Chapter 9
A Grand Challenge:
Facilitating Service-Learning for Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

Teacher educators committed to social justice are charged with preparing future professionals with the knowledge and skills characteristic of change agents. This chapter explains how two university faculty members co-taught a general education course about education and social justice enlisting service-learning. This multidisciplinary course allowed teacher candidates to work with peers from other majors to select, plan, and implement a service-learning project. The structure and design of the course is described, along with examples of readings, film, media, and organizations that promote social justice. Qualitative reflections from former students are included, along with descriptions of service-learning projects. Recommendations and implications for teacher educators designing a similar course are provided.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how two university teacher education faculty members incorporated service-learning in a general education course entitled, *Education and Social Justice*. From 2014-2017, the authors co-taught a "Grand Challenge" course at the University of Rhode Island, which employs students from across academic disciplines at the university to engage in learning about diverse perspectives that address a "significant global challenge" (University of Rhode Island Office of the Provost Website, 2014). Using theoretical underpinnings within social justice (Adams et. al, 2013), small groups of students planned and implemented service-learning projects designed to serve individuals who have traditionally been marginalized in the United States (US) educational system. This chapter includes a brief review of

literature supporting service-learning, a description of the course, examples of service-learning projects that students organized, quotes from former students, and implications for teacher educators who plan to implement a similar course. Employing social justice tenets from Adams et. al (2013), the authors share how service-learning projects, whose goal was to create culturally aware and responsive persons, led to: 1) recruiting students into teacher education programs; and 2) facilitating service-learning groups comprised of students from diverse majors, backgrounds, and experiences.

TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Teacher educators committed to social justice have been tasked with ensuring that, in their teaching, candidates are culturally responsive, (i.e. Darling-Hammond, 2006), inclusive, (i.e. Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Vaccaro, August, & Kennedy, 2012; Rembis, 2010), and prepared to use language that promotes social justice (i.e. Tharp, 2012). In a world with grave injustices and disparities, educators have a tremendous responsibility to teach social justice. Historically, not all social identity groups have been given the same opportunities in the United States or in our schools. Race, ethnicity, gender, social class, ability, and sexual orientation exert an undeniable impact on one's experiences.

Teachers face these societal injustices in the context of working with children and families within schools (Nieto, 2000); yet teachers are overwhelmingly White and middle class, suggesting that many teachers have limited experiences in working with marginalized groups outside of school-based situations (Boyd, Lankford, & Loeb, 2005; Villegas, 2007). Service-learning provides a unique opportunity for future educators to learn from individuals who have been marginalized in society within a context that is outside their classroom milieu. The authors designed a service-learning course so that students could experience the theories and concepts presented in the course content and "build a sense of civic responsibility as they address community-identified needs through course goals, objectives, and strategic experiences" (Sulentic Dowell & Meidl, 2017, p.190). Researchers have found that service-learning reduces teacher candidates' stereotypes of urban students from poor backgrounds (Conner, 2010), helps candidates identify their own ethnocentric beliefs (Chang et al., 2011), and promotes identity development (Farnsworth, 2010).

Sulentic Dowell & Meidl (2017) recommend that teacher educators look outside the traditional school-based setting to develop service-learning partners as a way to expand opportunities for future teachers. Expanding opportunities outside of a school setting allows teacher candidates to see how various groups, marginalized in schools, experience the world outside of the typical educational context. For instance, a teacher candidate may learn in a practicum setting that students utilize the free and reduced lunch program. However, it is unlikely that the teacher candidate would understand how the issue of childhood poverty is an issue confounded by lack of affordable housing, jobs that pay a living wage, institutional racism, and access to healthcare – all issues they would learn about if serving in a local homeless shelter or food pantry.

AUTHORS' COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course, *Education and Social Justice,* aimed to teach undergraduate university students about groups within the US education system that have been historically marginalized based on race, ethnicity, gender,

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