



# Undergraduate Journal

## of Service Learning & Community-Based Research

### Community Teaching in a Time of Turmoil: The Beginning of My Journey

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#### Abstract

Fall of 2020 I had the privilege of participating in an innovative community engaged teaching program at Ball State University. Navigating this new learning journey while watching the world combat ignorance was a challenging and fulfilling moment as I prepared to become an educator. I was able to see how educators can make for a truly meaningful and liberating learning experience for children by bringing in all of their lived experiences into the classroom. While the fight to give our children an honest education rages on, I could not think of a better time to begin this work.

Fall of 2020 was no simple time for teachers *and* students *alike*. We all watched and experienced the world come to a standstill and simultaneously burn as two deadly viruses swept through our nation: COVID-19 and ignorance. I couldn't imagine a better and more challenging time to rediscover teaching. This is the opportunity that Ball State University's Schools Within the Context of Community (SCC) program gave me. Within this innovative program, I was able to immerse myself into the community of Whitely, a historically Black community that I had no idea existed before this opportunity, despite living right down the street from it for three years. I learned of the troubles, the triumphs, and the strength it takes to pursue life and happiness – not just to survive, but to live and thrive. I was introduced to community members working tirelessly for themselves and the children in their neighborhood. I was able to tutor and learn from children in the local elementary school. My ideas of teaching were completely turned upside down, and my experience in SCC made for a semester that made me uncomfortable, challenged and stressed out in the best way possible.

Despite the challenges that came with starting this work during a global pandemic, the fundamentals of SCC did not waiver. We were in this program to begin our work with culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, but what does that even mean? It means that it is our responsibility as educators to take into consideration the **context** of our student's lives, and to participate, serve, and learn in the **communities** in which they reside. In doing this, we understand that our students are more than that educational aspect of their social identities. They are humans, individuals. Our children will face oppression head-on in and out of our spaces – racism (both systemic and individual), income inequality, food insecurity, inadequate housing. While these challenges are real and significant, educators who spend time learning in the community – or places their students spend the majority of their time outside of the classroom – also become aware of the tremendous cultural wealth that exists in traditionally minoritized spaces. Educators should take the time to explore the local community center, civic theater,

churches, corner stores, and parks their children go to. Get to know the community members your students learn from out of the classroom, invite these people in, use this wealth to guide and enhance your teaching. This wealth, defined by Tara Yosso (2005) **represents an “array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by communities to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression”** (p. 154). These are aspects of students’ collective identities that should be elevated and celebrated. Contrary to what educators may like to believe, school is not a protective barrier *against* the outside world, nor should it be. It is unrealistic, if not cruel, to expect our students to drop all their experiences at our door and focus solely on multiplication tables. We should strive to welcome **all** of the students’ experiences, all of their struggles against a society that works to oppress them and their families, and wield our classroom as a brave space to work through and counter the negative. But for all of the societal forces, we must counter which undermine our students and their community’s greatness, there are just as many joyous experiences that we must celebrate to make our teaching more meaningful and our children more successful. Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) require educators to nurture and sustain students’ cultural capital and wealth. CRP and CSP are not reactive, they are proactive. Students’ communities and lifestyles are welcomed in and celebrated, they are not upheld to White middle-class norms, rather they are honored as they are. CRP and CSP are used to fight back against schools’ ways of eradicating the lives and experiences of communities of color. But this pedagogy is not reserved for just students of color; White students greatly benefit from this teaching as they are introduced to new cultures and experiences different from their own. And this is what CRP and CSP call for; Educators that value and affirm **all** their students as well as the backgrounds and preexisting knowledge they bring with them. It calls for an educator that doesn’t wait until problems arise to consider bringing culture into the classroom, but rather an educator who is motivated to revere who their students are and where they come from to avoid resistance. All children deserve to be heard, seen, and represented positively. They deserve to be properly prepared for our society in a space that models what democracy should look like, designed with discovery, empathy, and shared humanity in mind. CRP, CSP, and community teaching are not just pedagogies, they are a way of being, and in a world where students will be challenged constantly with injustices, in schooling – an institution that pushes conformity and assimilation – we must salvage every bit of humanity we can in our students by bringing their culture, pre-existing knowledge, and cultural capital into the classroom. These values and pedagogies are the pillars of SCC. Everything we do, practice, and learn stems from these ideologies. Being immersed in a community that, while beautiful, is a low socioeconomic space and a food desert, provides the opportunity to truly understand that these things can co-exist, and that in struggle, there can be beauty. In the struggle, we see resistance; in the struggle we see teaching for emancipation and liberation. It was these pedagogies that I was fortunate enough to experience in action, and from which I was privileged to significantly learn and practice.

The pandemic caused the SCC program to look different than in previous years. We couldn’t get as close to the community as we would have liked, justifiably so, for everyone’s safety. But instead, my professors were able to show me what community teaching looked like, which impacted my education as well. They are, in my humble opinion, true geniuses and among the most caring and thoughtful educators I have ever encountered. They understand that this calling is not for the weak, that our profession demands a lot, and they expect nothing less than our best. Their care and kindness in the form of high expectations pushed me to put everything I had into becoming the best educator I could be. I watched as they tailored our curriculum to meet

our individual needs, how they paired us up so that we could challenge ourselves and our peers; the way they created a truly brave space for us. That is not to say that this all came easily to us - our classes were rigorous and demanded a lot of time and energy in new and deeply challenging ways. We had days that were better than others, and days where my ignorance prevented me from getting to the point my professors needed me to be. But I kept going, kept challenging myself, and kept searching for answers. And this is the type of environment I would be lucky to replicate someday in my own classroom - an environment where the students feel that drive to keep seeking out answers, to understand why we are learning what we are, to feel the importance, and to know my care and kindness comes in all forms, which may include the occasional expression of disappointment, but only because I know their true potential and how great they can be. This environment didn't create itself out of thin air and it happened because of more than the great professors. It took my personal investment. Our professors were genuinely interested in who we were and created a mutual level of trust and respect.

After continuously struggling together with our material, we finally had the opportunity to put our pedagogy to practice with third-grade students in a local elementary school. Twice a week, we would meet with two different students and take a learning journey together. We would learn about each other, our likes and dislikes, and we would discuss the world around us. Of course, we snuck some literacy practice in there as well. I remember how nervous I was when the tutoring sessions began. I am passionate about living a CRP/CSP life, and with that passion comes the intense fear of unintentionally having a negative impact on a child's life. With that fear, we can either accept the fact that we will mess up, and use that recognition to hold ourselves accountable, or we can let the fear stagnate us. I chose growth, which is imperative in order to continue moving in a CRP/CSP lifestyle. I was deeply worried until I realized, fairly quickly I might add, that our best moments together came when I let the students teach me, when I relinquished the power that I was told I had so much of throughout my teacher preparation courses. When I simply just listened and followed their lead, there was happiness and growth on both sides. As educators, we get so caught up in the power we hold over children. We obsess over our authority, we demand obedience, and often we run our classrooms like a prison ward or a factory line in order to make **ourselves** more comfortable; to make sure we, the authority, are not challenged.

One of the students I tutored was a beautiful little girl who enjoyed reading, especially the "No, David!" books and was very set on being a cardiologist when she grew up. Among the first things I did was get a book about the first Black woman doctor for us to read together. I thought this was something that would not only tie into her interests but give her some positive representation as well. We tried to read the book together twice and both times I could tell that it was not grasping her attention and she just wasn't interested. At first, I was frustrated, but I realized that the objective was her learning and there was no reason to continue if she was not gaining anything from this reading. I asked her if she wanted to do something else, and she quickly agreed. We ended up finishing an activity that we had started a couple of weeks back where we made our book with her as the main character. The other characters were her family members and the premise involved a game of "Life" gone wrong. I let her write the entire story, we collaborated on the illustrations, and once we had finished, we read it together. She was participating the whole time, enthusiastically engaged. We were laughing together as she wrote about her dad giving up on "Life" to go watch the basketball game that was on. I was able to learn so much about her and her family from that one activity. I got an insight into her life at home, her siblings, her parents, and she was happy to teach me all of this. All I had to do was

pass the reins and open my ears. Before, I was so set on something I wanted to do, something I thought she would enjoy after only knowing her for a couple of weeks. In reality, I just needed to listen to her wants and needs. She was able to practice her writing skills, reading skills, and I was able to learn more about my student from that one activity than any first day activity had given me.

The other student I had tutored was a joyous and energetic little boy. He was very open to me about his negative experiences with reading and books. I showed no judgement towards him on this and told him we would work on that. One thing I caught on to very quickly with him was that he loved to tell stories. He could take up all our time telling me all sorts of stories about what he wanted for Christmas, or about the new karate move he had just learned, and some days I just let him carry on with his tales. We moved at his pace. He wasn't very comfortable reading out loud on his own yet, and I knew it would be difficult to keep him engaged in front of a screen. So one week I introduced him to Madlibs, those kooky stories you can make using different parts of speech to fill in the blanks. It was a hit. I started incorporating these every week because of how much he loved them. We would find a topic that he was interested in, discuss the different parts of speech, and create our own hilariously nonsensical stories. Towards the end of our time together, I even got him to start reading them out loud to me, but only if he wanted to. By following his lead, I was able to get him to see that reading could be enjoyable, and that if there were no books or stories he could find that interested him, he could make his own; even if they talked about space monkeys or karate snakes.

My point in sharing these experiences is to showcase how easy my job became once I just took a step back and listened to my students. When I stopped worrying about what I wanted to do, and began following their lead, learning became enjoyable for all of us. Community teaching shows us that the relationship between student and teacher is not a hierarchical one, but one where we are equals. All of us have the capacity to teach and be taught by one another. We all have our specialties - I am the content expert, the students are experts on themselves, the families are experts on their children, and the community members are experts in their fields, their culture, and the place they call home. We all have roles that play a pivotal part in creating a rich and meaningful learning space for our children. We all influence our children and their development.

Adults carry their cultural belief systems around and the values get passed down to the children. By interacting beyond the student and creating these relationships with their families and communities we provide, "smooth transitions between the two settings and improved learning outcomes." (Grace et. al, 2016, p. 7) What this should mean for many educators is to begin initiating and allowing these relationships with the community and with families to happen. Schooling has burned us all before. Families and community members have continuously been ignored and traumatized by schools; cast out from participating. I'm sure we can all think of at least one educator we have heard talk terribly about a student or their family, instead of trying to learn about the student or the family. Some families and community members simply don't feel safe in our schools, and so it's on us educators to begin educating ourselves, opening those doors, and mending those wounds. We have to engage our families and our communities with more than a family night every few months, we need to let them have a say in their children's education. Families should see us in the community, engaging with them and others. We have to earn their trust and we can't do that unless we are present – immersed into the community with open ears and hearts, ready to learn and be challenged by new ideas and ways of being.

## Community Teaching in a Time of Turmoil

Even though I was unable to practice all of what I had learned, I still gained so much from the experience SCC gave me and put into practice all I could. I wasn't able to physically go into the Whitely community, but every month I would join the virtual Whitely Community Council meeting and listen to what was being discussed in the community. I learned of new lights that the community members went out of their way to install, COVID assistance programs, testing sites, and local food pantries. All of this was very useful information for me to have in case one of my students or their family needed information about these things in the community. While I was never able to meet my students' families in Whitely, I would ask my students about them constantly. I wanted them to know that they were just as important to me as they were to them.

My time in SCC is over, but my passion and dedication to this life are more alive than ever. I can't imagine what I would have done in my future as an educator without SCC. I believe the experience and knowledge SCC gave me should be a standard teacher preparation program everywhere. No future educator should go into the field without having any knowledge of community teaching, CRP, or CSP. Were it not for SCC, my approach to teaching might have been drastically different. I could have caused a lot of harm without even knowing it, and I would have moved into teaching without challenging some of my own biases and prejudices. But because of SCC, I gained an entirely new perspective on what it really means not just to be a teacher but to be an educator. And so I continue enacting this pedagogy and this life as a brave educator in every learning space I enter. I hope to go back into Whitely and continue this work with my student teaching, finally being able to really immerse myself into this beautiful and welcoming community. I am going to keep growing, learning, and seeking out ways for me to continue this work. Just as I ask my students to always continue their learning journey, I must demand the same from myself.

While my experience was virtual, it left an imprint on me that will never leave. I will always see Whitely and the community members as the place and people that taught me the most about education. SCC will always be the program that showed me my path, opened the doors, and welcomed me inside to begin this work and join the others in the fight for an elevating and liberating educational experience. I have already grown so much over the past year, and I look forward to seeing where this journey – one that has enlightened me – continues to take me.

References

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