

Changes in Students' Social Justice
and Racial Attitudes in an
Undergraduate Child Psychology
Service-Learning Course

L. Mickey Fenzel, Ph.D.
Loyola University Maryland
lfenzel@loyola.edu

Rebecca J. Dean
Loyola University Maryland
rdean@loyola.edu

Abstract

This study examines changes in students' perceptions of the existence of White privilege and racism and their personal social justice commitment during the course of a semester. Participants included 93 Caucasian undergraduates enrolled in a course in child development that had a required service-learning component. Outcomes are examined using pencil-and-paper pre- and post-test assessments and web-based end-of-course evaluations. Results showed consistent gains in students' perceptions of the importance that society takes steps to care for persons who are disadvantaged and that society takes greater action to improve the education of urban children placed at risk. Pre- to post-test gains in students' awareness of White privilege and the existence of racism and their commitment to social justice were also noted. Findings are discussed in light of the kinds of reflection activities in which students participated during and outside of class time.

Teacher education programs continue to be challenged by the task of preparing teacher candidates, most of whom are white, female, and middle class for careers in increasingly racially and culturally diverse schools and classrooms. The task is often made more difficult by the lack of awareness that many White students have of their own status and privilege, together with the resistance they have to examining these issues (Locke, 2005; Mueller & O'Connor, 2007). However, in order to become culturally competent and effective educators of children who are members of underserved or oppressed groups, middle-class and upper middle-class White teacher candidates must have an understanding of their privileged status and the social justice issues that accompany it (Allen & Rosatto, 2009).

A possible means of expanding student awareness is to include issues of bias, discrimination, power, and White privilege as topics for critical examination in their pre-service programs. As is suggested by critical race theory, students who are candidates for the teaching profession must be challenged to view the world from the lens of cultures other than their own to examine critically what Delpit (1995/2006) has termed the *culture of power* and assumptions about White as normative (Macintosh, 1998).

Service-learning in teacher education programs possesses the potential for educating candidates and engaging them in critical discussions about issues of power and privilege and how these issues play out in schools. However, for service-learning to be effective in changing candidates' dispositions and practices, service-learning placements and activities must provide the grist for student

discourse about how society, and schools in particular, function to maintain social inequality. As researchers (Conner, 2010; Delpit, 2006) have pointed out, White teacher candidates often harbor deficiency views of urban children of color that affect their teaching practices.

The ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), that posits ever-widening layers of influence on the development of children, provides a valuable framework for students' understanding of environmental influences on the development of urban children placed at risk. This framework considers the influences of the community (mesosystem and exosystem) and government (macrosystem) and the ways in which macrosystem structures deny opportunities to people who are marginalized. Through service-learning, candidates become part of the microsystem and mesosystem of one child or a few children with whom they become acquainted through tutoring or homework assistance. This experience moves the classroom discourse beyond the theoretical into the personal and tangible and must be well designed and implemented in order to change any racist attitudes and deficiency beliefs teacher candidates may have about disadvantaged children.

The social justice perspective contained in the Jesuit tradition of the university in which this present study takes place informs the service-learning approach utilized. This perspective emphasizes the education of "the whole person of solidarity for the real world," that is learned through "contact" rather than through "concepts" alone (Kolvenbach, 2000). In addition, the conceptual framework of the teacher

education program emphasizes the importance of students developing a social justice understanding as it relates to social structures and the equal treatment of all individuals. This perspective reflects the contention made by Cochran-Smith (2004) that teacher education needs to be conceptualized as both a learning problem and a political problem with an emphasis on issues of equal access and social justice in education. Through contact provided by service-learning and inquiry, pre-service teachers can be challenged to examine critically issues of racism, unequal access, and unearned privilege in education (Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In addition, constructivist theory emphasizing participant construction of knowledge and understanding of urban educational challenges supports the use of meaningful reflection activities in understanding of the relation of service-learning to course content (Astin et al., 2000; Bringle, 2003; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Hecht, 2003).

Several studies and reviews (e.g., Buchanan, Correia, & Bleicher, 2010; Conner, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Wasserman, 2009) have documented the positive effects that participating in service-learning in teacher education programs has on university students, although most of the research is qualitative in nature. Only a few quantitative studies (e.g., Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988) have been able to document changes in social and personal justice-related attitudes as a result of participation in community service or service-learning across disciplines. For example, Hamilton and Fenzel found a significant gain in attitudes in social and personal responsibility in a study of high school students' participation in community

service activities over the course of several months.

With respect to cultural and racial attitudes, research (Spanierman, Neville, Liao, Hammer, & Wang, 2008) has shown that White college students who take classes that address issues of race and ethnicity and interact with persons of other racial and ethnic backgrounds tend to demonstrate a greater awareness of racial inequality in society. Also, this and other research (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000) has indicated a link between color-blind racial attitudes and racial intolerance and other negative attitudes related to race, ethnicity, and gender among White students. The present study makes use of a validated measure of color-blind racial attitudes to assess change in candidates' racial attitudes over the course of a semester in which they engaged in service-learning in a course on child and adolescent development.

The present study puts particular emphasis on examining changes in social justice and color-blind racial attitudes using quantitative measures, an approach that is sorely absent in research on the effects of service-learning participation on college student attitude change. In addition to pre- and post-test measures, this study makes use of additional quantitative and qualitative data from surveys administered at the end of the course that provide additional evidence of the effects of participating in service-learning in the course on students' attitudes related to social justice.

The Child and Adolescent Development Course, ED 202

This course in child and adolescent development, required of all undergraduate majors in elementary education and taken as an elective by some

students in other majors, requires students to participate in a weekly service-learning activity in a high-poverty, high-minority urban parochial or charter school. Students are informed at the start of the semester about the nature of the service-learning component of the course and are directed to select and arrange a service-learning placement that fits into their schedules. At the school of their choosing, students work with children as tutors, classroom assistants, or homework helpers for approximately 2 hours per week or a total of 16 to 20 hours during the semester.

Once every two weeks during class meetings, students discuss the application of course content on development, racism, privilege, and equality of access to what they are learning from their work with children. Discussions address social issues informed by their urban school experiences from the social justice perspective of Jesuit education that asks the individual to think critically about and take action to support the rights and human development of others, especially those who are disadvantaged and underserved (Kolvenbach, 2000; Society of Jesus, n.d.). Students in the course are encouraged to document their observations and reactions to service experiences and are required to submit two essays in which they examine problems related to urban education and human development suggested by their service experiences.

Another course activity that supports the development of students' understanding of injustices that affect the education of urban children, especially urban children of color, is a class presentation. Working in teams of two or three, students investigate an issue of concern related to child development and education and present the topic to the

class, using Powerpoint and at least one activity that involves the class. Topics include NativityMiguel schools (urban alternative middle schools), effective teaching of urban students, perspectives on social justice in education, and the work of Beverly Tatum (2003) and Lisa Delpit (1995/2006). Together, these activities provide opportunities for reflection that are essential for a meaningful service-learning experience that can lead to attitude change.

Method

Participants

All participants were enrolled in an undergraduate course in Child and Adolescent Development in one of six 14-week semesters between the fall of 2007 and spring of 2010 at a comprehensive Catholic university in a major East Coast metropolitan area. For students in the class who were elementary education majors, their service-learning placement was the second one in which they interacted with children in grades 1 through 8 in an urban public or parochial school. With respect to the present study, participants spent a mean of 17.2 hours in their urban school placement working with individual or small groups of children, nearly all of whom were children of color who qualified for the federal free and reduced meal program.

Participants completed two types of surveys. For the pre- and post-test surveys conducted by the course instructor, participants include 93 students, 94% of whom were women between the ages of 18 and 22 (mean age 19.6) and 66% of whom were first- or second-year students, who self-identified as Caucasian or white. In addition, 89% of participants majored in elementary education. Twelve students who did not complete both pre- and post-

test administration of the surveys were not included in the analyses. For the web-based survey administered by the university's community service office at the end of the semester, responses were tallied from 92 students, but no demographic data were available. Of the 105 students enrolled in the six semesters of the course, 12 (11%) self-identified as African American, Hispanic, Arab American, or Asian American. The percentage of White students who completed this survey could not be determined.

The author, a White male, served as the instructor for all sections of the course included in this study. There are no other sections of the course offered at the university.

Measures

The end-of-course assessment conducted by the community service office was administered to students online through the Blackboard site for the course. Responses, without any individual identifiers, were then forwarded to the course instructor in an electronic spreadsheet format. Although the online survey contained several questions that provided feedback to the community service office on the identity of the service site and the kinds of activities in which the student participated, only those items that addressed the objectives of this study are reported here. These items include students' perceptions of the extent to which, as a result of the service course, their attitudes changed with respect to the importance of: (a) meeting the needs of persons who are disadvantaged, and (b) improving the education of urban children placed at risk. Participants also rated the extent to which their understanding improved with respect to the educational needs of children placed at risk. Students

responded to these items on a 3- or 4-point Likert-type scale. In addition, an open-response item asked respondents to describe ways in which their “understanding of Jesuit values of social justice changed” as a result of their service experience in the course?

Students also completed the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS, Neville et al., 2000) during the second meeting (pretest) and last meeting (posttest) of the class. The 20-item CoBRAS assesses participants’ attitudes with respect to: Racial Privilege, or blindness to the “existence of White privilege” (p. 63, 7 items); Institutional Discrimination, or the limited awareness of “institutional forms of racial discrimination and exclusion” (p. 63, 7 items); and Blatant Racial Issues, or the limited awareness of “general, pervasive racial discrimination” (p. 63, 6 items). Participants indicate on a 6-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they disagree or agree with each of the items. Reliability analyses conducted on each of these three subscales with the sample for this study led to the elimination of some items from the CoBRAS and resulted in the following subscale structure: Racial Privilege, 7 items, $\alpha=.75$; Institutional Discrimination, 6 items, $\alpha=.60$; Blatant Racial Issues, 4 items, $\alpha=.74$.

Along with the CoBRAS, participants also completed a scale that assessed their social justice attitudes. Based on the social justice subscale of the Spiritual Involvement Scale (Fenzel, 2002), this 8-item scale has an alpha reliability of .72. Fenzel (2002), who provided additional reliability and validity for the original scale, constructed the scale from previous work on attitudes toward personal responsibility for addressing social injustice in society, as well as work that viewed such

responsibility as an aspect of personal spirituality. Spiritual writing (e.g., Kolvenbach, 2000; Society of Jesus, n.d.) views social justice as an aspect of spiritual practice. Respondents indicate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they disagree or agree with such statements as: *I have a responsibility to help alleviate poverty*, and *I try to change things that are unjust in the world*.

Procedures

At the first class meeting of the semester, the instructor explained the required service-learning component of the course that involves between 16 and 20 hours of once-a-week service during the semester in one of three urban school placements. The author/instructor worked with the university’s community service office to select sites that offered after-school tutoring and homework opportunities for volunteers. Two of the sites are small religiously-affiliated high-poverty middle schools and the third site is a community after-school program. Students arrange for their own transportation and set their own schedules.

During the semester, students submitted two essays that addressed a problem associated with urban education and child development and took part in six classroom reflection-discussion activities designed to address issues of institutional racism, White privilege, effects of poverty, and roles that teachers and others can play in improving urban schooling and child development. The course syllabus stated:

... the purposes of the service-learning are to better understand theories and principles of child and adolescent development, especially as they apply to urban children placed at-risk, and to provide a

context for reflecting on issues related to meeting the developmental and educational needs of these children given the Jesuit values placed on social justice (i.e., access to effective education, the need to address poverty and racism).

With respect to the required essays, the syllabus read:

The first [essay] (after approximately 4 service visits; 2 pages in length) should briefly describe the nature of the service experience and focus on what the student has learned with respect to material covered in the course and issues related to educational justice or educational access. In the second essay (2-3 pages in length), students must provide a more critical analysis of the education children in the service site are obtaining and how their developmental needs are being addressed and met.

Results

Web-based Surveys

Results of surveys administered by the university's community service office showed strong effects with respect to indicators of attitudes toward social justice. For example:

- 89% indicated that they felt it was "very important," and 11% "somewhat important," that society "take steps to care for persons who are disadvantaged."
- 73% indicated that their perceived importance that society care for disadvantaged *improved* as a result of the service-learning experience;

- 74% indicated improved understanding of the "Jesuit value of social justice;"
- 100% indicated that the combination of service-learning and course content contributed at least somewhat (92% indicated more than somewhat) to their "understanding of the educational needs of urban children considered at risk."
- 91% indicated that they felt it was "extremely important" that society take "greater action to improve the education of urban children considered at risk because of economic poverty;"
- 86% indicated gains in perceived importance of society taking greater action to improve the education of urban children at risk. Student comments typed into the web-based surveys supported these findings. A sample of student comments include:

Service learning just made me want to teach in places where teachers are scarce and where the needs of children are in greater demand.

I now believe I am called to teach in an urban school setting.

I realize that being men and women for others is an important goal of the Jesuit mission in education. It is important to experience conditions in the inner city and see how these kids are living to realize what needs to be done as members of the College community.

I have become more aware of inner city kids and my new goal is to

help them in any way I can. The attitude I had about black kids has changed. They are very hard working.

My view of the Jesuit mission is being one for others. Using what we know to help others is extremely important. I think my views have stayed the same but I have always felt social justice is an important issue to address.

Pre-Post Survey Results

Results showed significant pre-to-post changes in the attitudes of Caucasian students in the course on two of the three subscales of the CoBRAS. Results, summarized in Table 1, showed that

students became less blind to the “existence of White privilege” and demonstrated greater awareness of “general, pervasive racial discrimination.” Students’ limited awareness of “institutional forms of racial discrimination and exclusion” also declined, but the difference was not significant at the .05 level.

In addition, on an 8-item scale that assessed their attitudes toward their personal responsibility to work for social justice (not related specifically to issues of race), participants showed significant gains during the course of the semester. This finding is also shown in Table 1.

In sum, multiple measures of

Table 1

Results of Correlated t Tests for CoBRAS Subscales and Perceived Personal Social Justice Responsibility (N = 93)

Scale	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	t	d
<i>Lack of Awareness of White Privilege</i>				
	4.07 (.72)	3.77 (.72)	4.50***	.94
<i>Lack of Awareness of Institutional Racism</i>				
	3.30 (.76)	3.19 (.72)	1.69+	.35
<i>Lack of Awareness of Blatant Racial Issues</i>				
	2.53 (.86)	2.13 (.85)	5.12***	1.07
<i>Personal Social Justice Responsibility</i>				
	3.11 (.44)	3.26 (.38)	- 4.18***	.88

+ $p < .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed)

student perceptions showed gains in their understanding of social justice and color-blind racial issues as well as gains in their perceived personal responsibility to work for social justice. For some students, this social justice commitment was demonstrated in their commitment to teach underserved children in urban schools.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine changes in undergraduate students' attitudes with respect to social justice and racism during the course of a semester in which they participated in a service-learning course in child and adolescent development. Results showed significant positive changes in participants' perceptions with respect to the pervasiveness of racial discrimination, the existence of unearned privilege for people who are white, and the importance of working for social justice. Positive changes in students' awareness of institutional forms of racism were also found, although this change did not achieve statistical significance. Students' written comments on end-of-semester course assessments supported gains found in pre-to-post survey assessments.

As results of this and other studies have shown (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005), one crucial aspect of service-learning that contributes to attitude change is the incorporation of frequent, varied, and focused discussions of, or reflections on, the experience in light of course goals. Although it is not known for sure, the variety of the activities in the course presented here that required students to examine significant social issues in education and child development and to demonstrate critical thinking about

these issues were likely to effect positive changes in students' attitudes and perceptions related to social justice and race. Considerable classroom time was devoted to a critical examination of issues of race, inequity, and privilege, and supplementary course readings also encouraged students to examine these issues critically as they considered their experiences working with children in urban schools.

Developing an understanding of issues related to culture, racism, and social justice and possessing cultural competence is essential for today's educators who face greater diversity of students in the schools (Allen & Rosatto, 2009). Also, developing such understandings and competencies will prepare and encourage pre-service teacher candidates to teach successfully in underserved schools, and service-learning is one type of pedagogy that can further such outcomes. The extent to which the attitude changes observed in this study will lead candidates to become change agents would be important to examine in future research, as some research (e.g., Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005) has shown such a long-term effect among adults who participated in college service-learning.

Long-term effects of service-learning in teacher education are more likely to be realized if service-learning is approached in a programmatic way, such that service-learning courses are sequenced to promote continued candidate development and increase the likelihood of candidates choosing to teach in underserved schools and being effective educators and change agents. Such a programmatic approach should be explored and research designed to assess short-term and long-term outcomes. Among the long-term outcomes that future

research might address is the relation between attitude change in teacher preparation programs and the level of success and longevity experienced by graduates who teach in underserved schools.

Although it is not without its limitations, the multi-method approach used in the present study might inform future research that examines the effects of service-learning on attitude change related to social justice and race, as well as the design of courses and assessments used in service-learning courses. At the same time, various comparison groups could be incorporated in such studies to examine the effects of different kinds of reflection activities on student attitude change and whether class discussions and assignments alone could effect the degree of change found in the present study.

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