

Chapter 65

Service–Learning Field Experiences to Build Intercultural Competence: Teaching and Learning on the U.S.–México Border

Judith Munter

San Francisco State University, USA

Beverley Calvo

University of Texas at El Paso, USA

Laura Irene Dino Morales

Centro Universitario Ciencia e Innovación para la Formación y el Emprendimiento, Mexico

Andres A. Oroz

Roxbury Community College, USA

ABSTRACT

There is a call today for preparing teachers to reflect on their role as agents for global change, as engaged citizens responsible for helping to create a more equitable society. This chapter explores the transformative potential for the integration of service-learning into field experiences through examination of a bi-national teacher education project located on the U.S.-México border. A primary purpose of this chapter was to examine the ways in which service-learning field experiences enrich and deepen intercultural competence of teacher candidates. Qualitative data, including interview transcripts, reflective essays, and reports were analyzed to determine the extent to which U.S. and Mexican master teachers, graduate students, and teacher candidates' perceptions of their work with transnational learners changed as a result of bicultural, bi-national service-learning field experiences. The findings demonstrate the potential of service-learning for developing intercultural competence in current and future teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences (Dewey, 1938, 28-29).

As we approach the third decade of the new millennium, concerns about the direction of the United States (U.S.) and its social institutions have taken on great urgency (e.g., Cervantes & Walker, 2017; Obser, 2017). Whether in political discourse, K-12 classrooms, or everyday conversations with friends, questions about pressing problems in education faced by teachers, students, parents, taxpayers, and policymakers are under intense scrutiny (Andrews, Richmond & Stroup, 2017; DeMatthews, 2017; Fischman, 2001). In times of change like these, the preparation of teachers in schools serving children and families from diverse contexts demands transformations in expectations, roles, and commitments for all participants, partners, and stakeholders (e.g., Cummins, 2016; Gorski, 2008). In many K-12 classrooms in the U.S. and around the world, teachers are working with children and families whose lives have been impacted directly or indirectly by the unprecedented scale of human migration, social inequality, war and violence, human rights violations, and global crises emerging across the planet, as societies undergo change. Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected, presenting new challenges and new opportunities for teachers and teacher educators. At their best, K-12 schools are critical partners in promoting global understanding (Weber, 2007).

The authors of this study posit that as early as primary school, schools can help young people learn how to engage as active participants helping to resolve local and global issues. Teaching is more than just a technical job focusing on transmission of information (e.g., Noddings, 2011; Swick 1999). Even with the pressures of high-stakes testing, descriptions of quality teachers typically include discussion of dispositions, perspectives, and actions based on moral commitment, caring and social justice (e.g., Gándara & Santibañez, 2016; Murrell, Diez, Feiman-Nemser, Schussler 2010; Villegas, 2007), defined as “attitudes, values, and beliefs . . . fairness and the belief that all students can learn” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2017, Unit Standards Glossary, para.83).

This chapter examines the potential for service-learning as a pedagogical approach for strengthening educators’ intercultural competence through innovative field experiences in high-need communities in border contexts. Relying on the transformative potential of service-learning as a tool for developing new knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Eyler, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jacob & Howard, 2015), current and future educators in México and the U.S. designed and implemented transformative field experiences in schools and communities undergoing significant change in rural outposts and urban communities located in the U.S.- México borderlands region connecting Texas and Chihuahua State.

SIGNIFICANCE

This study places emphasis on in-depth examination of the lived experience of participants in one bi-national program over a four-year period of time, examining the transformative potential for service-learning in borderlands contexts as an impetus for expanding the teacher-preparation continuum by providing teams of expert and novice teachers with opportunities to learn with and from people of cultures different from their own. A primary goal was to examine the ways in which bicultural service-learning field experiences enrich and deepen intercultural competence of teacher candidates.

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