Social Justice Education as Anti-Poverty Work:

Undergraduates' Experiential Learning in Childhood and Youth Spaces

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Introduction

Experiential learning is a growing commitment in higher education and often takes the form of undergraduates venturing off of their campuses and into the communities surrounding their colleges. Through the lens of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), this qualitative study examines the lived experiences and outcomes of undergraduates delivering literacy based social justice education lessons in local childhood spaces. As a further focus, this study also seeks to illuminate the role of social justice education as a form of anti-poverty work when implemented through college-community partnerships. Analysis of the experiences of ten undergraduate students at a small private liberal arts college in Central New York will work to demonstrate the role college-community partnerships can play in fostering social justice and class equity, specifically in the context of undergraduates working with children and youth.

This study draws on the research of Kolb (1984) and his development of experiential learning theory (ELT) which defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). By giving undergraduates the opportunity to apply the theories they have learned in the classroom, experiential learning through community-college partnerships have been shown (Cairney & Breen, 2017; Coffey, 2010) to allow undergraduates to critically reflect on their own identities and biases and work to transform their experiences into a deeper understanding of social injustices and inequalities. Furthermore, literacy based social justice lessons have been shown to empower children and youth by giving them the language to express their experiences and the confidence that their voices matter in the fight for social equity (Costello, 2018; Dunkerly-Bean et al., 2017). By building strong and mutually beneficial community partnerships, colleges can engage their students through

experiential learning to foster a lasting commitment to anti-poverty work (De Saxe & Favela, 2018; O'Meara, 2017).

Most research done on experiential education through college-community partnerships in relation to social justice focuses on pre-service teachers completing their practicum experiences in low-income communities (Bentley & Hendricks, 2018; Cairney & Breen, 2017; Coffey, 2010). Although a study done by Zyngier (2017) focuses on social justice education lessons delivered by pre-service teachers to economically disadvantaged children, its findings are based on the experiences and outcomes of children participating in the program rather than the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates delivering the lessons. By focusing on the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates delivering literacy based social justice education lessons to children and youth in community spaces, this study aims to bridge the gap between research done on the benefits of literacy based social justice education for children and youth and the research done on the value of experiential learning for undergraduates through college-community partnerships. Furthermore, this research seeks to address the connection between social justice education projects and community partnerships as a form of anti-poverty work.

Background

This research was conducted at a small private liberal arts college in Central New York. This college is identified as an elite institution based on its ranking as a top school and its low acceptance rate. In 2017, the college identified a renewed commitment to supporting and developing experiential learning opportunities for all of its undergraduates. This commitment was made in order to push undergraduates to take learning beyond theory as well as to organize and strengthen experiential learning opportunities already taking place on campus into a larger, institutionally recognized and supported program.

Through an education course with an experiential learning component, undergraduates visited two sites in the community surrounding the college. The first site was a school-age child care program, located inside an elementary school, for children who attend the elementary school. The elementary school is located in a rural area, and for the 2018-2019 school year 90% of students enrolled were White and 35% were identified as economically disadvantaged. Two different groups of undergraduates visited this site. The first group delivered a lesson on creating "how-to" books geared towards third grade students. The second group worked with second grade students and focused on community building. The undergraduates in this group led a literacy activity where they read a picture book and then created a community mural with students about their understanding of community.

The second site undergraduates visited was a community organization and child care center serving low-income children and families in an urban area. The youth undergraduates worked with were middle school aged students of color who were participating in a program that supports disadvantaged students both academically and socially as they become teenagers. Undergraduates led a lesson where youth were given control over their own ideal worlds by creating "youtopias." After reflecting individually, youth collaborated through drawing and writing to create a collective "youtopia" that represented a place they would want to live in.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Experiential learning theory provides a framework to analyze the lived experiences and outcomes of undergraduates' delivering social justice education lessons in childhood spaces within the community surrounding their college. ELT, as proposed by Kolb (1984), draws on the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget among others, to conceptualize learning as the process of

transforming one's experiences into knowledge. Kolb's (1984) ELT model has four cyclical stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These four stages describe the learning process and the value of learning from experience for all different types of learners.

Service-learning is one type of experiential learning and is based on reciprocal learning between community members and those serving the community (Sigmon, 1997). Contemporary research on ELT applied in undergraduate institutions (Cairney & Breen, 2017; Clever & Miller, 2019; Coker et al., 2017; Mtawa & Wilson-Strydom, 2018) demonstrates the positive relationship between service-learning experiences and undergraduates developing a deeper understanding of inequality and an ongoing dedication to social justice work. Experiential learning is a growing commitment in higher education because of its ability to move learning beyond theory by challenging learners to apply what they have been studying and acquire new knowledge through reflection and action. (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Experiential Learning in Childhood Settings

As research on undergraduates learning experientially in low-income childhood spaces mainly focuses on preservice teachers' participating in literacy initiatives as reading tutors (Donahue et al., 2016; Pittman and Garfield, 2014), less is known about the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates delivering social justice education lessons in these spaces. Research by Bentley & Hendricks (2018), Burke & Cutter-Mackenzie (2010), and Zyngier (2017) illuminates projects where undergraduates' interactions with local elementary school students align with social justice education goals such as creating spaces that center children's interests for children to think critically and be empowered. However, these studies focus on the positive

outcomes for children participating. This leaves a gap in regard to the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates who deliver social justice lessons in low-income childhood spaces.

Empowering Youth through Experiential Learning

Community partnerships between universities and local school districts have been shown to be beneficial to pre-service teachers, by giving them experience applying what they have learned in the classroom in order to work to empower youth in the local community (Coffey, 2010; Liao et al., 2018; Radina et al., 2018; Zyngier, 2017). Through working with youth from low-income communities, students are able to gain a new perspective on the spaces surrounding their institution and provide valuable resources that community leaders have identified a need for.

The work of both Radina et al. (2019) and Liao et al. (2018) demonstrate the value of service learning as a form of experiential learning and the use of literacy activities to empower youth. Building from an already existing school-university-community partnership, Radina et al. (2019) write about the experience of using Youth Participatory Action Research to empower youth to identify social justice issues within their communities and take action to work towards change. Similarly, Liao et al. (2018), describe the positive learning outcomes for teacher candidates who partnered with local high schoolers to create film and dance projects to represent social justice issues. Both of these partnerships were mutually beneficial, allowing teacher candidates to learn from youth's lived experiences and give youth the space and language to express how inequalities had affected their lives.

Experiential Learning and Anti-Poverty Projects

Contemporary research on undergraduates engaged in experiential learning opportunities with a focus on poverty (De Saxe & Favela, 2018; Klimt, 2018; Lien & Hakim, 2013; O'Meara,

2017; Steck et al., 2011) illuminates that experiential learning can raise undergraduates' awareness of the injustices faced by people living in poverty as well as enable undergraduates to critically reflect on their own privileges and biases. One method employed in undergraduate courses to help counter the dominant narratives told about people living in poverty is to partner students with organizations in low-income communities. Klimt (2018) analyzed the experiences of students who participated in a photography project through a partnership with a local community meant to build empathy and a deeper understanding of the experiences of those living in poverty. Klimt (2018) found that over the course of the project students' photographs, as well as their perceptions of poverty in the community, changed from focusing on "evidence of economic and social distress" (p. 128) to working to tell residents' stories of strength, resilience and hope.

Lien & Hakim (2013) studied undergraduates engaged in a similar project with additional components of poverty simulations and an actionable piece. Both of these projects are anti-poverty projects, because they help undergraduates gain a more nuanced understanding of poverty and its effects on people's lives by pushing undergraduates out of their comfort zones to engage with people in the local community. These projects have been shown to leave undergraduates with a commitment to work towards social justice and see beyond dominant narratives about marginalized groups.

Methods

Participants in this qualitative study were recent graduates of a small private liberal arts college in Central New York. Participants were identified for recruitment based on their enrollment in an education course during the 2019 academic year. Undergraduates in the course participated in a semester-long project on critical pedagogy which culminated with delivering a

literacy based social justice education lesson to children or youth at a community site. Five undergraduates visited a school-age child care center for children who attended elementary school in a local village. The other five participants visited a community organization serving low-income children and families in a local city.

To recruit participants, the graduates were contacted through email. All ten graduates opted to participate and completed electronic interviews. Electronic interviews were a valuable method for this research, because they allowed participants to give their fullest responses to questions and paint a picture of their experiences. Electronic interviews also enabled researchers to ask participants follow-up questions, giving the written interviews a conversational aspect. Line by line emic coding was used to more fully understand participants' perspectives about their experiences and takeaways. Data analysis was then conducted to find emergent themes within the participants' interviews.

Researcher Positionality

As someone who is intending to pursue a career as an elementary school teacher, I am committed to learning about social justice education as a form of anti-poverty work in order to create an equitable classroom environment and foster meaningful relationships with students. As a researcher, I recognize that my positionality in relation to participants may serve as a potential limitation. For example, privileged aspects of my identity such as being middle class and White may limit my ability to fully understand and capture the experiences of participants with marginalized social class or racial identities. Additionally, as I currently attend the college where this research was conducted, my identity as a peer of the graduates interviewed may have helped participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences but may have also been a limitation if participants were looking for more of a sense of anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

Participants' interview responses revealed the positive impact experiential learning through delivering literacy based social justice education lessons had on undergraduates' understanding of the community surrounding their college as well as its effect of raising their awareness of their own identities and biases. Working with children and youth challenged undergraduates' previous understandings of who social justice education can benefit and when people start becoming aware of inequality. The following analysis will work to establish a dialogue between experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and five emergent themes across interview responses: valuing children's and youth's interests and identities with relevant literacy-based activities, fostering children's and youth's self-expression through literacy-based activities, fostering identity awareness-raising for undergraduates, the value of experiential learning, and the significance of college-community partnerships

Valuing Children's and Youth's Interests and Identities with Relevant Literacy-Based Activities

One emergent theme across interview responses is valuing children's and youth's interests and identities with relevant literacy-based activities. This theme showed up in all 10 participants' interview responses. In looking at this theme, two key patterns that emerge are centering children's and youth's knowledge and experiences and the relevance of lessons beyond the classroom.

Centering Children's and Youth's Knowledge and Experiences. Undergraduates at both sites reflected on their processes of designing activities that would achieve their goals of empowering students, centering students' interests, and building community among students. At the elementary school the undergraduates that led the lesson on making "how to" books chose this activity to give children a space where they were the experts. This lesson was meant to

deconstruct the power dynamics between undergraduates and children, so that children saw the power in their lived experiences and could share a skill they were proud of. One participant reflected on how her group designed their activity writing:

> We wanted to include student voice and choice. So we knew that we wanted a lesson plan that allowed for the students to use creativity and their own lived experiences. This goal was important to us because throughout the semester we were taught the importance of using students' lived experiences in social justice education. It is crucial to do so in order to prove that students of all backgrounds have important knowledge to contribute to the classroom space.

Drawing on the work of Freire (2000), undergraduates worked to disrupt the banking model of education traditionally used in classroom spaces and identified that they hoped to show children that despite their age they had valuable knowledge that was important to share with others. By having discussions with children and helping them transform their knowledge into a book, undergraduates hoped to empower children by giving them the tools to share their experiences. Designing lessons like this one where the teacher steps back and lets student voices take the lead is an important skill for undergraduates to learn. Whether or not they are hoping to become educators in the future, understanding how to create spaces where they can elevate the voices of those whose knowledge is not usually seen as valuable and create supportive communities for those voices to be heard is an essential skill in the fight for social justice. By working with children and youth, undergraduates got to see how powerful these spaces can be and the value of listening.

Kolb (1984) writes, "If the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new more refined ideas into the person's belief system, the learning process will be facilitated" (p. 28). By having the experience of working with children, undergraduates were able to learn how doing social justice work in a community space is much different than learning about social justice in a classroom.

The process of learning and then testing out what one has learned in order to acquire new knowledge is central to ELT. The majority of undergraduates named that because of their experience in the community, the value of social justice education for children and youth is something that has stayed with them well beyond the course.

      Relevance Beyond the Classroom. At the community organization undergraduates reflected on the process of trying to create an activity that would be meaningful and relevant to youth outside of the classroom space. Similar to the goals of the lesson at the elementary school, undergraduates wanted to design an activity that would center children's interests and identities and empower them. One participant reflected on the lesson planning process writing:

> A group member also had the idea of having a discussion about poetry, particularly the work of Shakespeare. I personally questioned that because the work of Shakespeare is so normative in schools and it is not directed at Black, Indigenous/Latino, or Asian students. So in discussing these options, we had to balance practicality with meaningfulness for the community of students we would engage with.

Across participants and sites, many undergraduates named the importance of planning and delivering their social justice lessons as a group. Moments such as this one, allowed undergraduates to learn from each other and push each other to think beyond what is traditionally taught in classroom spaces and whose knowledge is traditionally valued. By deciding to lead a lesson on creating "youtopias," undergraduates created a space where youth could reflect on what was important in their lives and then imagine how they would want the world to be. Having this space allowed youth to critically reflect on social injustices and gave them the language to talk about their experiences and visions for a better world. Lessons like this one have the potential to create lasting change in youths' lives beyond the classroom space by empowering them to talk about the changes they want to see in their own communities and what is important to them. This can be an important step in anti-poverty work, because it allows the undergraduates

facilitating the lesson to better understand youth and their experiences as well as giving both undergraduates and youth the space to envision what positive social change in their communities could lead to.

One of the six propositions of ELT is that "Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world" (Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Teaching literacy based social justice education lessons gives youth the opportunity to express their experiences, while at the same time introducing undergraduates to how people living in different communities who may have different identities than their own experience the world. The "youtopia" project allowed both youth and undergraduates to reflect on injustices present in their communities, but also empowered them to realize that things could be different. This experience follows ELT in that it challenged both youth and undergraduates to see the world in a different way and then adapt to that new vision by focusing on social change.

Fostering Children's and Youth's Self-Expression Through Literacy-Based Activities

Fostering children's and youth's self-expression through literacy-based activities, is a second emergent theme found. While this theme showed up in all 10 participants' interview responses, it was clear that undergraduates who visited the community organization had the strongest connection to it. In looking at this theme, two key patterns that emerge are empowering students and building supportive communities.

Empowering Students. When designing an activity for youth at the community organization, undergraduates felt that it was important for them to include time for youth to independently self-reflect on what their ideal world would look like. After youth had time independently, they shared their ideas with their peers and worked collaboratively to create a world where they would all feel safe and included. The children at the community organization

are predominantly low-income students of color. One undergraduate, who reflected on the similarity of the space to spaces where he grew up, reflected on the power of writing for youth with marginalized identities:

> Writing provides students with an outlet for open and honest self-reflection and expression, where they are free to find their voice and speak their innermost thoughts and feelings without fear of judgement. This act can be especially potent for students with marginalized identities who come from under-resourced communities, because they are all too often rendered voiceless by those in power who seek to oppress and marginalize them. The activities we facilitated were literacy based by design, because we understood that the students we were working with might not have ever experienced a safe space where they could freely express themselves before.

Many undergraduates identified the value of giving youth the opportunity to first reflect individually before sharing out with the group. This time was important for youth to really think about their identities and how these identities affect how they experience the world. Creating a safe and supportive environment for youth to reflect can lead to powerful conversations when youth share with others what they have been writing about. Many undergraduates found their presence was important in this space because by listening to youth and validating their opinions they could encourage self-expression and empower youth to share their stories and beliefs more confidently. Empowering children's and youth's self-expression through literacy based activities shows children and youth they have agency over their lives and worlds and gives them the experience and language to talk about changes they would like to see in their communities.

According to Kolb (1984), for a person to learn effectively they need the ability of reflective observation: "to be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives" (p. 30). By giving youth the space to consider their own experiences, and imagine their ideal worlds, undergraduates worked to achieve their goal of empowering youth through self-expression. Undergraduates were then able to practice reflective observation of their own personal experiences by listening to the many perspectives youth had on inequality. Writing is an

important tool for social justice education as well as for experiential learning, because it gives students of all ages time to more fully consider their experiences and think critically about how their positionality has affected these experiences as well as imagine what a more just world could look like.

      Building Supportive Communities. Undergraduates identified that building supportive communities within the classroom would be important in order for children and youth to feel comfortable and safe expressing themselves through writing. At the community organization specifically, undergraduates emphasized the necessity of listening to youth's voices and centering youth's experiences and interests. Doing this was important in order to work towards deconstructing the inherent power dynamics created by undergraduates from an elite institution coming into a low-income community space. By prioritizing listening to youth and showing them the value of their voices and opinions, undergraduates were able to establish connections with youth and empower them to share their views. One undergraduate reflecting on her experience wrote:

> The strengths of the activity were that students could analyze the strengths and weaknesses of society, and then using their own opinions, thoughts, and experiences, they could choose what to keep and what to eliminate. They each were required to contribute in some way. This empowered each student's voice and mind, and they could feel as though they were heard or seen as they contributed to the mural.

Undergraduates worked to achieve their goal of having youth come together at the end of the activity and engage in dialogue around what their ideal world would look like. This collaborative aspect of the activity was meant to give youth agency over their own world while at the same time asking them to ensure that everyone's voices were heard, and everyone's needs were met. Giving youth this opportunity for collaboration was important, because it showed undergraduates youth's awareness of the inequalities in the world and their ability to work together to come up

with ideas in order to make the world a better place that they would like to live in. Listening to youth express themselves in this way helped raise undergraduates' awareness of the value of listening to those whose voices are often marginalized and valuing their opinions and ideas when working towards fostering change.

Writing about service-learning as a type of experiential learning, Sigmon (1997) states, "In any service-based program it is essential to align the key relationships on principles of mutual respect, realizing that each person has the ability to be learner and teacher, server and served" (p. 5). Undergraduates learned from youth through their experience at the community organization, and this learning was able to occur because of the type of lesson that was being delivered. Two of the goals of social justice education lessons are to empower students and to build community. By disrupting existing power dynamics in the space and elevating youth's voices, undergraduates were able to complicate the relationship between learner and teacher and server and served to create what they identified as a mutually beneficial learning experience for all involved.

Fostering identity awareness-raising for undergraduates

A third emergent theme found in the research is fostering identity awareness-raising for undergraduates. This theme showed up in all 10 participants' interview responses. In looking at this theme, two key patterns that emerge are undergraduates' assumptions about children and youth and undergraduates' reflection on their own positionality.

Undergraduates' Assumptions about Children and Youth. Undergraduates made initial assumptions about children and youth when arriving at their sites that were often changed after delivering their lessons. Both undergraduates who identified as White women assumed that the youth at the community organization would be "rowdy" and have trouble focusing on the

activity. These beliefs were challenged after interacting with the youth, and both women

expressed surprise at how focused and supportive of each other youth were during the activity.

Even though the women who named holding these assumptions were enrolled in a class on social

justice and were aware of the theoretical importance of reflection on bias and privilege before

doing social justice work, it took experiential learning for them to challenge these stereotypes

and reflect on why they held them.

Across both sites undergraduates also assumed that children would have a limited

awareness of inequality. At the community organization especially, this initial assumption was

challenged as youth included things in their "Youtopias" to represent their views on politics,

inequalities in education, and the importance of supportive communities. One undergraduate

reflected on his experience writing:

> I was surprised to see that grade school-aged children were so aware of the systemic
> issues affecting their lives, schools, families, and communities. Everyone approached the
> activity with a budding awareness of social inequality that we, as facilitators, had the
> opportunity to help cultivate during our time with them. Prior to this encounter, I was
> doubtful about young children's ability to perceive and name the social ills surrounding
> them. However, to my surprise, I realized they were much more competent at calling out
> problematic trends in their immediate reality than I had initially given them credit for.

This experience raised undergraduates' awareness about youth's potential to understand social

inequality and also youth's ability to recognize where changes could be made to improve society.

Teaching social justice lessons where children and youth are given the space to express their

feelings and opinions and are empowered to share their ideas with older students is essential so

that children and youth learn early on that their voices are important and powerful. By listening

to and interacting with younger students, undergraduates became more aware of their own

identities and biases. Children and youth are often left out of conversations about inequality and

social justice, because it is assumed they are too young to understand. Hearing children's and

youth's voices in these conversations challenged undergraduates' previous assumptions about the capabilities of students of these ages and made undergraduates reflect on why their own voices are usually privileged because of their age and their status as students at an elite institution.

Kolb (2005) writes, "To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning - a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts" (p. 194). Working with children and youth through experiential learning allowed undergraduates to get real time feedback on what they had learned in the college classroom as well as to challenge assumptions they had made about what interacting with students would be like. With experiential learning, emphasis is placed on the process of learning not on the outcomes, because learning is viewed as a lifelong process and one's knowledge is constantly being transformed and built on depending on one's experiences (Kolb, 1984). Having the experience of learning by working with children and youth was important for undergraduates' process of understanding their own biases and the work they personally need to do to create equitable learning environments.

Undergraduate Reflection on Positionality. Through experiential learning in community spaces, undergraduates became more aware of their own positionality and how it affected their interactions with students and delivery of their lessons. Participants who visited the elementary school, which is a predominantly White space, reflected on the importance of social justice education in privileged spaces to enable children to understand and engage with difference and become aware of their own privilege. One participant who visited the elementary school stated:

> My positionality affected my teaching of social justice lessons because it was really important to include my own experiences as a Black woman into the discussion and into the discussion questions that prompted further thinking about who is often left out, even in the setting of a workshop that is predominantly White. My positionality always makes

me more passionate about having an outcome that shows that participants left with more awareness and an ability to think critically about the spaces they inhabit and the voices that are present.

As a Black woman this participant reflected on the importance of including her own experiences when engaging in dialogue with the children. In predominantly White spaces, conversations about race are often missing, and children are unaware of the privilege they have because of their skin color or the biases they may hold. All participants who visited the elementary school wrote about their awareness of this dynamic and in response the importance of identity awareness raising for children in predominantly White spaces as well as the representation of diverse role models.

Across interview responses, a few undergraduates also identified as having difficulty interacting with and relating to children and youth because of their backgrounds. One participant wrote:

I think it's definitely important for me to see that as a White woman, I am someone that many students of color, particularly Black students, may see as a threat or as someone they do not trust because of the White privilege I hold. So I think with that, at the community organization it took a little more coaxing to gain students' trust and I had to kind of let the students do their own thing before I could fully interact with them.

This participant who identified as a White woman expressed her initial discomfort entering a space and working with youth who had a different racial background than her own. Throughout her interview she referenced her surprise that youth were not immediately comfortable with her. Through the experience of visiting a community site, this participant was forced to step out of her comfort zone and apply the theories she had learned about social justice. This experience taught participants the importance of continuously reflecting on their positionality and privilege in relation to the children and youth they are working with in order to understand the biases they hold and challenge these biases to ensure they are creating equitable classroom environments.

One of the propositions of ELT is that "all learning is relearning" (Kolb, 1984) This means that "Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas" (Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Although participants had previously reflected on their intersectional identities and positionality in relation to the children and youth they would be working with, the concrete experience of entering a space and engaging with community members proved valuable for undergraduates to critically engage with the power dynamics in relation to these identities. Experiential learning pushed undergraduates to not only write about their understanding of the implications of their privilege, but also to experience this privilege in real scenarios and reflect on its effect on their interactions with children and youth.

The Value of Experiential Learning

The value of experiential learning is another emergent theme across interview responses. This theme showed up in all 10 participants' interview responses. In looking at this theme, two key patterns that emerge are critical moments for undergraduates and the benefits of putting theory into practice.

Critical Moments for Undergraduates. All participants faced either logistical or pedagogical challenges during their experiences delivering their lessons. Logistical challenges included things such as being in a loud gym instead of a classroom space at the elementary school. Pedagogical challenges varied widely but were similar in that they proved critical for undergraduates' understanding of social justice education and the importance of experiential learning about this work. One such critical moment happened at the community organization where many youth included McDonald's in their "youtopias". One undergraduate reflected on his

choice to resist his temptation to step in, even though he had strong feelings about McDonald's in relation to low-income communities:

> My critiquing of their preferences would be ill-placed because I had the educational and food security privilege of my high school and undergraduate institutions. Telling the students present for the activity that McDonald's was unhealthy and they should not include it in their utopia would have been irresponsible. Moving forward, I always have to do the work of being self-reflective of my privilege in relation to different communities I enter through partnership and be mindful of when I should keep my own personal beliefs to myself. I liked that I was able to stop myself from doing any harm in the ways I described and it made me aware of the limits to what an educator can do and should do.

Critical moments such as this one are impossible to replicate inside a college classroom. Through experiential learning, undergraduates were able to interact with children and youth and see how the lesson plans they had created played out in real time. These interactions with children and youth were named by the majority of participants as key to their understanding of social justice education and its value as anti-poverty work. Experiential learning allows undergraduates to reflect on their privilege while at the same time working to empower and amplify voices that have historically been marginalized. These experiences can help raise undergraduates' awareness of social inequality in a meaningful way that would not be possible through theory alone.

The four cyclical stages of Kolb's (1984) ELT model are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The critical moments named by undergraduates serve as concrete experiences, and by reflecting on these experiences, abstract concepts, such as learning how to best respond when a critical moment occurs, start to develop. Then, in future scenarios, undergraduates are able to draw on these abstract concepts and test their knowledge through active experimentation, as the cycle starts anew. Many undergraduates named their experience delivering social justice lessons as important for their understanding of economic inequality and the role critical pedagogy can play in anti-poverty work. By reflecting

on their concrete experiences doing social justice work, undergraduates were better able to understand the value of social justice education and its application as anti-poverty work.

Benefits of Putting Theory into Practice. Adapting to unplanned moments like the one previously mentioned challenged undergraduates to apply what they had been learning in the college classroom to real life experiences. At the elementary school one of the biggest takeaways for undergraduates was the importance of flexibility when doing social justice work. Undergraduates were expecting to deliver their lessons in a classroom space, but instead one group ended up working in the corner of what they identified as a loud and crowded gym and the other group was in a cafeteria space with less children than expected. Because of these surprises, undergraduates had to adapt their lessons to better fit the energy of the space and the children they were working with. This challenged undergraduates to apply the theoretical work they had done in class in the moment. One undergraduate reflected on the value of this experience writing:

> Being able to carry out a lesson with real students is very different from a lot of the theoretical work we do in classrooms. We get to see firsthand what works and what doesn't in the classroom. We get to exchange knowledge directly with people who are different from us and not just our peers.

Adapting their lessons to keep children interested was a key part of the experience for undergraduates, because it made them realize that things rarely go as planned when teaching. A lesson that sounded really great in theory to undergraduates may not be interpreted the same way by elementary schoolers. For this reason, the experience of getting into the community was essential for undergraduates' understanding of social justice education as a form of anti-poverty work. Getting off campus allowed undergraduates to interact with people they otherwise would not have been able to and to learn from children in the community whose life experiences and views may have differed from their own. Experiential learning taught undergraduates that unexpected moments are unavoidable when teaching and that the only way to become a better

educator is to learn to adapt to these challenges by putting the theory they learned in class into practice.

Kolb (1984) writes that when one is transforming experience into knowledge there are two extremes of learning abilities, with reflective observation on one extreme and active experimentation on the other. A learner has to be able to apply a varying degree of each of these learning abilities depending on the situation they are in, in order to transform their experiences into knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Learning a theory in the college classroom would be placed at one end of the extreme as reflective observation. Undergraduates can reflect on their own experiences in K-12 classrooms to inform their understanding of how social justice education should be implemented. On the other extreme, when undergraduates visit community spaces, they are actively experimenting by applying the theory they have reflected on. Following Kolb (1984), because experiential learning gives undergraduates practice with each of these learning abilities, it cultivates creativity and growth.

The Significance of College-Community Partnerships

The fifth emergent theme found across interview responses is the significance of college-community partnerships. This theme showed up in all 10 participants' interview responses. In looking at this theme, two key patterns that emerge are breaking down the college-community divide and building mutually beneficial partnerships.

Breaking Down the College-Community Divide. One pattern that was apparent across interview responses was undergraduates feeling as if the college exists in a "bubble" that is isolated from the community. Many undergraduates had not previously heard of the sites they visited, and their knowledge of community members was based on assumptions rather than experience. Similarly, many undergraduates believed that community members viewed students

who attended their college as privileged and elitist and would be wary of having them in their spaces. One student reflected on the benefits of college-community partnerships writing:

> If there is no connection between the college and its local community, negative perceptions and assumptions about the people from either camp may continue to persist and only result in a severed relationship going forward. Instead of allowing this problematic trend to keep growing, the only remedy is an equitable partnership between both parties, and a viable first step in that process can be having undergraduates visit local schools to conduct social justice education work alongside the students in those spaces, which shows that we care about tending to those relationships.

Before delivering their lessons, undergraduates wrote that it was important for them to critically reflect on their positionality and biases in order to deconstruct existing power dynamics between themselves and community members and avoid the White savior stereotype they viewed as often associated with undergraduates from an elite institution doing work in the community. Because undergraduates visited community sites to deliver their lessons, undergraduates and community members were able to connect and build relationships, in order to better understand each other as people. Developing equitable relationships is essential for college-community partnerships so that everyone involved has the opportunity to contribute and feel valued and heard throughout the relationship.

According to Kolb (1984), "Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience." Grasping experience happens through two learning abilities: concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Abstract concepts are formed based on past experiences and generalizations. Because of the limited interactions most undergraduates identified between themselves and community members prior to this experiential learning course, both undergraduates and community members had generalized assumptions about each other. By the concrete experience of interacting and developing relationships through literacy based social justice education lessons, undergraduates named that they were able to

move past previous assumptions and stereotypes and start to build trust with community

members and break down the college-community divide.

      Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships. A primary focus of the undergraduates

doing this work was the relationships developed between the community sites and the college.

When planning the lessons they would deliver, undergraduates emphasized the importance of

listening to community partners' needs and valuing their knowledge. One participant who visited

the community organization reflected that:

> The community partnership aspect of any educational work honors the fact that many
> community members are experts in their own experiences and are aware of their needs.
> This work requires that educators coming into communities ask about these needs rather
> than tell the community what it needs based on biased understandings of impoverished
> communities and what non-community members believe would help students in those
> spaces.

At the community organization a key moment named by this participant was when one of the site

leaders working there commended the undergraduates on how well their activity aligned with the

organization's goals of building supportive communities among children in their care. By

prioritizing listening to community members, undergraduates were able to use the college's

resources to plan lessons for youth that met the sites' identified needs. Similarly, undergraduates

benefitted from interacting with community members, because it gave them the opportunity to

learn firsthand about the spaces surrounding the college and get real time feedback through

working with children and youth. Ensuring that community partnerships are beneficial to both

parties involved requires open communication between undergraduates and community

members. Because most undergraduates are not from the area surrounding the college, it is

important for them to check the assumptions they have about the community by centering

community members' lived experiences and knowledge.

Writing about experiential learning programs that equally weigh service and learning Sigmon (1997) writes, "In these programs we are challenged to respect local situations for what they can teach. Likewise, students are challenged to be their best, to listen, to explore, to learn, to share from their emerging capacities" (p. 4). Service-learning as a form of experiential learning, emphasizes the fact that college-community partnerships must be mutually beneficial in order to be successful. Creating a partnership where undergraduates can learn from the wealth of knowledge community members have about the children and youth in their care must start by listening to the community members' values and needs. The importance of listening continues when undergraduates teach children and youth social justice lessons because, as undergraduates identified in their interview responses, in order to empower students and work towards social justice and class equity, marginalized voices need to be central and heard.

Conclusion

This study drew on the research of Kolb (1984) and his development of experiential learning theory, in order to examine the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates delivering literacy based social justice education lessons in childhood spaces. Aligning with contemporary research on undergraduates engaged in experiential learning through college-community partnerships (Cairney & Breen, 2017; Coffey, 2010), this study found that learning in the local community allowed undergraduates to critically reflect on their own positionalities as well as to develop a deeper understanding of social injustice and economic inequality. Undergraduates' interview responses also demonstrate the benefits of putting the theories they learned in the college classroom into practice. Experiential learning helped undergraduates to more fully understand the value of literacy based social justice education for children and youth and the role it can play in empowering students by helping them express their experiences with confidence

and believe in their ability to create lasting change in their communities (Costello, 2018; Dunkerly-Bean et al., 2017).

By focusing on undergraduates delivering literacy-based social justice education lessons to children and youth in community spaces, this study aimed to bridge the gap between research done on the benefits of literacy based social justice education for children and youth and the research done on the value of experiential learning for undergraduates through college-community partnerships. The findings suggest that delivering literacy-based social justice education lessons to children and youth is a powerful experience for undergraduates. Children's and youth's awareness of the inequalities affecting their lives and ideas for change, challenged undergraduates' previous assumptions about what children and youth were capable of understanding and articulating. Furthermore, interacting with children and youth through mutually beneficial college-community partnerships allowed undergraduates to learn from community members' knowledge and experiences. This experiential learning opportunity left a lasting impression on undergraduates and many named their interactions with children and youth as essential to them fostering an ongoing commitment to anti-poverty work.

Across interview responses, undergraduates identified the value of establishing longer term college-community partnerships. The participants in this study worked throughout the course of a semester to learn about social justice education and develop their lesson plans but visited community sites only once. Undergraduates identified that after delivering their lessons they wished they had the opportunity to go back and continue to develop relationships with the children and youth they had worked with. Further research is needed on the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates participating in longer term partnerships of this kind. Additionally, further research on the value of undergraduates delivering social justice education lessons to

children and youth would be useful. This research would help to more fully illuminate the impact college-community partnerships can have as anti-poverty work in the movement for social justice. These recommendations for longer-term college-community partnerships and future research on undergraduates engaged in experiential learning projects with children and youth are important in order to work to establish equitable relationships between college students and members of local communities. These partnerships are valuable social justice tools, because they enable colleges and communities to share valuable resources which can help to foster lasting and shared commitments to working towards social justice and class equity.

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