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On Becoming Change Agents in Education through Service-Learning and Empowerment

Review by Valerie Kinloch, The Ohio State University

Vera L. Stenhouse, Olga S. Jarrett, Rhina M. Fernandes Williams, and E. Namist Chilungu, *In the Service of Learning and Empowerment: Service-Learning, Critical Pedagogy, and the Problem-Solution Project*. IAP-Information Age Publishing: Charlotte, NC, 2014, 276 pages. ISBN 978-1-62396-544-0. Paperback.

The authors of *In the Service of Learning and Empowerment: Service-Learning, Critical Pedagogy, and the Problem-Solution Project* beautifully present the results of their long-term, collaborative teaching and research project on service learning, critical pedagogy, and democratic practice. They focus their attention on the ways teacher educators, in-service teachers, and pre-service teacher education candidates can use an empowering pedagogy, referred to as the “Problem-Solution Project,” to democratically engage in teaching and learning with students, even under some of the most challenging of situations (e.g., scripted curricula, rote forms of learning, lack of teacher and student autonomy inside classrooms, the increasing top down focus on standardized testing, non-participatory learning environments, etc.). To address the importance of an empowering pedagogy, they explicitly discuss lessons learned from a required assignment for teacher education candidates in the Urban Accelerated Certification and Master’s Program (UACM) at Georgia State University. The lessons highlighted throughout this book reveal the value of recognizing the need to empower “teachers and their students who are often recipients of services but who are seldom encouraged to take action” (p. xix).

The book is organized into five parts. “Fostering Empowerment through Service-Learning, Critical Pedagogy, Constructivism and the Problem-Solution Project” is the title of Part I. It comprises one chapter that introduces readers to the historical and philosophical tenets of the work, be-

ginning with a brief discussion of the distinctions between traditional and empowering pedagogy. To begin, the authors cite critical pedagogue Ira Shor (*Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*, 1992) who asserts: “The difference between empowering and traditional pedagogy has to do with the positive or negative feelings students can develop for the learning process” (p. 23). Shor’s sentiments can be felt throughout the first section of the book, particularly in relation to how the authors detail and describe the overall purpose of the Problem-Solution Project (PSP). That is, they insist that PSP advocates for teachers and students to be empowered inside and outside schools and for them to become involved in service initiatives that critically and intentionally promote social change and social activism. Thus, the authors focus on an empowering pedagogy and not a traditional pedagogy in relation to service learning, which allows them to make the case for why the intersection of service learning, critical pedagogy, and constructivism is significant to teaching and learning. In fact, their utilization of the definition of service learning from the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse point to their understanding of service learning as a process that both “enhances the community through the service provided” as well makes available “powerful learning consequences for the students or others participating in providing a service” (p. 4; see also see the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse). Additionally, their uptake of critical pedagogy is grounded in the need to provide opportunities for people to collective-

ly participate in action (e.g., sociopolitical and educative) that challenges the status quo and produces emancipatory results for improving the overall nature of our living conditions and learning contexts. Finally, their view of constructivism recognizes the significance of involving students in meaningful hands-on learning and collaborative problem-solving projects that their teachers help facilitate” (p. 13). In other words, a constructivist approach to service-learning values experiential learning and engagement, and acknowledges the importance of teachers and students collaborating with each other to produce new and extended forms of knowledge. Taken together, service learning, critical pedagogy, and constructivism are foundational to how and why PSP is an empowering pedagogy that is multidisciplinary, generative, and attentive to issues of power and resistance in education.

Part II, “The Problem-Solution Project Assignment with Inservice Teachers and Their Pre-K to 5th Grade Students,” contains three chapters. In Chapter 2, the authors provide a macro view of PSP with new in-service teachers working in PK–5 classes. They share specific information about the pedagogy/assignment, how it was implemented inside classrooms, and examples of how PSP led to teacher and student empowerment. As teachers were introduced to PSP, they gained strategies for aligning it with curricular requirements and for introducing it to their own students. They brainstormed with students, created project webs, conducted pre-assessment surveys, supported students in making decisions about their projects, and determined ways to integrate curriculum standards with project goals/action. In Chapter 3, the authors build on the previous chapter’s framing of PSP to discuss how one of the co-authors (E. Namisi Chilungu) implemented PSP shortly after being hired into the teacher education program. Chilungu openly admits to experiencing initial resistances from teacher education candidates and to feeling disempowered since she had no prior experience working with PSP. Overtime, she began to see the impact of PSP for teachers and their students, which led her to write, “The more I saw the impact...the more I valued the project and imagined ways I would continue to adapt it for my own instruction” (p. 50). Chilungu’s discussion of the value of PSP leads nicely into Chapter 4. There, another co-author (Rhina M. Fernandes Williams) reflects on lessons learned from teaching elementary-aged students and from implementing PSP with veteran teachers. Williams describes how teachers were encouraged to try on PSB and to determine ways to align it with content area standards. In so doing, Williams and the teachers came to realize that “within the confining context of schools in to-

day’s society, [PSP] is one way in which teachers can reclaim a piece of themselves and teach in the way they imagined they would” (p. 54).

“Voices of Inservice Teachers Engaged in Problem-Solution Projects with PreK-5 Grade Students” is the title of Part III, which contains eleven chapters. Each chapter opens with a reflective story on PSP from a participating teacher. In Chapter 5, a new pre-K teacher, Aliya Jafri, writes about her hesitation to implement PSP with much younger students who were still gaining English skills, and a new kindergarten teacher, Danny Johnson, describes his initial struggles with helping students understand definitions of “problems” and “solutions.” Overtime, Jafri and Johnson, in addition to other teachers featured throughout the book, realized that their students were not too young to become change agents in their schools and local communities. Similarly, in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, the authors share scenarios on PSB and using a language of possibility and empowerment when working with young students. From veteran teacher Brooke Eppinga’s PSP with kindergarteners on preventing excessive amounts of sun from shining into their classroom (see Chapter 6), to new teacher Melissa (Gerry) London’s project with first graders to acquire new tables for the school’s courtyard area (see Chapter 7), and new teacher Crystal Perry’s project with fifth graders on securing enough chapter books for students that met their reading interests and levels (see Chapter 8), the examples of PSP demonstrate the valuable role of listening to and working with students to identify problems and implement solutions in ways that connect service to learning. The remaining chapters in this section, Chapters 9 through 15, offer specific examples of PSP within school and community contexts, with special attention placed on working with students to better understand local and global concerns, as well as direct and indirect forms of service learning. Collectively, these chapters emphasize the importance of establishing relationships in communities and collaborating with community groups to affect positive, small- and large-scale social change. What strengthens these chapters is the inclusion of recommendations for action for administrators, teachers’ perspectives on PSP and how to connect it to content area standards, and strategies for beginning with but moving beyond curricular requirements in order to center PSP in teaching and learning.

There are three chapters that comprise Part IV, which is titled “The Preservice Teacher Cohort Experience.” In this section, the authors shift their focus from in-service teachers to pre-service teachers enrolled in the very first year of the UACM program. Chapter 16 opens with a vignette from one of

the co-authors (Vera Stenhouse) that chronicles some of her early attempts to implement PSP as a teacher educator. She explains why it is necessary for pre-service teachers to become so inspired in their practice that they are willing “to take action or [be] given opportunities to explore the demands of being an empowered educator themselves” (p. 167). Her vignette leads into a more detailed description of the university course on culture, education, and community that pre-service teachers were required to take, and highlights examples of projects that emerged from the course across each of the cohorts. In Chapter 17, the authors explore particular outcomes that resulted from the course, and how the utilization of service learning and critical pedagogy points to the need for an empowering pedagogy in pre-service teacher education programs. While there were some observable moments of hesitation—“the teachers observed that elementary students were more facile in engaging the process than they were themselves as a cohort” (p. 202)—there were other moments of comfort and confidence with the process, where “the teachers seem confident and willing to share power with the children” (p. 203). Finally, in Chapter 18, two of the authors (Vera Stenhouse and Olga S. Jarrett) engage in a dialogue about the challenges they faced with teaching and implementing PSP, and they reflect on how their practice transformed overtime. They consider Ira Shor’s argument for educational empowerment and its possibilities for transforming the practice of teaching and learning for students, pre- and in-service teachers, and teacher educators.

In Part V, “The Problem-Solution Project and an Empowering Education: Implications,” the authors present two closing chapters on the larger implications of PSP for practice and policy. In Chapter 19, they encourage pre- and in-service teachers, teacher educators, and staff who work in teacher education programs to use PSP. To do so, they highlight the promise of Shor’s eleven principles for empowering education: problem posing, participatory, situated, multicultural, dialogic, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, activist, affective, and desocialization. Their argument in this chapter is clear: “However, if there are no risk takers who initiate change, then an inequitable status quo remains unchallenged and unchanged... [empowerment] is more a function of teachers’ abilities to create opportunities to present experiences that are situated and dialogic that can lead to the activism necessary in a Problem-Solution Proj-

ect” (p. 227). This sentiment extends into the final chapter, Chapter 20, in which they argue that PSP is empowering, relational, and dialogic, especially during these difficult times of budget cuts and the negative, undermining narratives of teachers that circulate throughout mass media. Some of their recommendations for practice and policy include the following: 1) Placing increased attention on sociopolitical concerns inside our classrooms in ways that lead to teacher and student empowerment; 2) engaging in justice-oriented work that is grounded in social action; 3) encouraging open dialogue among different groups of people; and 4) proposing educational policies that promote student engagement in the learning process, and that value teacher and student autonomy, power, choice, and voice.

Overall, this book provides a rich, detailed, and inspiring assessment of the intersections among service learning, critical pedagogy, and constructivism in relation to the Problem-Solution Project. The authors take great care with including a variety of perspectives from in-service teacher education candidates, pre-service teachers, students, and from their own perspectives as teacher educators. The book should be placed within a larger trajectory that includes important scholarship by John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks. In fact, this is one of those books that we can read, learn from, and return to time and again if we seek to remain committed to engaging in service-learning work, fostering an empowering pedagogy, and addressing issues of power in critical, insightful, and purposeful ways. As Ji Park, a fourth grade teacher writes, “One of my students shared how she thought only adults could do something for others. But, discussing the processes of developing and implementing the project, my students referred to themselves as change agents” (p. 233). And this is one of the main goals of the book—to promote an empowering pedagogy and to encourage students (and teachers) to become change agents.