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Afterword

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One only has to visit the websites of K-12 school districts and institutions of higher education to see that most of their mission statements mention a commitment to innovation and a desire to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills in their students—qualities that define the “21st century learner.” The authors of this edited volume have presented a strong case for service learning as a tool for the development of 21st century learners. Through theory, research, and the description of real-life programs, their chapters support the assertion that service learning “challenges our youth to innovate, think critically, and solve problems—the very skills the workplace demands and adult life requires” (Corporation for National and Community Service 2015, para. 4).

So where do early childhood educators go from here? It’s evident many have a firm grasp of the mutual benefits of service learning but do they really understand the bigger picture? Many of the service-learning programs described in this book were developed, primarily, to better prepare pre-service teachers for the challenges they face in today’s classrooms including class size, ever-changing technology, diversity, high-stakes testing, parental involvement (or the lack thereof), and shrinking budgets, to name a few. Just as educators have broadened their focus from teaching strictly content knowledge to teaching learning and innovation skills; information, media, and technology skills; and life and career skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning 2015), early childhood educators who employ service learning as pedagogy should consider broadening their focus from traditional service learning to critical service learning. Critical service learning, defined by Mitchell (2008) as an approach to community service learning with a social justice aim, “encourage(s) students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (p. 51).

Teaching for social justice means “recognizing oppression in its multiple forms, and then taking action in the classroom to interrupt the cycles of oppression” (Russo 2004, para. 6). Schools that are dedicated to teaching for social justice develop capable students who are able to reach their educational goals while fighting for
their own rights and the rights of others (Valadez and Mirce 2015). Critical service learning is a tool teachers can use to increase student achievement as well as student involvement in social justice issues. Students and teachers engaged in critical service learning “use critical examination of themselves, others, institutions and events to find patterns of inequality, bigotry or discrimination, then explore possible solutions to the problems they’ve identified” (Blake 2015, para. 2).

One great example of critical service learning was recently presented to me in my role as a reviewer for Early Childhood Education Journal. In an article I was asked to review, Banners for Books: Mighty-hearted Kindergartners Take Action through Arts-based Service Learning (Montgomery et al. 2015), the authors argue that young children are not only capable of understanding injustice in the world but eager to do something about it. Their study followed 19 kindergarten students who used art to raise awareness about the human right to education. The kindergarten teacher initially wrote to education faculty from the University of Northern Iowa asking for their help:

I wanted to let you know that I would really like to get involved in a service-learning project with my kindergarten students through a possible partnership with Art for El Salvador. I know the impact of my 19 students would not be huge, but I think the experience is too valuable to ignore in their education. We may be little but our hearts are mighty! (Personal Communication, January 9, 2015, cited in Montgomery et al. 2015)

Shortly after receiving this email, three education faculty met with the kindergarten teacher and began planning a “Banners for Books” project. This project began with 5 months of social studies instruction using children’s literature that centered around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26—The Right to Education (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948). According to Montgomery et al. (2015):

Children’s literature about children’s rights became the catalyst for critical conversations, written responses, and drawings inspiring action. Students worked to address injustice by screen printing images they drew about their beliefs regarding a child’s right to education on fabric banners to raise awareness about school inequity. These banners were then displayed in their school and in the partner school [in El Salvador].

Throughout the “Banners for Books” project, researchers gathered data from students’ discussions, writings, illustrations, and interviews. They came to the conclusion that kindergarten students are able to recognize their own educational rights and privileges and demonstrate care and empathy for the rights of children around the world. Like the authors of Chapter 14 of this book, the “Banners for Books” researchers found that critical service-learning projects (or problem-solution projects, as Starks et al. describe them) increase student engagement, develop students’ social and emotional skills, and empower both students and teachers.

To prepare students for work on a critical service-learning project, Blake (2015) suggests that teachers:

1. add the philosophy of social justice to the classroom
2. foster a classroom community of conscience
3. help students see each other as co-learners rather than adversaries
4. include diverse experiences and backgrounds in classroom materials
5. have classroom discussions that help students critically engage with issues that affect them

Adding a philosophy of social justice in the classroom means building a classroom environment where students feel free to express their ideas, beliefs, and concerns. Teachers foster a community of conscience by developing rules of conduct for classroom behavior and discussions. In addition, they can help students see each other as co-learners by teaching them that differences of opinion can lead to understanding and differences in backgrounds open our minds and hearts to new people and new experiences. When teachers create these kinds of opportunities in their classrooms, they can begin to help students tackle social justice issues that affect them and those they care about through critical service learning.

Service-learning pedagogy, whether traditional or critical, provides early childhood students and teachers with the opportunity to engage with the community in a “real-world” context. The result is a “deeper commitment to communities, better preparation for careers, improved conflict management, and greater understanding of community problems” (Deans 2000, p. 4). Early childhood educators who are currently employing service-learning pedagogy should consider moving to a critical approach that encourages students to examine themselves and their value systems in relation to social justice issues around the world. By doing so, “classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality” (Au et al. 2015, para. 2). The utilization of critical service learning promises to foster these ideal classrooms and create a new kind of “21st learner”—one who cannot only innovate, think critically, and problem solve, but use these skills to improve quality of life for themselves and others.

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References


