Perpetuating Transformation Education: Early Childhood Graduate Students Enacting Transnational Tenets

Following the hundred-year, devastating tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in 2004 where all was lost along the coast, a leading early childhood educator communicated with graduate students for assistance. Dr. Ratna Megawangi, Executive Director of the Indonesia Heritage Foundation, requested support, and a group of graduate students responded. The process to rebuild two preschools is discussed in this narrative as it describes how the graduate students enacted a transformational, transnational curriculum through a class-selected project.

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**Introduction**

Unmistakably, the past illuminates our way into the future. It is Kierkegaard who reminds us of this certainty. Yet, so often it is neglected in understanding how to live in the now en-route to the future. Consequently, this insight can be applied to transformational education. Transformation is defined as curricula designed to encourage students to care for others and to make a difference in the world (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). Engagement in social action creates windows on the past that establish memories. To genuinely understand competent citizenship, students develop as responsive learners through participating in the considering of others in need. Involvement in social action opens the door of reflection.

**Review of Literature**

Having recollections about involvement in social action are foundational and create a collective history that offer students a means not just to understand the present while establishing a moral code, but to envision future roles of global citizenship, or more recently articulated as transnationalism. Transnationalism is citizenship that encompasses the local, national, and international communities. Through social action projects that affect change globally, students extend citizenship awareness and its faces of identities (Banks, 2008; Knight-Abowitz & Harnish, 2006).

Nussbaum (2002) asserts that civic education is an educative means for teachers to develop the aggregate of students’ ability, knowledge, skills, and values to effectively operate within their communities. This is genuine schooling (Sprague Mitchell, 1934). Furthermore, Nussbaum states that it is not only within the local community that students focus, but also increase their conception from expanding ideas of belonging to state, region, nation, and to the global community.

If teachers plan and implement curriculum for social action, it is vital for them to model transformative and critical conceptions of citizenship education. Promoting democratic ideals, citizenship in action, and ultimately transformational social action give students ample opportunities to experience citizenship that has social justice dimensions while simultaneously learning all content areas. Immersion experiences give students the ability to describe characteristics of democracy because they have a lived experience from which to draw. Students who participate in social action are citizens of today, not of the future (Banks, 2008; Dewey, 1916; Kincheloe, 2001; Osler, 2005). If learners do not have first-hand experiences with social action, will they internalize the reality of citizenship or come to understand democracy?

**Democracy**

Democracy is the principled ideal in the United States; except, all too often, the ideals of democracy are violated. There is a huge chasm between valuing democracy and the reality of how the pluralistic society in the US lives. Racism rampantly exists in our culture, as do perpetuated, stereotypical perceptions (Savage & Armstrong, 1992; Sunal & Haas, 2008).

Schools are often the least democratic places in the US. Democracy is seldom the way in which teachers plan, implement, or evaluate learning. Routinely, the regime of direct learning is expected and orchestrated by administrators. Traditional classroom learning is predominantly an autocratic endeavor. Inspiration, creativity, and inductive intelligence are being slowly snuffed out, while textbook peddlers promote scripted, behaviorist modes of learning. Sadly, these non-authentic learning situations spread while companies earn millions, and students’ involvement in citizenship in social action wanes.

Consequently, teachers and students alike are then deskilled, demoralized, and more and more undereducated because of the deluge of scripted programs and direct instruction. In
essence, teachers are de-professionalized (Al-
dridge & Goldman, 2007). Educators live and
teach in contradiction and paradox (Wink,
2005)! How can society expect learners to de-
scribe democracy and graduate from school
knowing how to subsist within one with little-
to-negligible experience? Emancipation from
restrictive teaching and learning environments,
teacher and student yearn for a time when
more democratic circumstances are expected.
So, foremost, when the present educational si-
tuation sounds so dire, how do critical educa-
tors perceive the contradictions? Subsequently,
how do educators attempt a democratic ap-
proach to teaching and learning that is the ex-
periential heart of transformational social
action?

Social Action and the Social Studies

One fundamental solution is to connect ele-
mentary social studies teachers and students to
people and organizations where social action
can make a difference within first-hand, mean-
ningful contexts for students. If achieved, in-
terest and social relationships become habits of
mind which do secure social change (Dewey,
1916). Making a difference for others becomes
transformational social action whether it is in a
local or global setting. This is the essence of
the social studies.

Transformational social action can reverse
the notion that educators tend to teach as they
were taught by simply taking on the mantle as they
graduate. Unfortunately, using basals and
textbooks, having students answer questions
about chapter readings with related work-
sheets, and testing them about subject matter
taught seems to be the present state of educa-
tion. The focus is on literacy, numeracy, and
assessment. This current curricular perspective,
strained by policy makers, trains teachers to set
the stage for learners to become engaged in
short-sided, academic instruction to the exclu-
sion of learning how to be civically or globally
responsible (Beaty, 2004; Katz, 1996).

Preparing children for future educative
success and only concentrating on cognitive
functioning at lower levels, such as memoriz-
ing and recalling, creative, critical verbal re-
flexion that naturally occurs with young child-
ren allows ever important abilities to atrophy.
With the existing pressure on academics rather
than on discovery of the world around them,
learners miss out on crucial opportunities to
construct meaning, develop language, and in-
terpret experiences in social, emotion, and cog-
nitive settings. Kincheloe (2001) describes
how social studies education at any level can
be civically challenging and result in social
action. His conception includes teachers assist-
ing learners in the development of enough
social studies content knowledge to be able to
analyze and construct self and social know-
ledge through immersion in social action.
Consequently, students would have the cognitive
tools to knowledgeably ask questions and to
be self directed. It is peculiar that so few
school administrators seem unaware that the
training ground for democracy lies within the
walls of learning.

If students are involved in education that is
oriented toward transformational social action,
students consider their civically belonging at
the local and global levels. Democracy be-
comes authentic, active, and challenging
(Sunal & Haas, 2008). Students, together with
their teachers, predict how social action is
connected to justice and equality. This is one
way that social action is possible (Kincheloe,
2001). This conceptualization is the basis for
this study. The question guiding the inquiry
was “How did teacher participants enrolled in
early childhood graduate coursework move
from a curriculum of reading and discussing
issues to enacting a transnational, transforma-
tional social action project?

Method

A narrative, interpretive design was chosen
to guide this qualitative study (Denzin, 1989).
As researchers, we sought to better compre-
hend how graduate students enrolled in course
work described how they enacted transforma-
tive, social action and transnational curriculum
through the process of a class-selected project
while implementing what they studied in class
readings. We sought to ascertain the particular
ways twelve teacher/graduate student partici-
pants characterized how they progressed from
decision making about the project to enacting
the transnational project after reading and
studying issues of transformative, transnational
education.

After gathering the data, we decided a case
study design might be a better method to
utilize to interpret the findings and describe
how we understood the events in the current
issues graduate course. Case study is sustained
on three tenets: describing, understanding, and
explaining (Yin, 1989). Through using a case
study method, the researchers attempted to
convey a vicarious experience for the readers
(Merriam, 1998). The description is an effort
to vividly describe the narrative as it unfolded
and transport the readers to the setting. The
twelve participants subsequently were set with-
in a case study which was in essence still a nar-
rative research design.

Participants

The participants were 12 teachers enrolled
in an early childhood graduate program at a
southeastern university. All were veteran
teachers. To examine the research question for
this study, the researchers collaboratively
designed and analyzed the study. Pseudonyms
were used for all of the students with the
exception of Marcie Hill, who was a student in
the class, a member checker, peer de-briefer,
and a co-author for the study.

Data Set

Teacher participants posted responses on
an electronic discussion board. Email interac-
tions, photographs, newspaper articles, field
notes, and reflective journals were kept by
researchers and participants. A collectively
written recapitulation by class members about
“cultural capital” and final papers submitted by
the teacher participants served as the multiple
pieces of the robust data set.

Data Analysis

Researchers used an interpretive and induct-
ive method to analyze the data set. The re-
searchers repeatedly read each piece of datum.
Independently and jointly, we developed pre-
codes or bracketed the data (Denzin, 1989). To
identify emergent themes from the data, we
took the bracketed elements and categorized
them until we settled on themes that made
sense to the three of us. Highlighting coded
words was the scheme used to identify themes.

The researchers employed a case study,
narrative approach, but also immersed the data
into interpretive analysis. Yin (1994) stressed
that case study researchers are operative as a
co-investigators during the course of data col-
lection. The process begins with a problem and
follows with the development of a case study.
Case study method is utilized to examine con-
temporary real-life situations and to provide
the basis for the application of ideas and
extension of methods. Researcher Yin (1994)
defines the case study as an empirical syste-
matic method inquiry that researchers use to
investigate contemporary phenomenon within
an authentic context, especially when the
boundaries between the phenomenon and
context are not clearly evident. This method
seemed a perfect fit for the data set which was
the interaction between the graduate students/
veteran teachers and the Executive Director of
the Indonesia Heritage Foundation (IHF), Dr.
Ratna Megawangi. The IHF is a non-govern-
mental, non-political, and non-religious organ-
ization that seeks to prepare teachers for dev-
elopmentally appropriate early childhood pro-
grams throughout Indonesia. The particular
area of focus for this transnational project was
Banda Aceh, the hardest hit area from the
To promote trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a procedure for enlisting an outsider to “audit” fieldwork notes and subsequent analysis and interpretations. Triangulation among the data and with the literature was accomplished. Member checks occurred with approximately half of the participants in the group to ensure validity of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Marcie Hill collected all of the asynchronous electronic postings between her 10 colleagues/veteran teachers and Dr. Megawangi and about the Banda Aceh school project. She read and commented on the analysis and on the final paper. Marcie Hill kept the data set of email postings and shared the data set with us for analyzing purposes and this research paper.

**Findings**

Beginning with the process of reading and rereading the set of raw data, we bracketed the data, forming initial categories, and then ultimately identified patterns and set final themes (Denzin, 1989; Yin, 1994). The researchers and Marcie Hill agreed upon the themes that were inductively identified. However, other member checkers corroborated the analysis and the identified themes as well giving the themes inter-rater reliability.

Four themes were identified from the analyzed data. The case study was analyzed, as were the other raw data. The identified themes were as follows: Intent for Change, Respect for Cultural Capital, Plans for Change, and Taking Action. However, as we tried to provide the readers with a vicarious experience of how the case unfolded into a phenomenal transformational social action project, the anchor experience provided participants illumination into future educative endeavors to perpetuate transformational social action into their own elementary school curriculum. Thus, readers can derive how the graduate students took their experience, reflected upon it, and perpetuated social action projects within their teaching contexts. Because of their profound experience over time and the reflective class component, the veteran teacher participants saw the value in taking civic action and in transnational projects for students in their teaching settings.

**Intent for change.** In view of the fact that close to 1,000 teachers died or were missing following the tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in late December of 2004, the teachers who survived suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder due to the loss of children, spouses, parents, families, relatives, and fellow students. The situation was dire. Children who were left in the tsunami-devastated Banda Aceh tragedy re-entered what remained of their schools one month following the tsunami. Prior to the disaster, a school had 205 students. According to Dr. Megawangi, one month after the quake and ensuring tsunami, “Only two children showed up on the first day of school.” Most other elementary schools in Banda Aceh experienced similar conditions. This information was reported via email correspondence from Dr. Megawangi to Marcie Hill. Marci was the primary email correspondent from the graduate course.

The graduate class of 12 teachers had a desire to do something for the young children on the other side of the world. Enrolled in the spring term of 2005 in “EDC 720 Problems and Issues,” following the tsunami in Banda Aceh, Dr. Aldridge knew of the leading early childhood educator, Dr. Ratna Megawangi, (IHF). She became the virtual bond between Marcie and the graduate students/veteran teachers. The IHF is involved in building and supporting quality preschool programs throughout Indonesia, including the coast of the Banda Aceh area. The early childhood graduate students, including Dr. Aldridge, knew that packing up teaching materials, books, and other such resources would take much too long and would not be written in Bahasa, Indonesian, Malay, or other languages spoken in Banda Aceh. These were not suitable options for that rapidly needed assistance.

Initially, the class reached a consensus. They decided to send seeds so that the people
could begin to re-plant much of what was so savagely and swiftly washed away by ravaging waters. Finally, Dr. Aldridge had to step in and help the early childhood teachers’ rethink. He guided them to investigate the city’s geographical region. They realized after researching that much of the vegetation was grown in the mountainous region. Banda Aceh itself survived on the fishing industry. So the seeds were not appropriate for the coastal plain area of Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Ultimately, again cooperatively, the class members decided to email Dr. Megawangi and simply ask her what the most pressing need was from her perspective. Then, the next step would be to try to meet that need.

Reverence for cultural capital. Although we warn our graduate students to specifically document that themes are identified and do not magically emerge, this theme did seem to emerge as it was effortless to identify. Cultural capital generated myriad responses because, as a class, the veteran teachers decided to collectively write a paper with references from critical theorists about how to work with the families left in the community and how to make cultural capital a priority. Through their position of respect, they wanted to revere the cultural capital of the people in Banda Aceh. They learned that cultural capital helps young learners immensely as it demonstrates respect and understanding for them and their families, and the graduate students realized much of what Greene’s (1988) insight reveals:

The ultimate purpose of learning is to help students and teachers create meaning in their lives. Teachers should challenge the “taken for granted,” the given, the bound, and restricted. Knowledge grows out of beliefs that have been subjected to reflection. We must awaken in order to continue our efforts to build a just, compassionate, and meaningful democracy. The goals of education: have children come to understand that learning is to nurture their intellectual talents.

Theory of knowledge is anything that helps us to know ourselves and in the world in which we live. (pp. 54-69)

Once Marcie contacted Dr. Retna Megawangi via email about what she saw as the most urgent need, she responded that so many children and teachers were suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress. Any information about how to deal with either from a child’s point of view or ways to assist adults would be most helpful. She did not have time to search for this information. Dealing with day-to-day pressures was keeping her so busy and frazzled.

Taking salient thoughts from the work of Posner (1992), the teacher participants recorded these important thoughts:

Students are part of a cultural and linguistic reality. All knowledge is valued. A goal for the classroom is to build self-esteem for life. The role of the teacher is to communicate an interest and willingness to incorporate the students’ reality into the curriculum. Teachers come to know and become active in the communities in which they teach.

In an early email exchange between Marcie Hill and Dr. Megawangi, Marcie wrote:

Please keep in mind that we [the early childhood graduate class] wish to be sensitive to the culture of your people. We are sending things that teachers and parents use here in the United States. They may or may not be appropriate to you, your students, and your needs. We hope you understand.

Because of study of critical pedagogy, the early childhood graduate students were aware and took into careful consideration the cultural capital of the people. They knew that the misery of the families so swiftly split apart in
Banda Aceh might need something very different than people here in the US.

**Plans for change.** As Marcie was the class-selected member to email Dr. Megawangi, she had to explain to her how helpless the class was feeling. However, they did think about sending materials to assist the children in a state of unbearable sorrow because of horrific devastation. In the email interactions, Dr. Megawangi suggested that the graduate students could search for and send websites appropriate for young children in grief and trauma. Time began to quickly become a huge obstacle for Dr. Megawangi to attend to gathering appropriate information, so having help from graduate students in the US would be an incredibly effective means to assist her.

Dr. Megawangi also humbly requested materials to assist young children to deal with grief and trauma because she also planned to prepare the early childhood teachers who were left to assist the youngsters affected in Banda Aceh. She also wanted to assist the teachers who experienced depths of sorrow for their families and their students. This is a brief snippet of Dr. Megawangi’s email:

> It’s horrible. Since we didn’t have any experience to prepare teachers to deal with children with tsunami traumatic experience, I’d like to get some information on special activities/play for children in the classroom (play therapy in the classroom) and other information how to deal with traumatic children. We will train kindergarten and elementary school teachers. If you could send us those materials to us, it would be highly appreciated.

This email was read over and over.

The first set of Internet materials sent from the graduate students was from a Tufts University list of highly recommended sites to guide Dr. Megawangi. Interestingly and serendipitously, Dr. Megawangi noted in a subsequent email back to Marcie Hill that she earned her PhD at Tufts University. She was thrilled about the fact that the first set of materials came from her alma mater. She responded to Marcie, “I was surprised that Tufts has that, for I took my MA and PhD degrees at Tufts University.” She was thrilled with the information and spoke of its usefulness. The graduate students took this as a wonderful sign that they were on the right track. They saw this as synchronicity. What they were doing was indeed necessary transnational, transformative social action.

**Taking action.** Next, the twelve early childhood graduate students organized themselves into small groups. One group looked for materials on websites that would help Dr. Megawangi. Another previewed them, yet another screened the websites to make certain that each were developmentally appropriate, useful, and culturally sensitive. Once the materials were deemed suitable, the material or websites were sent to Marcie who then synthesized the material and communicated the website to Dr. Megawangi. They targeted ages of children from pre-kindergarten through age twelve.

One particular website, Drawn Together, offered resources as well as literature reviews about using art as a means to deal with grief in young children. PowerPoint presentations, drawing mandalas, and creating memory boxes were just some of the therapeutic ideas explained on the web site by an expert. At Scholastic.com, the graduate participants found a copy of an article previously published in *Instructor Magazine* and written by Dr. Bruce Perry. They thought this was particularly salient. So did Dr. Megawangi. Finally, another website that was helpful for Dr. Megawangi’s wish to help her teachers and students deal with grief was called Beyond Indigo. The site houses many links where good information was available to help people deal with grief. Really, this was insignificant to the magnitude of the pressing daily needs she endured.

Once this initial project was fulfilled, the graduate student/participants brainstormed other ways to assist Dr. Megawangi and her
associates to rebuild the teacher education program. The graduate students asked Dr. Megawangi to send any further requests she had because they still wanted to assist her with the ongoing strife that she expressed via the emails to Marcie. When Dr. Megawangi sent a proposal to the graduate class to build a new kindergarten called Semai Benih Bangsa and translated “Planting the Nation’s Seed,” the title precipitated a little chuckle, because of the first idea about sending seeds, and now seeds referred to a real kindergarten. The five-page proposal was succinct and itemized. At first, it seemed overwhelming. It was quite shocking for the graduate students to receive a proposal to build a school, especially their notion of a school. But once reviewed, the graduate class of teachers was in total disbelief at how little U.S. money was actually required to simply fulfill the proposal request. Ideas and excitement abounded.

This was the first solution to the problem. Every June, the southeastern university where the graduate students attend has an annual reading and writing institute/conference. One graduate student suggested they could raise funds at the conference from conference attendees. They did so. And they really did so!! Additionally, a group of young girls in a math group contributed through their social action, transnational project. The total amount necessary for the school was achieved. In fact, it was over achieved, because of other benevolent donors. The class sent enough money to Dr. Megawangi so that she and her foundation could build two schools in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Both schools were named for people in our area. One was named for the course professor’s 96 year-old mother and the other for another full-professor who founded the institute/conference where the conferees made substantial donations to build the schools.

Discussion

This success story of transnational, transformative social action spawned the graduate participants to implement transformational social studies/social action learning into their elementary school curriculum. Marcie Hill teaches in a rural area northeast of the large metropolitan area where the southeastern university is located. She engaged her students in discussion about what her graduate colleagues accomplished as only 12 students. Her fourth-grade students initiated social action projects such as food drives for the students of poverty in an adjoining community. Her class sponsored a campus clean-up program. Since Marcie has a family member serving in Iraq, her students brainstormed ways in which they could help him and his troops.

It is straightforward to envision that the experience of being a local or global citizen and taking transformative social action branched off into the graduate student/teachers’ classrooms. These examples fulfilled the past expression of Dewey (1916) and contemporary theory of Tobin and Kincheloe (2005) that social studies students begin by reflecting upon experiences of citizenship in action. They then move beyond by enacting global citizenship and transformational pedagogy that is contextually connected to democracy and humankind.

Findings

The graduate students described their teaching; however, not all was at a transformational level. Four still described more of a transaction and citizenship model of teaching. For the most part, well over half (n=8) however, described transformative, social action projects in which they immersed their students and reflected upon the experience. From their documented experiences, the researchers project that these graduate students will be further convinced to enact transnational teaching for transformative social action. The graduate students/teachers verbalized how they saw themselves as citizens of the world with significant roles to play for the good of humanity. Upon further reflection on transnational
social action, they described how it led them to immerse their students into social action projects (Dewey, 1916; Fullinwider, 1991; Kincheloe, 2005). Participants described how, in their estimation, their elementary students would become better stewards to classmates and seemed to talk in more compassionate terms towards others while studying topics in the classroom. It seemed as if the older video, Pay it Forward, came directly to mind.

Implications

Being immersed in transnational and transformative social action is essential if learners are to become a competent, adult citizenry (Banks, 2008; Knight-Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). However, limitations and variables enter into each context as to why and how most of the participants moved from a citizenship level to transformational social action at a transnational level because of an immersion experience. It is difficult to determine whether the intersection of life’s situations, other courses taken during their graduate programs, depth of reflection, or other unforeseen variables inspired graduate teacher/participants to enact transformational pedagogy in their school curriculum because of this experience in their graduate program.

Either way, for the most part, the graduate participants expanded in enacting and perpetuating transformative social action/transnational pedagogy. The project with Dr. Megawangi in Banda Aceh was the result of a catastrophe. Sometimes, we sit in comfort wondering what we can do to assist instead of sending money. In this instance, 12 graduate students in education, and Dr. Aldridge enacted transnational social action to make it possible to fulfill a humble, yet necessary request by Dr. Megawangi to assist early childhood learners and their teachers who were in a desperate situation. Social change was transnationally possible (Kincheloe, 2001), and two schools were built in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

This particular case study perpetuated the tenets of transnational social action. It is an exemplar case. Essentially, it unfolded in a synchronistic fashion. Each person involved became meaningfully related. Reproduction of transnational social action occurred inside classrooms where teacher/participants envisioned their roles as the training ground for citizenship at the regional, national, and global spheres.

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