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Developing Justice-Oriented Teachers: Reciprocal Mentoring in Marginalized Communities

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Abstract

Community contexts stimulate pre-service teachers' cultural and environmental awareness of local injustices while building their knowledge and skills as future teachers of diverse students. In Study "Abroad" in the Neighborhood, pre-service teachers visit local families who teach our students the Spanish language and culture. A second initiative is Environmental Regeneration through Permaculture Food Gardens focused on pre-service teachers' and children's construction of school gardens linked to curriculum, food cultures, and health. Pre-service teachers who understand why and how to appropriate a justice-orientation to education may become teacher-activists who honor perspectives and assets of diverse people in classrooms, schoolyards, and communities.

A central focus of our Department of Education in Regis College is to actively engage our undergraduate pre-service teachers with those "living at the margins."[1] Both students and faculty members have opportunities to work closely with the community surrounding our university—a community which consists of culturally and linguistically diverse families, many living at or below the poverty line. Each year, increasing numbers of students express interest in contributing to the local community, yet few understand the complexities of social, political, and economic inequities they will encounter. In this article, we describe two seminal initiatives in our department that rely on reciprocal mentoring to anchor future, or pre-service, teachers' acquisition of intercultural and environmental knowledge and skills, and provide the experiential immersion so critical to becoming effective teachers in diverse schools and communities.

First Initiative: Study "Abroad" with Immigrants in the Neighborhood

While our department embraces the Jesuit commitment to developing leaders in service of others, especially those who are from poor and marginalized groups, students' attitudes about *offering* service concerned us, an attitude which reflects a view that those in need of service have nothing of value to give.[2] If students leave our classes to enter the teaching field with these attitudes, then we do a great disservice to the children they will serve. To develop teachers in service of others, our students must first acknowledge "others" for the valuable contributions they make to classrooms, schools, and society as a whole. [3]

The Study "Abroad" in the Neighborhood program (also known as CB-SEEP or Community-based Spanish-English Exchange Program), was modeled on a similar Spanish-English exchange program at Pitzer College in California[4] and is presently housed within a required class for all education students. In this program, we group our pre-service teachers in threes and place them with Hispanic immigrant families in the neighborhood, all of whom live at or below the poverty line. The families spend two to six hours per week with our students, teaching them the Spanish language and different aspects

of their culture. In exchange, our students spend time helping the family with English in any capacity the family sees fit. Students commit to family visits for 10-15 weeks and families set the agenda for visits. Over the years, families have cooked with our students, taught them how to dance, taken them to church and to parties, and have played games and watched movies with our students. We arrange visits so that families—not the students—are in positions of power. The only guidelines given to the families are that our students are there to learn about the families' culture and language. Throughout a semester with these families, our students learn valuable lessons that are impossible to duplicate in a classroom setting. While visiting the families, we require students to engage in ethnographic practices where they observe, participate, analyze, and record what they experienced. The students then translate their experiences into four reflective essays written over the course of the semester.[5] From 2007 – 2010, we analyzed these essays for recurring themes, some of which we delineate below.[6]

Disorientation

> Where do I begin to describe my first visit with my family? I freaked out. I can't remember ever feeling so happy to leave some place. Don't get me wrong, the family was as nice as they could be, and patient for putting up with the hundred "no comprendos" I stated. I literally left the house with a headache and feeling sick to my stomach. I was out of my comfort zone – I didn't know what to say (because I don't know Spanish), I didn't know how to act (because I don't know their culture) and all I wanted to do was cry. I see now how my students must feel. How do they do this five hours a day, five days a week? *(Student reflective journal, entry #1.)*[7]

As noted above in the quote, most students enter families' homes with great trepidation: the language and culture are new, and our students, who are so accustomed to providing service to those in need, are suddenly the ones in need of help. Yet, we find this experience pivotal for our pre-service teachers. We expect teachers to understand the challenges and struggles faced by culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD) who are recent immigrants, yet most teachers have never experienced similar feelings themselves.[8] Our students readily notice that entering a situation where their first language and culture are not represented makes learning that much more difficult.[9] Our preceding class discussions include the stages of cultural and language acquisition and typical behaviors at each stage. We ask our students to reflect on their behaviors while visiting the families and compare these to possible CLD student behaviors: Did they start to fall asleep? Did they get frustrated? Did they try to leave early? We find that critical reflection on this initial experience helps our pre-service teachers confront the more insidious stereotypes surrounding immigrants and education. Our students better understand that behaviors such as "not paying attention," or "frustration or anger" are a reflection of the process of language and culture acquisition, and not a reflection of a lack of desire to learn.

After the first visit, all students feel more comfortable. This shift from discomfort to feeling welcomed is also an important step in teacher education. It is through meaningful contact with the 'other' that relationships are forged and people can feel more comfortable with one another.[10] We analyze the steps families took to make our students feel more comfortable and we help our students translate these steps into their classrooms to create a supportive environment for their newly arrived students.

The unique struggles of immigrant families

> I've never studied abroad, so this is the closest I have ever felt to 'culture shock.' I can't imagine how nerve racking it must be to come to another country, not knowing the language, not knowing the societal rules, and not knowing how you were going to support your family. Visiting with my family gave me a very real understanding of how difficult it is to come into this country and try to live. *(Student reflective journal entry #3)*[11]

> I was surprised at how small their apartment was. There were five of them living there, A., his wife, his son and daughter, and his brother in law, and the

> apartment had only one bedroom and one bathroom. *(Student reflective journal entry, #1)*

As noted from the quotes above, our students experience some of the struggles families face while trying to live and thrive in a new country. We think this experience is crucial to teacher education. The extent of the struggles immigrant families face are often not revealed in the classroom, and if teachers do not regularly visit students' homes, or develop meaningful relationships with immigrant families, they will be unaware of the struggles their students may be experiencing.[12] One unique aspect of this program is that our students are expected to attend the family visit regardless of the situation. Our students have visited families in the hospital and witnessed the struggle when doctors do not speak Spanish and family members do not speak English – yet a child's life is at stake. Our students have visited families when parents have lost work, when cars have been stolen, or when parents are injured on the job. In all of these situations, our students have reflected on the fact that while they have ready access to assistance in these situations – savings accounts, car insurance, health insurance – their Hispanic families do not.[13] Our students better understand the issues their future students, families, and communities may face. Our students then work in class to become pro-active as they research the resources available to teachers to help students and families in crisis situations.

From theory to practice

> Tonight I was asked to help the children with homework. I was nervous because all of the directions were in Spanish and I could not understand them. I now know how parents who do not speak English feel when their children ask them for help on homework. This experience will make me think twice if and when my students who are learning English come to school with their homework not done or done incorrectly *(Student reflective journal entry #4)*

> What struck me most about our visit was the lack of materials that the girls had available to them. Just the fact that they didn't have paper to draw on made me realize that there are probably many students who are in the same situation. *(Student reflective journal entry #2)*

All teacher education programs provide readings and discussions around the struggles immigrant children face in school, yet unless teachers have experienced these struggles first- hand, it is hard for them to truly understand the situation. When our students visit families who are unable to afford basic school supplies, or families where the children's homework is in a language that parents do not understand, our students begin to recognize that if resources or assistance at home are lacking, then children's academic achievement can be negatively impacted.[14] Our students begin to develop more compassion, understanding, and appreciation of the challenges so many children and youth must overcome to succeed in U.S. public schools. As our students gain deep affection for the families they visit, we witness this relationship transferred into their classrooms: our students readily work to develop the strategies necessary to meet the needs of immigrant students in the classroom. We also find our students reach out to immigrant families, making attempts to communicate with people they may not otherwise contact.

Challenging beliefs

> I think back on all the cultural walls and language differences that separated "me" from "them." Now the words "me" from "them" sound harsh and cold because the family is no longer the other, rather they are an intricate part of the culture that makes America so great. This experience gave me a perspective on another culture that I commonly critiqued and allowed me to look at my own culture and critique it. *(Student reflective journal, entry #9)*[15].

In this initiative, our pre-service teachers confront many stereotypes they hold around Hispanic immigrants. By building meaningful relationships with families, our students are forced to examine the numerous strengths and benefits their families bring to the neighborhoods, the schools, and society. We believe this learning is an integral part of becoming a teacher. Teachers must examine their biases and stereotypes before entering the classroom, but it is even more powerful if teachers can overcome their biases and stereotypes and

instead integrate the strengths of all students into their curriculum. We find our students doing this as they work hard to develop skills in culturally relevant pedagogy and discuss ways to bring families into their classrooms.

Reflections on Study Abroad in the Neighborhood

> After having visited the family for the semester, I feel so comfortable with them, and I am learning that we (the family and I) are in this experience together. I now have an even deeper personal respect and knowledge for what my students go through. I now understand that we are learning a new language and culture together, that we are not there to critique or judge one another. I will make it clear to my students that I am excited to know more about them and to learn with them. (*Student reflective journal, entry #4)*

In our initiative, the traditional "receivers of service" are in positions of power, and their assets and knowledge are accentuated through the service they offer to the traditional "givers of service."[16] The Study "Abroad" in the Neighborhood Program initiative not only increases awareness of resources and expertise of the neighboring Hispanic community, but builds meaningful relationships between two differing cultures and languages. Reciprocal mentoring is achieved by families teaching our students about themselves and their language, and our students helping families with English and sharing their lives with families. By integrating classroom discussions and weekly reflections into this initiative, our students begin to break down previously held stereotypes and perceive our neighbors as friends, and as people who have much to offer. Many students then transfer this knowledge into their teaching and bring the assets of cultures represented in their classrooms into the curriculum. We feel that at a Jesuit university, it is our obligation to prepare teachers who are comfortable and knowledgeable about involving families and communities into their classrooms. Participation in this initiative is one step in this direction.

Second Initiative: Environmental Regeneration through Permaculture Food Gardens

As we extend our departmental dialogue about involving pre-service teachers in diverse communities, we consider the array of challenges they and their students will confront in the coming decades. Environmental degradation presents increasingly complex and unjust challenges, particularly in poor and marginalized communities where residents bear disproportionately heavy societal burdens of toxic contamination.[17] Such contamination marginalizes communities as cultural, social, environmental, political, and economic networks weaken and fail to support the health and well-being of the natural world and its inhabitants, both human and other-than-human. Many of our pre-service teachers hold a justice-orientation to teaching and choose to apprentice and work in marginalized communities. We therefore aim to prepare teachers who attend not only to their future students' health, well-being, and learning inside classrooms but also in communities' outdoor environments.

Our evolving approach over the past six years emerges from concerns not only about environmental degradation but also about food deserts in nearby communities. Grocery chains avoid operating stores in low-income neighborhoods due to low revenue projections, and families must travel to more affluent communities where stores exist.[18] Those without transportation rely on fast food restaurants and convenience stores within walking distance to purchase high-fat and low-nutrition foods that contribute to obesity, diabetes and other health problems in the community. Children may have learning difficulties due to hunger or illness. Or, residents with access to land can grow their own food if they have the knowledge, tools, and skills to do so. These issues, environmental degradation and food deserts, are the focus of courses that explore environmental health and food access as human rights.

Across four courses—two education courses and two courses we created as Integrative Core courses that enroll students from all disciplines—we have developed three holistic approaches that

support pre-service teachers' evolving justice-orientations to teaching and learning: knowledge acquisition and dialogue, fieldwork to regenerate environments, and reflective writing and dialogue about humans' relationships to the natural world. These three approaches occur through reciprocal mentoring in which all participants act as teachers and as learners at various points throughout the learning process.[19] For example, pre-service teachers learn from and teach others about their own food cultures that emanate from family traditions and the bioregion in which they live. Another example of reciprocal mentoring occurs when pre-service teachers bring their learning from other courses and apply it to environmental regeneration and food production. These personal and academic connections formed through reciprocal mentoring are essential threads that draw on all participants' expertise, deepen learning, and promote collaboration in college classrooms and community spaces.

Clearly, political and other leadership is needed to improve environmental conditions in any community. Yet we can begin working toward environmental health by partnering with others to regenerate environments one plot at a time. This is one avenue that yields tangible results as we improve and re-purpose barren schoolyards or urban lots for food production. In the following sections, we outline why these aims are significant and how we pursue them with pre-service teachers.

Knowledge Acquisition and Dialogue

Pre-service teachers often express their lack of knowledge about and experiences in the natural world. Concepts of environmental regeneration are unfamiliar and may seem unrelated to their classroom teaching. One of our pre-service teachers expressed her perspectives at the beginning of a course that integrates the study of environmental regeneration and fieldwork:

> As humans wreck [*sic*] more and more devastation on the environments, future generations will suffer. I believe that it is important to cultivate mindfulness and awareness within our students about the environment . . . . I myself have never really developed a very intimate relationship with nature. I always felt lucky to have grown up in Granvale (pseudonym) and been around nature, but I am not very sure that this was enough. Although I am excited for this project, I am also very hesitant about ability to be an effective teacher since I do not know too much about the topic. (Pre-service Teacher Notebook #12)

To build background knowledge about local environments and stimulate connections to them, pre-service teachers write autobiographical accounts of their experiences in the natural world. Class dialogue of documents and people advocating for the health of all life forms contribute to pre-service teachers' knowledge of environmental challenges and solutions. Throughout four courses, pre-service teachers explore questions such as "How and why do humans establish relationships with each other, the natural world, and other-than-human lives?" An on-line resource, *Sustainability and Catholic Higher Education: A Toolkit for Mission Integration*, emphasizes the "Catholic commitment to protect and defend human life and dignity, especially of the poor and vulnerable who are most impacted by environmental degradation and climate change."[20] This publication informs pre-service teachers about environmental efforts at other Catholic universities and raises awareness of students who do not perceive environmental degradation and climate change as a legitimate concern of Catholics. We consider links to Ignatius of Loyola's exhortation to find God in all things as we reflect on experiences such as observing bees at work, planting a vibrant color palette of flowers throughout the garden, or composting.[21]

We also draw upon environmental historian Donald Hughes' documentation of St. Francis' attitude, now "recognized as a precursor of positive environmentalism."[22] Hughes describes how St. Francis included all creatures and elements of the natural world in his concept of community and mutual dependence, addressing them in familial relationship terms that eliminate an anthropocentric perspective. According to their disciplinary interests, pre-service teachers select auxiliary readings that focus on activists who forged pathways toward environmental regeneration. Tewa Pueblo scholar and activist, Gregory Cajete, for example, delineates indigenous approaches that inculcate reverence

and care for all lives and the natural world—universal approaches that he and elders seek to revive among children and youth.[23] Other perspectives that pre-service teachers might select include Gandhi's advocacy for *ahimsa* or nonviolence toward living beings,[24] Wangari Matthai's mobilization of Kenyan women to do the spiritual work of regenerating eroded lands,[25] or scientist Jane Goodall's promotion of locally-grounded, organic farming as a powerful step toward environmental regeneration and food justice.[26]

The Earth Charter offers a set of guidelines created by diverse people worldwide calling for the health and well-being of the natural environment. In a section entitled, "Social and Economic Justice," the Charter calls for agreement among nations to "Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required."[27] This section also implores citizens worldwide to "Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations."[28] Class discussions turn to the surrounding community where an oil refinery periodically spews toxic clouds and where healthy food is difficult to access.

Fieldwork: Regenerating Environments

> Physically, people seem to become more alert and happy when given time outside. I have noticed a huge change within my students when they are outside versus being inside. Raphael, in particular, is much more engaged and excited to learn when we are in the garden . . . . He loved planting the onions, observing his seeds, and saw little connection to the facts that we were writing down until it related directly to <u>his world.</u> Kids can make amazing connections if we ever give them the opportunity to explore. (Pre-service Teacher Notebook, # 12)

Most pre-service teachers demonstrate exuberance similar to that above when teaching and learning from students in outdoor contexts such as schoolyard gardens, but often begin this work with hesitancy. Providing outdoor environmental instruction appears daunting, a national phenomenon among pre-service teachers who express their lack of experience in and knowledge of outdoor environments.[29] Fieldwork is an essential aspect of understanding and caring for the natural world and its human and other-than-human inhabitants. This occurs at several sites, primarily in marginalized communities: a Catholic partner school, an urban farm near campus, and other urban farms in the area. The approach we use is permaculture that regenerates soils through a "composting in place" process—a worldwide grassroots approach that blends local, indigenous and scientific perspectives and practices.[30] Pre-service teachers mentor or are mentored by classroom teachers, children, youth, or community volunteers to layer organic materials that build soil health in gardens, grow healthy food, track increasing biodiversity, integrate subject areas during outdoor learning, beautify schoolyards, and celebrate diverse food cultures. A next step at the Catholic school is for pre-service teachers to apply permaculture design principles to construct a circular prayer garden with children and youth, some of whom travel to and from Mexico where they are accustomed to assisting families with agricultural tasks. Whether constructing a permaculture garden for the purpose of food production or for creating a contemplative space, reciprocal mentoring occurs when participants share teaching roles; children sometimes instruct pre-service teachers during planting tasks but teaching roles reverse when pre-service teachers teach concepts such as photosynthesis. This fieldwork phase has the potential to deepen participants' commitment to including the natural world in their future classrooms and lives.

Reflective Writing and Dialogue: The Significance of Environmental Regeneration

The third phase evolves as pre-service teachers apply holistic and justice-oriented lenses to examine physical, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral or spiritual insights into their environmental regeneration efforts. The Earth Charter provides a rationale for such a lens in the section, Respect and Care for the Community of Life. Charter authors recommend that we "Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity."[31] We also include attention to physical health to counteract rising obesity,

diabetes, and other health problems in marginalized communities.

Through multiple lenses, pre-service teachers' recognize the demanding physical labor of food production within the larger purpose of making healthy environments and food available.

> Because of the windy conditions, I had manure crusted on my face and pieces of wood chips in my hair and even some in my mouth. It was well worth the intensive labor in order for the community garden to take effect." (Pre-service Teacher Notebook, #13)

This writer was aware that the garden she was constructing would produce enough food for gardeners and for people living at homeless shelters. A second and prevalent example of physical and moral aspects of environmental regeneration emerges in pre-service teachers' oral comments, not only about the amount and intensity of labor involved in food production but also about their gratitude to farmers who labor to sustain others.

Intellectual considerations include pre-service teachers' scientific, literacy, cultural, and other areas of inquiry, knowledge, and skills they develop in the four courses. One pre-service teacher, for example, adapted her knowledge and skills of soil testing in a science laboratory to her instruction about soil testing in the garden; children completed the process and demonstrated it for peers. Text-book learning solidified when learners used authentic materials. Aesthetic involvement tended to emanate from pre-service teachers' and children's close observations—seeing and listening as though they had never been in a garden, followed by sketching or painting what they saw and felt. One pre-service teacher mentioned "awe and wonder" as responses to close observation of a tiny space in the garden alive with textures and thriving lives (Pre-service Teacher Notebook #13). Others explored paintings such as Millet's *The Gleaners* or Tony Ortega's *Obreros de la Fresa* (Strawberry Workers) prompting discussion about the role and conditions of farm laborers' work and their human rights struggles.

Most pre-service teachers communicate their desire to implement outdoor environmental regeneration and food production to benefit their future students and families, although others remain skeptical and wonder if such experiences are possible in contemporary schools with crowded curricula and testing demands. A pre-service teacher who does intend to pursue active environmental regeneration expressed her reasoning in the following passage:

> Environmental education can help foster the goodness within us all by forcing us to look outside of ourselves and at the larger picture. In 100 years or so, everyone on this planet will no longer be here, but what is our legacy? Children need to be taught about sustainable resources and how to preserve our environment. The first step, however, is to promote awareness and foster a sense of compassion through all living things. In my future classroom, I hope to implement environmental education through experiential-based learning. (Pre-service Teacher Notebook # 12)

Significance of Two Experiential Initiatives in Teacher Preparation

Aiming to provide holistic and integrative preparation to pre-service teachers, we have integrated Study "Abroad" in the Neighborhood throughout our entire undergraduate teacher preparation program. The effort recently received institutional and state recognition as the first Colorado teacher preparation program to integrate Culturally and Linguistically Diverse education standards in all teacher preparation courses. Our next goal is to further integrate our second initiative, Environmental Regeneration through Permaculture Food Gardens, so that pre-service teachers are prepared to provide such education effectively in their future classrooms.

These two initiatives are significant aspects of our vision of an educational system that is more peaceful, just, and regenerative than the one we have constructed up to this point in history. Pre-service teachers who understand why and how to appropriate a justice-orientation to education have the potential to become teacher-activists who honor perspectives, strengths, and assets of diverse people inside classrooms, outside in schoolyards, and in communities. We envision activist-teachers who understand the complexities

of cultural, environmental, social, political, and economic inequities and confront them, particularly in marginalized and often voiceless communities, by creating partnerships that contribute to the long-term health of individuals, communities, and environments. Immersing their future students and themselves in diverse communities and the natural environments surrounding them, teacher-activists will contribute to communities where all lives and the natural world flourish.

Notes

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[7] Grassi and Castro, 10-12.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Elizabeth Grassi and Heidi B. Barker, *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional Students: Strategies for Teaching and Assessment* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010); Grassi and Castro, 10-12.

[10] Grassi and Castro, 10-12.

[11] *Ibid.*, 12.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.,* 11.

[16] *Ibid.;* Grassi, Hanley, and Liston, 87-110.

[17] Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005); Paul Mohai and Robin Saha, "Reassessing Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities in Environmental Justice Research," *Demography* 43, no. 2 (2006): 383-399.

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[30] Peter Bane, *The Permaculture Handbook* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2012).

[31] Earth Charter International Secretariat, p. 2.

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