like me," but they follow up by claiming that it wasn't the ethnic commonalities that helped them to connect with families, but rather the realization that families share an interest in early learning --- "we [mothers and ECTCs] were both here to read with this little kid and watch them growing and being happy" (open-ended response, interview). This bond then paved the way for many ECTCs to share an appreciation of diverse communities' funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) --- "before this [S-L projects], I had never observed in/with a low-income, poverty-stricken school. It was incredible to see the children’s desire to help, read, participate, and learn even in an environment that is not 'five star.' … From this event [the Head Start family literacy night], I learned that the [city] community has a huge potential for growth and impact" (open-ended response, written reflection).

Overall, ECTCs feel that transformations that took place in Course L were more positive and authentic than in other courses because they were ECTC-led and not instructor-mandated. And while transformations within each ECTC was an individual experience with varying degrees of growth documented, these life moments position this group of ECTCs in a receptive mindset for future experiences that could push them to grow even more. As one interviewee shared:

So I feel that just service-learning kind of …it expands how you look at people, just in general even if it has nothing to do with the demographic you are [going to work] with you still have that knowledge of like ‘people are all different.' So it just makes me more of a … I don’t know … more conscious how I say things and how I phrase things and the opportunities that I choose to put forth to them [my students].

So, while their steps towards becoming critical pedagogists may be considered small, at least they are not steps backwards.

**Recommendations**

Conclusions posit that, given the predominantly Caucasian makeup of this particular group of ECTCs, instructional approaches to issues of social inequality should avoid an accusatory classroom atmosphere by
taking the learning outside of the classroom in order to allow for authentic, ECTC-based transformations. Facilitating S-L activities places the burden of learning in the hands of the ECTCs and can remove instructor bias from ECTCs' personal learning experiences. Recommendations from these ECTCs for providing a safe space in which to experience well-supported, positive transformative learning in the area of social justice, include:

1. "Smile." Many of the interviewees explain that most instructors "claim that they want you to be comfortable and share," but then they shut you down by saying, "Okay" and just moving on. ECTCs claim that open-minded instructors can create a supportive course environment that promotes non-judgmental discussions by simply "smiling" and responding to student input with "Okay, and..." to signal that they actually want to hear more about the ECTC's internal learning process.

2. "Let us know you aren't 'Queen of the Universe.'" As an extension to Recommendation #1, the interviewees all believe that instructors can position themselves as approachable to their students by humbly sharing their own experiences of mistakes, growth, and discovery. As one interviewee claims, "it lets us know you aren't 'Queen of the Universe.'" Caution should be given when sharing personal experiences, though, so that the exchange promotes connection and conversations with one's students and does not coerce them into coming to the same conclusions that one's own personal experiences led to.

3. Understanding that "We're not there yet..." An overall sense of inadequacy and shame is expressed by ECTCs when recounting discussions (or lack thereof) in courses in which instructors' beliefs dominated. One interviewee advises that in order for transformation to take place in an instructor's classroom, the instructor must acknowledge that "we're [ECTCs] not there yet..." (open-ended response, interview) and then be willing to give ample time for inquiry, practice, and reflection in order to allow ECTCs to struggle with and come to their own conclusions about issues of social justice. One focus group participant claims that S-L is an effective way for instructors to trust ECTCs to construct their own knowledge about critical issues, she explained:

   Instructors expect us to be critical thinkers, to advocate for our students, to be an active presence in the community ... But if they never give us the chances to be in the community to expand how we look at diverse populations ... how are we supposed to become more conscious of how we talk, get a broader understanding of children's backgrounds ... if not through service-learning?! If you want me to become an artist, don't talk about the others who know how to paint --- let me paint!

4. Accept responses like: "...even poor people want the best for their kid." As an extension to Recommendation #3, in order to sustain ECTCs' continued discussions and desires to grow, shared revelations from ECTCs like: "even poor people want the best for their kids" (open-ended response,
written reflection) must be met with an asset-based mindset. Just as ECTCs are encouraged to approach the young students and families in their classrooms from an assets-based mindset, instructors of ECTCs must be willing to applaud the emergent understanding that is being displayed instead of condemning reflections as "naive statements of privilege" (open-ended response, interview) and making ECTCs feel guilty about their inexperience.

5. "Take us out of the classroom." Once instructors have created a safe space for ECTCs to explore and discuss in class, then it is time to take students out of the classroom. Low-risk experiences like project-based S-L can provide context and/or connection to ECTCs' learning through the completion of purposefully planned projects that facilitate direct interactions with communities. According to many of the interviewees, traditional in-class discussions of assigned text readings only present others' point-of-view of critical issues. Conversely, S-L activities allow ECTCs to form their own beliefs about the importance of developing "secondary" teacher responsibilities (e.g., building family relationships, fostering a sense of justice in students). Many of the ECTCs claim that S-L experiences make a significant impact on them because they "take us out of the classroom" (open-ended response, written reflection) and into the communities from which their students will come from. One focus group participant sums it up by saying:

Although I have lived in [city] for the majority of my life, I often take for granted vast cultural differences that [city] has. ... I find myself staying in my comfort zone ... this experience [S-L] provided me with the chance to experience other aspects of diversity that I often take for granted. It opened my eyes to the fact that despite SES and life circumstances, everyone has the innate desire to learn and succeed in life. The families I worked with welcomed the opportunities to grow and learn. This gave me a sense of hope for the [city] community that I have not had in quite some time. ... all children, regardless of ethnicity, cultural background, SES, race, and other diversities, are entitled to the best education that they can receive in a least restricted environment.

**Scholarly Significance**

Despite the pressing need to promote and practice education praxis that can change the world, it is often believed that large class sizes, limited class time, and demanding work and school schedules of contemporary ECTCs can all hamper learning beyond the “banking model” of regurgitated information (Freire, 1970; Nieto, 2002). However, instructors who take the effort to create environments that build trust and care and facilitate the development of sensitive relationships among learners can still foster transformative learning (Taylor, 1998). Conscientious instructors may reconsider traditional instructional practices (like guided readings or instructor-led discussions) which can be perceived by ECTCs as threatening because they exist disconnected
from authentic contexts, in favor of S-L which can create a community of learners united in a shared, low-risk experience of trying to make meaning in community-based activities on their way to becoming critical pedagogists.

**Future Research**

As a follow-up to this study, the researcher hopes to explore whether or not the S-L experiences have a lasting impact on the ECTCs' commitment towards CP by conducting subsequent studies with the five focus group/interview participants as they navigate their first years as classroom teachers. Data from research like this could improve advocacy efforts for S-L as standard pedagogy for developing ECTCs' CP. Additionally, given the shared program concentration of the participants, the researcher hopes to explore if the positive phenomenon is exclusive to ECTCs who naturally have a "heart for service" or if the same results would be found among TCs in other program concentrations (e.g., middle school). Data from research like this could help instructors identify the conditions needed to promote successful S-L experiences.
References


