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Service Learning and Critical Consciousness Development among Youth of Color in Poverty

Matthew A. Diemer

Michigan State University

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Westheimer and Kahne (2004) delineated between more traditional, or “participatory,” and more critical, or “justice-oriented,” service learning programs. Participatory service learning fulfills a clear societal or community need and is oriented toward helping the disadvantaged, such as volunteering at a soup kitchen for the homeless (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Critical service learning seeks to critique and transform inequitable social conditions that create societal and community problems such as poverty and hunger (Cipolle, 2007; Maybach, 1996; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, in press). Paulo Freire’s notion of critical consciousness (1973; 1993) and youth sociopolitical development theorists (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2003; Watts, Griffith & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts & Flanagan, in press) provide a theoretical framework to conceptualize the consciousness of social injustice and motivation to produce social change germane to critical service learning programs. In short, critical consciousness entails an awareness of sociopolitical inequality, such as the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and resources, and a motivation to produce social change through social action and protest.

Some qualitative studies have suggested that traditional service learning participation may facilitate critical consciousness development among predominantly White and more affluent participants. Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) analyses of service learning programs suggested that participation in traditional service learning activities by predominantly White suburban youth does not translate into increases in youths’ critical consciousness. However, predominantly White undergraduates appeared to develop a greater consciousness of poverty and racial inequality and feelings of collective social responsibility through participating in traditional service learning activities in Rhoads’ (1998) qualitative study. Cipolle (2007) found that

traditional service learning activities may in fact facilitate more affluent White youths' critical consciousness if these activities are supplemented by school-based discussions of social inequality and support for sociopolitical consciousness. In sum, it is unclear if traditional service learning in and of itself is facilitative of critical consciousness development (Rhoads, 1998), has no effect upon critical consciousness development (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), or may be facilitative of critical consciousness development if supplemented by school-based support for critical consciousness development (Cipolle, 2007).

Traditional Service Learning

However, the role of traditional service learning in fostering critical consciousness development among Poor Youth of Color (PYOC) has not been examined in previous research. PYOC predominantly live in lower-income communities more profoundly affected by sociopolitical inequality (Ginwright & James, 2002). If traditional service learning activities are carried out in communities more profoundly affected by social, economic, and racial inequality then traditional service learning activities may foster critical consciousness development. That is, participation in traditional service learning and helping others similarly and clearly affected by sociopolitical oppression may be facilitative of critical consciousness development among PYOC.

For example, many who provided relief assistance to the Gulf Region following Hurricane Katrina emerged from the experience with a greater consciousness of inequality and increased motivation to produce social change, based on the social conditions that they observed. Traditional forms of service learning (e.g. helping the disadvantaged) may also be an opportunity for learning and analysis of the sociopolitical conditions that create disadvantage. In turn,

participation in traditional service learning and fostering positive change in communities affected by sociopolitical oppression may also facilitate the motivation to change these sociopolitical conditions.

Transformational Teacher Practices

The role of school-based support for critical consciousness development may be an underconsidered, yet important, factor in the relationships between traditional service learning and critical consciousness development. Maybach (1996) argued that more traditional, or “missionary” service learning, that is oriented toward helping the disadvantaged must also include structured support for understanding the sociopolitical context that creates disadvantage to facilitate the critical consciousness of service learning participants. That is, transformational pedagogical practices that provide opportunities for analysis of and reflection upon sociopolitical inequality may be necessary for traditional service learning programs to have an impact upon participants’ critical consciousness development (O’Grady, 2000). Relatedly, Diemer et al. (2006) suggested that peer, parental, and community support for challenging gender, racial, and social inequality is facilitative of critical consciousness development among urban adolescents. Balcazar, Tandon, and Kaplan (2001) suggested that classroom discussions of sociopolitical inequality had an impact upon the critical consciousness of urban early adolescents.

The literature is unclear whether a) (as reviewed in the previous paragraph), service learning participation, b) transformational teacher practices, or c) the combination of service learning participation and transformational pedagogical practices that has an impact upon the critical consciousness of service learning participants. This tension in the literature suggests three hypothesized relationships between traditional service learning, transformational teacher

practices, and the synthesis of these two domains in facilitating critical consciousness development among PYOC. The present study will also expand upon previous inquiry by examining these constructs among youth of color who reside in poverty.

These relationships will be tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), because of SEM's capacity to specify and control for measurement error, capacity to test the direction of structural relationships, and capacity to test the fit of theoretically rich conceptual models (Bollen, 1989; Martens, 2005). SEM will complement existing qualitative research that has examined the relationships between service learning and critical consciousness development among predominantly White and more affluent youth. In the present study, SEM will afford the examination of the unique effects of traditional service learning participation and transformational teacher practices upon critical consciousness development.

SEM will also afford the specification and modeling of the component parts of critical consciousness. Previous service learning research (Cipolle, 2007; Rhoads, 1998) has examined a more general "critical consciousness" construct, rather than examining the component parts suggested by the literature. However, previous theory and research have suggested that critical consciousness is composed of a consciousness of sociopolitical inequality and the motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2006; Diemer, Hsieh & Pan, in press; Diemer & Hsieh, in press; Freire, 1973, 1993). Additionally, the relationships between these components can be examined using SEM, as sociopolitical consciousness is theorized to facilitate the motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality.

Figure 1, the conceptual model, depicts the hypothesized relationships between latent constructs that will be examined with the IEA Civic Education (CivEd) dataset, using SEM.

Reviewing the conceptual model, traditional service learning is hypothesized to have a direct effect upon sociopolitical consciousness. In turn, sociopolitical consciousness is hypothesized to have a direct effect upon the motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality. The indirect effect of traditional service learning upon the motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality will be examined via sociopolitical consciousness. Because of a dearth of scholarship in this domain, an alternative model where traditional service learning has a direct effect upon expected sociopolitical action, rather than an indirect effect via sociopolitical consciousness, will also be fitted. Transformational teacher practices are theorized to have a direct effect upon sociopolitical consciousness and an indirect effect upon the motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality (via sociopolitical consciousness).

---Insert Figure 1 about here---

Method

Data Source

Participants will be selected from the Civic Education (CivEd) survey conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1999. CivEd is a large scale survey that assessed aspects of civic engagement and service learning experiences among adolescents from twenty-nine countries (Husveldt, Barber & Torney-Purta, 2005). The present study will examine the 2, 811 CivEd participants from the U.S. who were in the 9th grade at the time of data collection.

The U.S. CivEd sample contained slightly more female (1,392, 49.5%) than male participants (1,375, 48.9%). Participants self-identified as White (1,811, 69.0%), Black/African

American (518, 18.4%), Asian (154, 5.5%), American Indian (130, 4.6%), or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (85, 3.0%). Of these participants, 430 (15.3%) self-identified their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino.

Variables List

The variables used to operationalize traditional service learning, transformational teacher support, sociopolitical consciousness, and the motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality, along with the potential response options for each indicator, are detailed in Table 1.

---Insert Table 1 about here---

Anticipated Results & Discussion:

An unanswered question in the literature is whether a) traditional service learning performed in communities more affected by sociopolitical oppression b) teacher support for challenging racism, sexism, and injustice or c) a combination of both traditional service learning activities and transformational teacher support has an impact upon critical consciousness development among PYOC.

This project may provide empirical support for the “Katrina Effect,” or how individuals who participate in more traditional service learning/civic participation may emerge with a greater consciousness of social, economic and political inequality and an orientation toward reducing social inequality (c.f. Rhoads, 1998). Diverging from Westheimer and Kahne (2004), this work would help us to understand how traditional service learning may in fact facilitate youths’

capacity for social analysis and become involved in social action to reduce inequality in their communities.

Alternatively, the obtained structural model may suggest that transformational teacher support has an impact upon critical consciousness development among PYOC (c.f. Diemer et al., 2006). Finally, traditional service learning activities complemented by pedagogical support to analyze and challenge the root sociopolitical conditions that make traditional service learning activities necessary may have the greatest impact upon critical consciousness development among PYOC (c.f. Cipolle, 2007).

This project may facilitate our understanding of service learning among youth of color who reside in poverty, and the role of service learning in spurring other forms of civic participation. The conceptual framework in this study could also be applied in future research to examine what role service learning plays in facilitating this population's engagement with traditional forms (e.g. voting) of civic engagement. This work may inform the development and delivery of service learning programs in schools and community organizations, particularly for poor youth of color. Given that the practice of service learning tends to take a more traditional perspective (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006), this research may inform more critical approaches to the practice and pedagogy of service learning, particularly among PYOC.

Limitations/Conceptual Issues for Further Scrutiny

Although CivEd provides a rich source of data with a diverse group of participants and their teachers, there are some limitations in the operationalization of constructs using existing data. The operationalization of traditional service learning contains both participatory (e.g. participation in groups to help one's community) and attitudinal (e.g. a good citizen participates

in activities to help the community.) Transformational teacher support is operationalized more indirectly (via teachers' self-reported views and values), rather than observations of teachers in classrooms. This operationalization assumes that teachers who believe that human/civil rights, gender, and culture are important considerations in civic education and will enact these views in their teaching practice. Similarly, the motivation to reduce inequality also reflects self-reported motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequality, rather than actual participation in activities to bring about social change.

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