Chapter 17

Teaching What We Don’t Know: Community-Based Learning as a Tool for Implementing Critical Race Praxis

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors analyze two community-based learning (CBL) courses designed to help preservice teachers understand how issues of race and power emerge in classrooms. Students enrolled in a reflection-oriented course demonstrated deep understanding of their white identities and developed a desire to enact social justice pedagogy; however, they also expressed anxiety about effectively teaching diverse students. Similarly, students enrolled in an action-oriented course were unable to engage in Critical Race Praxis in their community placements due to colorblind mindsets and feelings of white guilt. While some students understood white privilege to function through systems of oppression, many students adopted a white savior mentality. These outcomes suggest that white preservice teachers can imagine being change agents better than actually being change agents. Teacher educators should use CBL to help white preservice teachers develop the cognitive and emotional capacities for Critical Race Praxis prior to student teaching in diverse classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the K-12 public school system has become more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that by Fall 2014 the percentage of White students had decreased from 58% to 50% (NCES, 2017) in just 10 years. Coupled with a drastic change in the racial demographics of schools is the fact that students of Color are more likely to be suspended and expelled, and placed into the school-to-prison pipeline at higher rates than White students (Blake, Gregory, James, Hasan, 2016; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2015). This suggests that the academic needs of students of Color are not being adequately met by public schools.

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One method for ensuring that preservice teachers are equipped with both content and experiential knowledge to effectively teach diverse students is service-learning. This experiential pedagogy is used in teacher education as a mechanism to expose preservice educators to communities different from their own. Waterman (2014) contends that “service-learning can play a supportive role: pedagogy, curriculum, and community building both within the school and between school, neighborhood, and others” (p.131). Service-learning also supports critical self-reflection in addition to civil and political learning (Mitchell, et al., 2015).

However, although service-learning has the potential to enhance preservice teachers’ understanding of communities of Color, it has been critiqued as paternalistic and reflective of the ‘savior complex’ in which students are helpers intent on solving problems for less fortunate people (Crassons, 2009; Meisel, 2008). To mitigate such hierarchical relationships, teacher educators can utilize a specific mode of service-learning that positions preservice teachers as partners, rather than saviors: community-based learning (CBL).

Community-based learning is a type of service-learning that uses social relationships as primary text. Borne of socioculturalism (Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), CBL is a type of intent community participation that helps students understand that knowledge is socially and culturally situated. Preservice teachers enter new school settings as participant observers, whom through mentorship from veteran teachers, are gradually integrated into the social fabric of the school and community. Teaching experiences are scaffolded to allow teacher candidates opportunities to learn culturally-oriented norms and practices, and to build authentic relationships with students and other staff.

The goal of CBL in teacher education is for preservice teachers to become invested in the well-being of the community and to participate in, not just understand, the social realities endemic to that locale (Corbett, 2004; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). To do so, teacher candidates must first understand their own social identities, and how those identities may or may not fit within the social framework of the school. Guided by that understanding, teacher candidates should employ student-driven, collaborative instructional practices with the ultimate goal of co-constructing knowledge to solve social problems. Freire (1970, 1974, 1992) called such self-directed reflection and action, praxis.

Critical Race Praxis

Critical Race Praxis (CRP) is the cognitive and behavioral processes through which service-learning can enhance teachers’ inclusive educational practices. CRP has its roots in critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011), with significant influence from two theoretical frames: a) Critical Race Theory (Bell 1992, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) that challenges liberal notions of colorblindness, equality, and meritocracy, and b) Critical Whiteness Studies (Frankenburg, 1993; Leonardo, 2002) that interrogates how Whiteness is normalized. CRP is a way of understanding and interacting with the world that transforms knowledge into social action. It operates as a reflective tool with which one can interrogate their lived experiences in relation to structures of power and dominance. By engaging in CRP as an element of their service-learning experience, preservice educators can learn how race and culture are enacted in schools to organize and maintain hegemony.

Utilizing CRP to center the role of race in teaching and learning processes is especially important for White teacher candidates whose only exposure to multiculturalism may be theoretical, and occur only at the insistence of teacher educators of Color. Teacher preparation programs have only recently