Chapter 61

Informing Teaching Through Community Engagement: A New Zealand Approach

Trish Lewis
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Letitia Hochstrasser Fickel
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Glynne Mackey
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Des Breeze
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

ABSTRACT
Preservice teacher education programs prepare teachers for a variety of educational settings that serve a diverse range of children. Research suggests that many graduates lack confidence and the capability to teach those from backgrounds different from their own, including children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and children with additional learning needs. In the bicultural, and increasingly multicultural, New Zealand context, preservice teachers are overwhelmingly from White, middle-class, monolingual backgrounds. This chapter offers a case study of the development of a community engagement course within an initial teacher education degree program. Based on Kolb’s model of experiential learning and Moll’s notions of funds of knowledge and identity, the course aims to enhance preservice teachers’ knowledge of the lives of children they teach, and their dispositions and cultural competence for teaching, through personal and professional interaction with the community.

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INTRODUCTION

Schools and early childhood centers are necessary and important learning contexts for preservice teachers to develop the relational framework that underpins teaching practice. Recent research, however, has demonstrated these settings alone may not be sufficient, because they do not provide extended opportunities to experience and understand the full scope of children’s lives and the rich and varied cultural contexts of families and communities (McDonald, Bowman, & Brayko, 2013). Nor do they necessarily provide opportunities for preservice teachers to attain, or further develop, certain dispositions for teaching, such as resilience, empathy, courage, and grit (Meidl & Baumann, 2015). In an effort to address these issues, community-based learning, in particular service-learning opportunities, have been posited as promising practice in teacher education (Sleeter, 2008).

This chapter describes the development, and introduction, of a community engagement course in an undergraduate preservice teacher education program in one university in New Zealand. The authors consider how the inclusion of service-learning supports preservice teachers in developing personal and professional identity and knowledge (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), including enhancing the development of teacher dispositions (Meidl & Baumann, 2015), and cultural competence to enable successful teaching in the contemporary educational context. They offer insight into the policy and practice context of New Zealand, and how this launched the change in conceptualizing the importance of community engagement in the preparation of preservice teachers. In addition, they examine the collaborative process that led to the development of the course, the theoretical framework established to guide preservice teacher learning, and provide an overview of the course design. Finally, the authors discuss lessons learned during the process of developing a community-based service-learning course for preservice teachers.

SUPPORTING PRESERVICE TEACHERS DISPOSITIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE LEARNING

Contrary to popular opinion, teaching is complex and “unnatural” work (Ball & Forzani, 2011, p. 41). Rather than arising naturally from one’s interest in either children, or a subject matter area, teaching is reliant on specialist knowledge and proficiency in a range of disciplines related to learning, development, and subject matter. Moreover, it requires unique aptitudes, such as recognizing and using multiple perspectives, and understanding how to work with both individuals and large groups. In addition, the acquisition of skills and the ability to deconstruct knowledge and reframe it in such a way as to enable the specific learning of others is crucial (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Hashweh, 2005; Shulman, 1986, 1987). Perhaps most importantly, it demands the capacity to cultivate supportive and responsive relationships (Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2013) that enable a teacher to work with many learners, who have a diversity of life experiences and cultural backgrounds, at the same time as overseeing inclusive, safe, and productive learning environments (Ball & Forzani, 2011). Thus, a key task for teacher education is developing preservice teachers’ capacity to undertake this unnatural work as they learn to navigate the complexity of early childhood centers and classrooms.

Service-learning has been found to support preservice teachers in learning to negotiate this complexity and engage in the unnatural work of teaching. Community-engaged service-learning enhances the ability of preservice teachers to work with, learn with, celebrate with, and lament with, people from communities,
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