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**Social Justice Education as Anti-Poverty Work:**  
**Undergraduates Facilitating Culturally Relevant Learning Among Local Youth**

**By**  
**Liza Greene**

**In Fulfillment of the Summer Levitt Research Fellowship**  
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**Under the Supervision of Professor Meredith Madden**  
**With Research Team Donna Le and Riley Nichols**

## **Introduction**

Education has traditionally operated on the value of educator knowledge and student ability to comprehend the delivery of that knowledge. As a result, education continues to drift further from its so-called platform as the ‘great equalizer’ -- driving the inequality gap and leaving many students behind. In the past few decades, social justice based education has gained recognition as a means to resist this digression among students. As opposed to focusing lesson plans upon a concrete curriculum, social justice based learning is student-centered and minimizes the potential for students to be left behind as an outcome of their positionality. This research studies social justice education as a critical instrument in anti-poverty work. The project specifically calls attention to how social justice can be implemented through literacy based lessons that engage students with hands-on activities as well as one another. Congruently, the project seeks to understand community partnerships by examining how experiential learning within college classrooms better connects undergraduate students to nearby towns and schools.

Based on previous social justice research, there is a rising commitment to make education more universally accessible and applicable to all students. By grounding lesson plans in methods more culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings 1995; Gay 2010) to student life, studies (O’Meara 2017) have found that students are more likely to have long-term positive outcomes. Literacy based activities, in particular, have proven to yield higher rates of classroom participation at all ages by providing a platform for student expression at a personal comfort level (Cairney & Breen 2017). Across all social justice research, there is a call for experiential learning as a channel for critical reflexivity and identity awareness raising (Akella 2010). Experiential learning has been deemed especially crucial for future educators as the demand for field experience (Coffey 2010) grows.

This research aims to further understand the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy and how it deviates from what we currently know about traditional education practices. This project looks to illuminate how educator-to-student relationships emerge when curriculum shifts to have a more student-centered foundation. Finally, this research hopes to further unravel the correlation between literacy-based activities and student expression as well as discover how these particular social justice based lessons contribute to the fight against poverty.

## **Background**

The field of 30 potential participants was drawn from two education courses at the small private college in central New York. The two courses each had a component on the syllabus which prompted the undergraduate students to partner with the nearby communities through conducting a social justice based group facilitation. The study analyzed undergraduates' involvement with experiential learning as they put their own understandings from the education courses into action in local schools, libraries and community organizations. The facilitation assignment required the undergraduates to create and facilitate social justice enriched activities through a literacy-based format.

The participants partnered with a total of 6 sites, all of which are geographically located in local communities near the college in central New York. Of the sites, two were high schools; high school A is situated in a small urban school district while High School B is located in a small rural school district. Another site, Early Education Center A, partners with a local elementary school and provides after school care to young children in the area. One group of participants facilitated an activity at a local library with a group of students ranging from middle to high school. Two sites are nonprofit organizations that provide after school programs; at

Afterschool Program A, the participants worked with high school students and at Afterschool Program B the participants worked with a range of students from elementary to high school age.

## **Literature Review**

### *Theoretical Framework*

This research utilizes a culturally relevant theoretical framework which draws on the theory and praxis of Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, Geneva Gay's (2010) *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, and research implementing both theorists' scholarship in *Culturally Relevant Education (CRE)* (Aronson & Laughter 2016). Contemporary research (Borrero 2016; Borrero 2017; Brown et al. 2019) highlights this practice as an instrumental tool in disrupting traditionally one-dimensional curriculums to further embody social justice and identity consciousness within the classroom. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy was originally outlined with 3 objectives: students must experience academic success beyond test scores, students must develop "cultural competence," and students must develop a critical consciousness to question and challenge the existing norms of society (Ladson-Billings 1995). Gay (2010) expanded upon this idea, coining her own theory, Culturally Responsive Teaching, where she focused on the educators role in making learning more relevant and effective for students. Culturally Relevant Education (Aronson & Laughter 2016) draws on both strands of educational research by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2010) to acknowledge the call for more evidence assessing the relationship of these theories with student outcomes.

Contemporary research applies all three theorists' scholarships on cultural relevance. One study (Borrero, Ziauddin & Ahn 2017) with a group of K-12 educators revealed the complexities with teaching in modern America; participants reflected upon their challenges with

implementing “culturally relevant” teaching styles while also meeting the demands to teach in a way that directly leads students to score high on exams. Another recent study (Brown, Boda, Lemmi & Monroe 2019) examines the implementation of CRE in STEM subjects specifically, discovering an overall lack of research regarding this intersection with subjects less centered around literature. However, the findings proved that CRE has potential to be applied to any field of education as all learning activities require relevant contexts for all students.

### ***Student Agency***

A culturally relevant pedagogy calls for lesson plans that empower individual students and foster a community environment through applicable methods. The study’s findings draw on different components of student agency: educators are responsible for both valuing student interests and unique identities while simultaneously providing a platform for self-expression and discovery.

A significant amount of contemporary research focuses on the former: the centering of students (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski 2011) with attention to individuality through relevant literacy based activities. In the past few decades, there has been a shift in demographics to bring more nontraditional and underserved students to educational institutions across age groups, prompting the call for “learner centered education” (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski 2011) and “democratic classrooms” (Cooper & Gause 2007) which acknowledge identity difference and student empowerment as a key aspect of social justice learning. Both student centered environments directly stem from Ladson-Billings (1995) concept of culturally relevant pedagogy in which she claims lesson plans must evolve to meet the demands of a constantly changing society. Additionally, there has also been a call for “Civic Learning Pedagogy” (O’Meara 2017),

illuminating how some agency over their learning experiences generates students that are better equipped with tools to critique the status quo and foster change within society.

Other contemporary studies (Bell et al. 2008; Dunkerly-Bean et al. 2017) focus specifically on the power of self-expression, active engagement, and occasional discomfort (Cairney & Breen 2017) through literacy based activities. *The Storytelling Project* (Bell, Roberts, Irani & Murphy 2008) created a curriculum in which students had the platform to share a series of stories through writing-- prompting students to consider what we gain as a society through listening to others and, contrastingly, what we might lose when we fail to hear marginalized voices. Another study examines student understanding through aesthetic experiences (Dunkerly-Bean, Bean & Summers 2017) finding children's literature, art and theater to be highly effective in young students' understanding of social justice issues.

### ***Educator & Student Relationships***

Studies on community partnerships within social justice education (Parsons 2005; Bentley & Hendricks 2018) reveal a main theme to be the significance of connection between educator and student and the process of trust building. This theme seems particularly fitting with Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching (2010) as she calls for educators to spend more time critically reflecting on their own positionalities in an effort to create a more just and unbiased classroom environment.

The participants in this study are occupying the role of the educator, but are also students themselves at a nearby undergraduate college. The study *Doing Poverty* (Steck, Engler, Ligon, Druen & Cosgrove 2011) specifically focused on this age group of undergraduates; they conducted a simulation to help the college students understand the realities and everyday experiences of living in poverty. Educators must partake in "culturally relevant caring" (Parsons

2005) in order to teach effectively and foster a classroom space where students feel understood and valued. Other studies (Taylor, Lorin, & Milosh 2019; Scherff 2012) offer resources for researchers and teachers to better embrace diversity in the classroom while cultivating critical literacy among students as a tool to challenge inequality and the status quo. One elementary school implemented a school-wide literacy project with a local university to examine the significance of community partnerships (Bentley & Hendricks 2018). Community partnerships emerged as a recurring discussion throughout the interviews as participants reflected upon their own interaction with culturally relevant education as they became more aware of their surrounding communities.

### ***Experiential Learning***

Research on experiential learning (Coffey 2010; Teixeira-Poit, Cameron & Schulman 2011) largely illuminates the benefits of experiential learning both from the participant perspective as well as the outcomes of the youth with whom they were working. One study (Akella 2012) directly applied David Kolb's experiential theory (1984) finding it essential that educators are both wary of their own as well as their student's positionality in order to adopt suitable lesson plans that fit their needs and independent goals. Another article: "*They taught me*": *The benefits of early community-based field experiences in teacher education*, expands upon this idea by outlining how theory performs differently across varying student populations; consequently it is necessary for educators to partake in field experience prior to teaching to develop skills that allow them create amenable lesson plans and adjust as needed to different student groups (Coffey 2010). From the student's standpoint, experiential learning is critical to the broadening of perspectives beyond the notions of right versus wrong (Teixeira-Poit, Cameron & Schulman 2011); there needs to be a shift in education that not only recognizes different



learning habits, but also values these contrasts and encourages students to dive deeper into culture relevant to them. Experiential learning creates a space for reflexivity (Tiessen 2018), as a result students leave the classroom better equipped to understand ethical issues and spark social change.

## **Methods**

Over the course of this research project, a variety of methods were used to gain the trust and contribution of participants while also achieving an abundance of in depth data to analyze. For the participant recruitment process, a total of 30 participants were recruited through email. This field of potential participants was composed of former undergraduate students at a small private college located in central New York. Of the 30 participants, 27 initially responded, for which documents were then electronically shared to conduct the email interview process. Electronic interviews were chosen as the data collection method for this project with the goal of collecting detailed interview responses from participants as well as an opportunity to ask follow-up questions. Of the 27 participants who initially responded, 22 participants entirely completed the interview process.

The research team utilized emic line by line coding to prepare the data for analysis. There was a second coder across all of the data sets to help eliminate the chance of bias. From the coding process, the research team combined individual code charts to determine the most recurring patterns across all participants and sites. The data was then examined to look for themes which the researchers then individually analyzed.

### *Researcher Positionality*

I identify as a white, middle to upper class female undergraduate student currently attending the same small private college as the research participants. I am interested in this research because I believe social justice education is critical to fostering more engaged and aware young adults who challenge the inequities of contemporary society. As a peer to the participants, my position appeared to help break down the initial barrier between researcher and participant. I shared personal connections with participants previous to the project which devised a foundation of trust and established a comfortable rapport. However, I also recognize how this identity could serve as a limitation to participants who hoped to retain greater anonymity throughout the process. Additionally, it is likely that my identities influenced my view when examining low-income spaces. As an upper to middle class, White individual, I recognize that my own experiences may be very different than those of the participants or the local students they worked with. It was crucial in this research to not allow my own positionality to skew the manner in which I analyzed the data. Our research group needed to acknowledge how our own positionalities may have affected how we understood and analyzed individuals' experiences.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The themes: *Valuing of Students' Interests and Identities with Relevant Literacy-Based Activities; Fostering Student Self-Expression Through Literacy-Based Activities; Significance of Connection and Trust Building Between Students and Undergraduates; Value of Experiential Learning*. The themes highlight the significance of educator-to-student relationships and student agency in social justice education as perceived by the research participants. The repetitive nature of these themes across all sites and interviews speaks to how influential cultural relevance is in fostering positive student outcomes across education.

### *Valuing of Students' Interests and Identities with Relevant Literacy-Based Activities*

The first theme in the research is valuing of students' interests and identities with relevant literacy-based activities. Across 22 participants, this theme showed up in 18 interview responses. The theme was noted across all sites, but was specifically prominent at two: Childhood Education Center A and High School A.

Based on the undergraduate participants' findings and regardless of varying lesson goals, all social justice education begins with first creating a bridge to connect experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. When beginning the process of creating a lesson, almost all of the participants recalled an initial goal to construct an activity that was both relevant and interesting to the students through expanding upon already familiar experiences. The participants felt it was critical to give the students agency by creating a collaborative learning environment where students not only took part in the activity, but actually contributed to the structuring of it.

While the undergraduate participants catered their activities to each individual site, all of their activities had similar missions to empower students and their ideas while stimulating engagement and community. For a younger age group, like that of Childhood Education Center A, the participants reflected upon their early realization that they would not only need to construct a social justice lesson, but one that was accessible at the early childhood educational level. The participants managed to incorporate social justice pedagogy by asking the students to reflect upon and share about their own communities in an effort to create an understanding of how a community can mean many things. The participants were able to foster an engaged classroom environment among students as young as second grade by entering the process with a mission that focused on student interest and experience. Participant A reflected upon their group's objective "to create a lesson plan that allowed for students to use creativity and their own

lived experiences.” Participant A felt this was an important goal because it reflected what they had learned in their college classroom about incorporating “students’ lived experiences in social justice education” in an attempt to center personal reflexivity within learning.

For older age groups, like those at High School A, High School B, Local Library A and After School Program A, the participants achieved similar student engagement in social justice education through a more direct approach. When structuring a lesson plan, the participants at High School A were focused on cultivating difficult conversations through a familiar and relevant manner; they settled upon music as a medium to discuss mental health issues among teens. Participant B recalled:

It was relevant for the students. We picked songs that they knew and listened to outside of school so for many of them it wasn’t the first time they were interacting with the lyrical text or watching the video. I do believe that students’ familiarity with the content allowed for fruitful conversation and greater overall engagement. I believe a core aspect of socially just education is validating the students’ culture in AND out of the classroom.

Through incorporating a relatable medium into their activity, the group of participants felt like they were able to alleviate some of the discomfort around mental health discourse and engage students in meaningful conversations.

This theme’s prevalence across participants’ interviews indicates how critical the centrality of student interest and lived experience is to creating culturally relevant pedagogy. Most traditional education is structured around a core curriculum which is usually facilitated in a one way transaction known as the *banking model of education* (Friere 1970) -- with a teacher delivering information and a student absorbing it. Social justice pedagogy challenges this narrative by creating a more mutualistic relationship between student and teacher; the teacher centers student experiences as a key component in comprehending theory and building community. The first step to this pedagogy is expressed in this specific theme: in order to foster

student engagement, the facilitator must value students' interests and cultures while making the learning process relevant to life beyond the classroom.

The pattern across age groups demonstrates how social justice has the potential to be incorporated in every phase of education. Despite the variety in sites and age groups among students, this theme was revealed as a crucial part in how the undergraduate participant groups approached their lesson plans and generated overarching outcome goals. The participants who facilitated an activity at Childhood Education Center A deconstructed the concept of "community" with the goal of expressing how community can mean something different to every individual. As opposed to explaining this to the young students in a top-down lecture format, the facilitators instead took a ground-up tactic, asking the individual students to reflect on their own perception of community. Upon sharing different ideas with their peers, the students were able to better understand how their perspective of community is not universal within the classroom (Cooper & Gause 2007). They were then able to immediately put this lesson into action (Ladson-Billings 1995) because it was tangible, applicable and culturally relevant within their lives.

The participants that taught at High School A took a similar ground-up approach by placing students' interest in music as the foundation of their lesson and then incorporating mental health through the familiar medium. Mental health is notoriously an uncomfortable conversation, yet by tackling it through a widely recognized method, the undergraduate participant group was able to relieve some tension and open up a productive conversation (Parsons 2005). When mental health is immersed into a familiar conversation as opposed to lectured upon by teachers, the environment becomes more open and welcoming (Gay 2010). Students not only initiated a

discussion where they could learn from one another, but they simultaneously strengthened the community within their classroom.

Both of these facilitations serve as prime examples for the potential influence social justice education can have within classrooms and its role specifically in fighting poverty. As students gain agency within their own education, they develop awareness and communicative skills which become tools to daily life and the widespread mission to establish a more just and equitable society (Ladson-Billings 1995).

### ***Fostering Student Self-Expression Through Literacy-Based Activities***

The second theme is fostering student self-expression through literacy-based activities. This theme showed up in all 22 participant interviews, however it was discussed with the most detail at two sites: High School A and the Local Library A -- with students ranging from middle school to high school ages.

When beginning the process of creating a social justice activity, all of the undergraduate participants were asked to make the activity *literacy-based* by including some form of hands on engagement -- whether it be art, writing, reading etc. In the interviews, the participants reflect upon their thought process of choosing an activity medium that would be fitting for the age group of students. For example, for younger aged students at sites like Childhood Education Center A, the participants facilitated an art-based activity where the students expressed their idea of community through drawing symbols on a large class mural. On the older end of the spectrum, high school students participated in more writing based activities where they had the opportunity to individually reflect upon their own experiences and identities.

At the Local Library A, the participants facilitated a literacy-based activity where they began the class period by reading a few vignettes from *The House on Mango Street* (Sandra

Cisneros), a book about the coming of age experience from a young girl growing up in Hispanic quarter of Chicago. The students were then asked to write their own vignettes highlighting their experiences; the undergraduate participants recalled first sharing their own personal vignettes with the hopes of creating a more connected and open classroom environment. Participant C reflected:

Writing is such an important tool for students to communicate to the outside world but can also be an invaluable tool in personal reflection and growth. I think our activity touched on both of these aspects as we illustrated how students can use writing to express themselves outward but we also asked students to write pretty personal pieces that they need not share. Giving students this space to express themselves through writing sets them up to be able to use that tool for the rest of their lives.

Participant C found that writing provided a platform for all students to express themselves in a way that was comfortable and within their own boundaries. Not only did the written stories behave as a vehicle of communication among students, but they also allowed students to reflect introspectively and discover more about their own positionality.

The participants at High School A also found writing and literacy-based activities to be influential in creating a space for self reflection and community building. Their activity began with students watching a TedTalk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie titled “The Danger of a Single Story;” Adichie demonstrates the importance of viewing all individuals as complex beings, not restricted to one identity. Then the students self-identified across categories of social identity through an identity wheel activity and participated in a “gallery walk” to observe their peers' completed wheels. Finally, all of the students were invited to journal about the process, their experience with self reflection and their understanding of their personal positionality among their peers. Participant D wrote about the journaling activity and literature-based activities in general:

Writing provides students with an outlet for open and honest self reflection and expression, where they are free to find their voice and speak their innermost thoughts

and feelings without fear of judgement. This act can be especially potent for students with marginalized identities who come from under-resourced communities, because they are all too often rendered voiceless by those in power who seek to oppress and marginalize them. The activities we facilitated were literacy based by design, because we understood that the students we were working with might not have ever experienced a safe space where they could freely express themselves before.

In order for social justice education to reach its full potential of creating socially aware and conscious humans (Ladson-Billings 1995), educators must center the learning within methods that are accessible and meet the comfort needs of all students. For education to be culturally relevant, it is essential that educators recognize the individual starting places of each of their students and facilitate a lesson that provides a platform for self expression on multiple levels -- both internally and externally (Teixeira-Poit, Cameron & Schulman 2011). Every student comes from a different background and culture; it is critical that not only each culture is respected and valued, but also that each student feels that their own story is worth sharing (Bell, Roberts, Irani & Murphy 2008). Both the participants who facilitated at Local Library A and High School A fostered cultural relevance within their activities. Participant C and her facilitation group built their lesson from a book that highlighted a story from a very different culture than most students in the local town experience everyday. By framing the lesson on the platform of a young girl's marginalized identity, the facilitating group resisted the dominant white narrative that has been at the center of literature within education for decades. Additionally, the opportunity for students to write their own vignettes without too many channeling guidelines allows students to explore their own culture while not framing it as above or below that of their peers (Dunkerly-Bean, Bean & Summers 2017).

Similarly, the participants facilitating at High School A, structured their activity around a video that expressed the danger of humans being funneled into one narrative. By watching this TedTalk and completing identity wheels, the students expressed their own backgrounds and



individualities while also becoming aware of the varying cultures among their peers (Dunkerly-Bean, Bean & Summers 2017). The journaling activity at the end tied together this overall culturally relevant activity by providing the means for students to privately reflect upon their experience with the activity as a tool for individual growth.

### ***Significance of Connection and Trust Building Between Students and Undergraduates***

The third theme in the research is the significance of connection and trust building between students and undergraduates. Across 22 participants, this theme showed up in 19 interview responses. The theme was relevant at all sites, but was particularly crucial to the experiences of participants facilitating at After School Programs A and B -- two nonprofits dedicated to serving low-income children.

Across every site, the participants express the significance of formulating connections with the local students, beyond a typical educator-student dynamic. Many of the participants recall a level of discomfort in entering an unfamiliar classroom setting; some participants shared how entering this new environment immediately made them more aware of their own positionality and how that is perceived differently at community sites rather than their college campus. Participant E, facilitating at After School Program A, stated:

I am a young, white woman who, at the time, attended a predominantly white private college. The students we worked with were young men of color. Historically, white women's voices have been valued above the voices of young men of color, often to the detriment to their livelihood.

However, the participants also note how this barrier subsided as they made a conscious effort to get to know the students and develop trust. Participant E said, "that was a moment where it felt like, although we were all drawing from very personal experiences, there was a sort of collective understanding in the room." Many of the participants who worked with high school aged students also acknowledged how their position as undergraduate students contributed to a

more friendly and casual setting as opposed to the common power dynamic that often sets in between students and their teachers. Participant B shared how their close proximity to the high school students served as a model for the achievement of goals:

I think that as a person that has been through it and survived, I need to serve testament to other students that if post-secondary education is a goal of theirs that it is attainable, but we can't do that unless we provide students with a socially just education.

The participants who facilitated at After School Program B seemed to reflect upon their time spent at the site with specific attention to their relationship with the students and how that grew overtime. After School Program B serves low income children in an urban local community; as undergraduate students at an elite predominately white institution, the participants were instantly conscious of their own positionality.

Participant F recalled:

So I think it's definitely important for me to see that as a white woman, I am someone that many students of color, particularly black students, may see as a threat or as someone they do not trust because of the white privilege I hold. So I think with that, at [After School Program B] it took a little more coaxing to gain students' trust and I had to kind of let the students do their own thing before I could fully interact with them.

Participant F continued to explain how this initial barrier broke down; as participant F shared more personal anecdotes with the students, they reflected that same vulnerability and trust. Participant G revealed how their time with the students at After School Program B made them more aware of how critical relationship building is within social justice education as a whole.

I learned about the relationship building aspect of social justice education. The participation and enjoyment the students experienced through this activity could not have been generated without the warmth and friendliness of the [undergraduate] student group. As the name suggests, social justice education has so much to do with societal relationships and, in particular, relationships between educators and students.

The theme of relationship between the participants and the local students was pertinent across almost all interviews -- which speaks to the power of connection and trust within social justice education.

Regardless of activity, the participants universally communicated how student vulnerability was essential to achieving a positive lesson outcome; the participants quickly realized that this unveiling would not be attainable without first creating a comfortable classroom environment established on the foundation of trust. Both participants E and F focused on this identity awareness raising moment as they confronted their own positionalities as white females reigning from an elite college and recognized how this would propose an inevitable barrier between them and the local students at their respective sites. In social justice education, it is critical to first acknowledge the identities of everyone in the room, including your own. This is often a step that is missed in traditional education, and because of that disregard, many classrooms struggle to develop trust between student-student relationships as well as student-teacher relationships. Both participant E's and F's interviews demonstrate how this step of self reflection is key to eventually nurturing a connection with the students, they both accept that this relationship may take time and give agency to the students to develop trust at their own pace.

Once this certain degree of trust was established within the classroom environment, the participants were actually able to develop a relationship with the students beyond their facilitator; their closer age proximity to the students allowed them to be viewed as friends and potentially a projection for the near future (Bentley & Hendricks 2018). In order to achieve education that is culturally relevant, it is imperative for students to feel valued and respected not only by their peers, but also by their teachers. By becoming vulnerable in front of the classroom, participant B was able to see reflections of her own identity in the students and used her story as a representation of possibility and hope. The age proximity between the participants and the CNY students was brought up throughout many interviews. As social justice education serves to uplift students by granting them some agency over their own education, it is important for them to learn from individuals who are not much older than themselves (Tiessen 2018). Learning can be so much more than this linear top-down transaction of knowledge that a traditional

teacher-to-student dynamic promotes. As educators transition to building their lesson plans on a culturally relevant foundation, they find there is not only much to teach, but also much to discover from their students (Akella 2012). This multidimensional relationship makes learning more of a collaborative experience which prompts students to feel more confident utilizing their newfound critical consciousness outside of the classroom.

### ***Value of Experiential Learning***

The fourth theme in the research is the value of experiential learning. This theme showed up in all 22 participants' interview responses with two main sub-themes breaking it down: *Critical Moments for the Undergraduate Participants* and the *Advantage of Implementing Theory in Practice*.

#### *Critical Moments for Undergraduate Participants.*

The undergraduate students expressed multiple critical moments where they were either confronted with moments that made them reflect upon their own positionality or unplanned moments when they had to adapt. Overall, they expressed that the opportunity to partake in field work was vital to their realization that learning is not always a clear-cut process. Some participants expressed physical challenges; for example, at Childhood Education Center A the participants entered the site expecting a classroom and ended up facilitating in a noisy gym. Other participants shared their challenges when the lesson didn't go entirely according to the plan. One of the participants teaching at the Local Library A reflected on an instance during their facilitation when a teacher interrupted with a problematic comment in front of the entire class. Participant C, recalls freezing in front of the class, knowing the comment was going directly against their goals for the lessons but also not knowing how to respond. Participant C reflected:

This moment has stuck with me because it felt like a real turning point in the lesson. I think that we could have ignored the comments and pretended like they were not a big deal but the moment has stuck with me because [College Professor] showed how to appropriately but forcefully reject harmful comments.

All four participants facilitating at Local Library A touched on this moment; they remembered it as a moment of shock and uncertainty, but also one that was critical to their understanding of social justice work. Although they were taking a course that prepared them to deliver a social justice based activity, no in-class lesson could have predicted a moment like this. Experiential learning does not train students to overcome every unexpected moment, however each moment they encounter prepares them to be more flexible and confident when challenges arrive. This moment was fundamental to the participant's understanding of culturally relevant teaching styles as they saw first-hand a teacher who was lacking positionality consciousness.

#### *Advantage of Implementing Theory in Practice*

Many of the participants reflected upon how experiential learning provided them with the opportunity to put the theory they learned in their college education courses into action. Despite their depth of knowledge and theory, the participants still expressed feelings of unease when encountering unexpected moments. One participant who facilitated at both After School Program B and High School A reflected upon how the opportunity to teach in a real classroom setting taught them something they could never learn from sitting through a college lecture. Participant D recalled:

I got to witness firsthand the positive impact that social justice education work can have on students with marginalized identities. I took the knowledge I gained in my coursework about the issues in our education system and supplemented it with invaluable real-life experience to support what I had learned. Though I may have understood the theory behind much of the social justice pedagogy I read and wrote about in my college classroom, I had the opportunity to put everything into practice at

both sites I visited, which cemented for me the value of educational initiatives driven by a mission of social justice.

Across all of the sites, many of the participants found that the experience of entering their community was essential to their understanding of social justice education as anti-poverty work. Although the college is less than a mile from the town and within 20 minutes of a larger city, students rarely have the opportunity to get off campus and take part in community partnership work. The participants found that their experience off campus really opened their eyes to how much they could learn from people whose lives may be different from their own. Theory, especially in education and sociology coursework, is essential to analyzing the functions of society (Coffey 2010). However, the application of that theory is truly where the understanding begins. Lecture pedagogy is a critical component of undergraduate education, yet its broad delivery format also has a large potential to lack cultural relevance. This study, along with other research (Coffey 2010; Akella 2012), proves that education is most powerful when it combines theoretical lecture and experiential pedagogies. The opportunity for undergraduate students to put new knowledge into action in their local communities is largely influential in grasping the intersection of theory and the real world.

## **Conclusion**

If everyone has a right to livelihood, then everyone should concurrently be guaranteed a right to high-quality education. Research, both past (Ladson-Billings 1995; Gay 2010) and present (Taylor, Lorin, & Milosh 2019) has built upon this notion, believing education alone to be the minimum, and one that may be fulfilled by traditional education. Yet in order for one to truly acquire an expansive and profitable education, the process must cater to the individual needs of students and become culturally relevant within the context of each of their lives. As

discussed in the book *Higher Education and Democracy: Essays on Service-Learning and Civic Engagement* (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski 2011), it is just as critical to recognize that this context is ever changing; shifts in demographics continue to bring more nontraditional students to classrooms each school year, resulting in a call for learner-centered education. Pedagogy must evolve to meet society's evolving needs, fostering an increase of student agency in the classroom and likewise a change to create more dynamic educator-student relationships.

This research plunged into a specified area of social justice education, observing how this type of education has particularly positive outcomes when executed through literacy based activities. Overall, the findings disclosed that the most effective forms of education are culturally relevant to the students. Students learn best when material is taught through a familiar medium that is applicable outside of the classroom. Many patterns emerged through analyzing the data, yet four themes were most reoccurring across all of the sites and nearly all of the participants. These themes reveal student-centered learning as a critical component to social justice education. Students' identities and interests should be largely valued when creating a lesson plan and a literacy structured activity appears to be a powerful vehicle in fostering self expression. Trust building and connections between educators and students is largely significant in creating a classroom community that encourages this self expression and participation. As learning shifts to become more student centered, the participants found they also had to adapt and become flexible to students' needs and individual paces.

While the findings of this research alone reveal the productive potential of social justice education, there are still many routes to be further explored in future projects. The undergraduate research participants reflected constructively about their experience facilitating a lesson plan at a nearby site, yet almost all of the participants expressed that time felt limited and proposed an

extension for this type of field learning in projects to come. This project opens a door to further examine the significance of community partnerships between colleges and universities with local towns and schools. Future research has the potential to illuminate how these partnerships serve as a positive mode of learning for both undergraduate students and local community members. Additionally, while this project contributed to the call for more evidence applying Ladson-Billings' and Gay's theories to educational settings (Aronson & Laughter 2016), there is still ample opportunity for future research to further confirm the relationship between culturally relevant social justice education with positive student outcomes.

Social justice education has an overwhelming potential to generate positive outcomes among both educators and students. By adapting a learning process which typically operates around a core curriculum to instead center students, the research revealed a more collaborative and community oriented classroom composed of aware and active students. This study establishes social justice education as an instrumental element to the upbringing of all individuals. The findings demonstrate student growth in developing identity consciousness along with the ability to critique the status quo with aspirations of creating a more just and equitable society.



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