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Stenhouse, V. L., Jarrett, O. S., Fernandes Williams, R. M., & Chilungu, E. N. (2014). *In the service of learning and empowerment: Service-learning, critical pedagogy, and the problem-solution project*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

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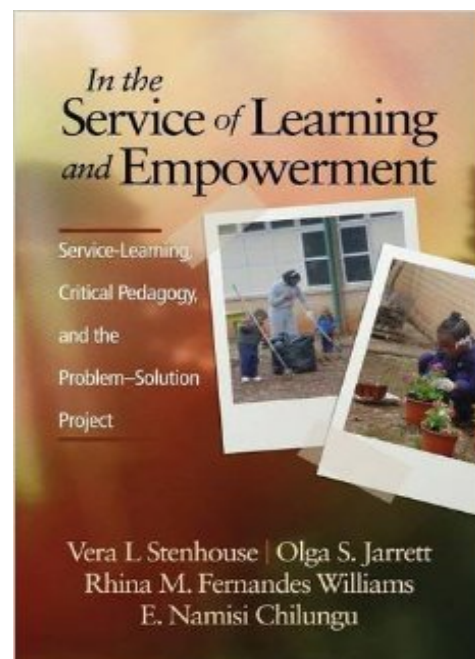
Reviewed by *Meghan E. Barnes*

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In the book's foreword, Ira Shor calls Stenhouse, Jarrett, Fernandes Williams, and Chilunga's (2014) Problem-Solution model an *empowering paradigm* as it encourages pre-service teachers to use concrete, local problems to develop critical habits of mind and social agency. Rather than adopting neoliberal approaches to education that value the private over public, equate citizens with consumers, and diminish individual political rights, Shor, along with Stenhouse et al. attempt to build "power from below" and encourage group decision-making and course design through democratic schooling practices. Thus, critical inquiry, collaborative decision-making, and power-sharing become central to teacher education and schooling in general. Drawing from Shor's work and his critiques of neoliberalism, the Problem-Solution Project attempts to bridge three aspects of an empowering education: service-learning, critical pedagogy, and constructivism.



Barnes, M. E. (2014, November 17). Review of *In the Service of Learning and Empowerment* by Vera L. Stenhouse, Olga S. Jarrett, Rhina M. Fernandes Williams, and E. Namisi Chilungu. *Education Review*, 21.

Introduction

While teacher autonomy is becoming more and more limited throughout American schools and scripted curricula become the norm in public education, those districts serving low-income students remain the most limited by such policies (Sleeter, 2008). Stenhouse et al. begin their book with two teacher vignettes where these concerns are addressed head-on as teachers consider the isolation, fear, and time constraints that present challenges to service-learning and critical pedagogy work. Together, the authors and teachers challenge these constraints and offer the Problem-Solution model as a possibility for encouraging student and teacher agency in urban schools, specifically.

Part I

The authors argue that *critical* service-learning (Mitchel, 2008) and that teaching focused on constructivist change (Claus & Ogden, 1999) can challenge the notion that service-learning reinforces deficit ideologies of others (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Butin, 2003). Using Shor's 11 values of a critical and democratic curriculum, the authors address the ways in which the Problem-Solution Project promotes critical pedagogy and encourages pre-service teachers (and their students) to challenge the status quo instead of reinforce it, as critics argue it may. While the authors find that a generative approach is at the core of the Problem-Solution Project, they acknowledge that the initiating source of a learning topic most influences the opportunity to achieve critical and democratic educational goals. Using a constructivist approach to teacher education, the authors work to position themselves as facilitators—making learning more hands-on and collaborative, rather than teacher-centered. Many teachers in the book find that the Problem-Solution approach allows them to engage students with more challenging academic material with greater frequency.

As the teacher vignettes shared throughout the book show, the process of identifying a “problem” is the first step to the Problem-Solution Project. Here, the students are led in brainstorming activities that encourage them to find their own problems in the school and local community. Rather than soliciting information from the community, however, the students and teacher make decisions and develop service projects based on their own assumptions

and understandings, thus limiting opportunities for reciprocity to develop between school and community.

Because of the unique setting of this work, however, Stenhouse et al. may have viewed the students themselves as the community partners. The Problem-Solution Project engages urban students in service-learning, assuming that “engagement in service and problem solving is not an exclusive act for a select or a privileged few” (p. 14). Thus, the students, those who are traditionally viewed as *recipients* of service, become active change agents as they expand their critical consciousness.

Part II

Through the reflections of both elementary school teachers and teacher educators, the authors provide an overview of the various manifestations of the Problem-Solution Project in a master’s program for experienced teachers over a period of nearly 11 years. With some experience, the teachers found ways to position students as change agents through both deliberate and emergent projects.

One of the primary concerns of both teachers and the university instructors was student empowerment. Overall, specific examples of teachers’ experiences with the Problem-Solution Project as well as evidence presented through teacher observations and reflections demonstrate that students were in fact empowered through the work. One teacher shared that the Problem-Solution Project permitted “teachers [to] reclaim a piece of themselves and teach in the way they imagined they would” (Stenhouse et al., 2014, p. 54). It thus became clear that empowerment was not limited to students. Although consideration of teachers’ content knowledge was briefly touched upon in the chapter, a more thorough exploration of the role the Problem-Solution Project played in developing pedagogical knowledge and furthering course objectives is warranted in order to challenge the critique that service-learning lacks academic rigor (Butin, 2003).

Part III

Through photos, student work samples, and written reflections, teachers offer advice and experience with the ways that the Problem-Solution Project can challenge age-based deficit ideologies, align with mandated standards, strengthen student engagement, develop a sense of collective responsibility, and ease curriculum-based concerns of administrators.

Initially anxious about the Project, pre-K teacher Aliya Jafri remembered that she went into the Project with low expectations of her students. However, she found that students can “always rise up to a developmentally appropriate challenge you pose” (p. 58), thus challenging assumptions commonly held by pre-service and novice teachers about youth (Finders, 1998/1999; Lewis & Petrone, 2010). Although her students were unable to replace the too-large lunch tables and chairs that they identified as problematic in their school, Aliya found that her students, as well as she, were empowered by the project. Students felt that they could bring about change, and Aliya learned that “it is not as much *what* you teach, but *how* you teach it” (p. 61).

Teacher Gerry London found that the Problem-Solution Project brought together community members, parents, and students around a shared cause. Together, London and her first graders identified the school courtyard, with its broken tables and lack of seating, as the focus of their project. Working together with parents, administration, and local community partners, this group of first graders was able to raise money to purchase the supplies needed to build and paint picnic tables for the courtyard and then to find community members to donate their time to construct the tables. Another group of teachers found “different ways in which the students can connect with the community” (p. 111) through a combination of both direct and indirect service. From visits to the homeless shelter to a culminating event with a visit from a hospital social worker, those students who were able to interact with community members experienced a strong connection both to the Problem-Solution Project and to the community itself.

The challenging responsibility of teachers to give up control and “make room for student leadership and learning” (Stenhouse et al., 2014, p. 122) is addressed as two teachers permitted students to choose the initial direction of their project and then to change that direction as time went on. As they were encouraged to see themselves as agents of change, the students in these classes began to see their schools as potentially influential social institutions and community members.

Referencing Sleeter (2005), the authors argue that although standards may be in place to ensure that all students are held to high learning goals, the ways that students learn and are taught does not have to be standard.

Using the experience of a veteran fourth grade teacher, the authors demonstrate ways that the Problem-Solution Project can be negotiated into pre-existing curricula and can also help students and teachers to address standards in creative and engaging ways.

At once concerned about standardized tests, the physical school building, school culture, and teacher morale, school administrators are placed in demanding and at-times conflicting roles in education. The authors recognize this knotty position while also offering up some lessons for administrators to consider when presented with Problem-Solution Projects from teachers.

The authors also consider teachers' potential for continuing the Problem-Solution Project model past their graduate school studies. Throughout the chapter teachers share the various challenges they faced in trying to implement the Project in their own classrooms. The authors recognize that "An enduring tension in service-learning and critical pedagogy is how to engage schools' mandates in conjunction with student-centered instruction and opportunities for collective civic engagement" (Stenhouse et al., 2014, p. 155).

Part IV

In part IV the authors turn to the experiences of teacher educators as they implemented the Problem-Solution Project with nine cohorts of pre-service undergraduate teachers.

The Problem-Solution Project was implemented in a course designed to encourage pre-service teachers to "examine the sociopolitical context of schooling within the United States" (Stenhouse et al., 2014, p. 169) as well as the role of community in education and culturally responsive pedagogy. Students considered the role of power in education as they worked through the six steps of the project (which are described in detail in the book): brainstorm, choose, identify curriculum standards, research, take action, and share/reflect.

The authors provide vignettes to illustrate the various manifestations, challenges, and joys associated with the Problem-Solution Project over the nine cohorts. Common among many of the cohorts was a frustration with time constraints, lack of leadership, and the "perception of helping *self* versus *others*" (p. 185). Over the years, the projects varied. Some projects were focused on the teacher education program itself (creating resources for the pre-service teachers to use during planning, for instance) while

others were more focused on community needs (such as hunger and immigration legislation). Further, some cohorts decided to appoint leaders to direct logistics of the project while other groups created small committees assigned to different tasks within the project. Although tension was experienced by almost all cohorts in the planning stage, most cohorts expressed both pride and satisfaction upon the completion of the project.

The university instructors themselves reflect on their experiences with the Problem-Solution Project in an effort to encourage others to “resist oppressive presentations of teaching, service, and learning” (p. 195). Overall, the instructors found that issues of power were central to the project. The pre-service teachers’ “perceptions of their scope of influence” (p. 195) and power over the project had a significant impact on students’ experiences. The instructors admit that although their goal was to give authority and power to their students, the overall organization of the project resulted in the illusion of shared power in many instances.

Further, the pre-service teachers consistently struggled to see the decision-making process, the development of leadership skills, and conflicting opinions as educative. The socialization of pre-service teachers proved difficult to combat. Participants struggled to reconcile their own experiences in more traditional, teacher-centered classrooms with the student-centered approach of the Problem-Solution Project.

In the final chapter of this section, Jarrett and Stenhouse continue the dialogic nature of the book and the project by writing in the form of a discussion. Through their discussion, both instructors were able to reflect on their experiences with the Project and to analyze the ways that their teaching changed and was challenged through their work. Both instructors admitted they struggled to balance teacher-centered talk and instruction with student autonomy and action. Similarly, Jarrett and Stenhouse considered the role of grades in the Problem-Solution Project. Both questioned how much students focused on an end-product, rather than the process of the project, because of the looming grade at the project’s close. Ultimately, both instructors found that their teacher education courses were enhanced as they wove students-identified problems into course curriculum, e.g., discussing the impact of hunger and food insecurity on student performance.

Part V

The authors begin the book by referencing Shor's 11 characteristics of an empowering education. In the final section of the book, they revisit these tenets as they consider the experiences and reflections of both in-service and pre-service teachers. The authors value the role of students in the problem posing aspect of the Project and identify this contribution as an element of participatory educational practices. Although the autonomy and authority afforded to students in the Problem-Solution Project are certainly positive constructivist approaches to teaching, in many instances opportunities for collaboration and reciprocity with community members is limited.

The authors also consider the project to be multicultural because the learning "reflected the demographic composition" of students. Again, greater collaboration with community members would extend the potential for assumptions and stereotypes of others to be challenged.

The instructors find that their teachers struggled to relinquish control to students to build a more dialogic and democratic classroom environment. However, those instructors who were able to make space for student voice and autonomy experienced the "greatest gains in understanding the significance of the Problem-Solution Project approach" (Stenhouse et al., 2014, p. 219). Research encouraged PK-5 students and pre-service teachers alike to approach learning as an opportunity to produce, rather than merely to consume, knowledge. Further, many teachers were introduced to the idea of activism for the first time through their work with the Project.

The authors find a distinct contrast between the PK-5 students and pre-service teachers when considering the affective characteristics of the project. Whereas the pre-service teachers expressed reproach for those projects considered "self-serving" (e.g., school beautification, the compiling of new teacher resources), the PK-5 students did not. Finally, challenging dominant models of teaching and placing greater autonomy in the hands of students was well-received with the PK-5 students, but met with great frustration and resistance from the pre-service teachers. This opposition was perhaps due to the pre-service teachers' years of socialization into more teacher-centered approaches to instruction.

The book ends with a focus on the role of the collective. Concluding with the question, “What can we do?” (p. 234), the authors consider the collaborative nature of being and the interplay of practice, policy, and preparation when developing empowered students and teachers. The authors suggest that through the Problem-Solution Project, students are taught to value their community and their differences, they are encouraged to exercise autonomy and power, and they can begin to challenge deficit ideologies and are socialized into a world where the teacher is de-centered.

Respect, Reciprocity, Relevance, and Reflection

Despite calls to “shift the centre of gravity from the university to the field” in higher education (Sleeter, 2008, p. 2954), critiques of service-learning as a pedagogical tool are varied and many. Butin (2003) identifies three common critiques, arguing that community impact, meaningful and sustained student outcomes, and rigorous assessment practices (linked to academic learning goals) are limited in service-learning. Further, Butin argues that in order to overcome these potential shortcomings, service-learning must be founded on four *Rs*: respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection (Campus Compact, 2002; MJCSL, 2001; Sigmon, 1979). The criterion of *respect* rejects the notion of the server as a “white knight” coming in to save others. In order to be *reciprocal*, “Not only should the server provide a meaningful and relevant service to those he or she is serving, but often members of the community being served should be the ones responsible for articulating what the service should be in the first place” (p. 1677). The service should also be a central component of the class and have *relevance* for the academic learning goals of the course. Finally, to “provide context and meaning” (p. 1677) to the experience, students should *reflect* throughout the service experience.

Stenhouse et al. address Butin’s 4 *Rs*, although implicitly, throughout the book. Although respect and reflection become central tenets of the Problem-Solution Project, reciprocity and relevance are less consistent. For instance, students are often viewed as the “initiating source” of projects, rather than community members themselves. Similarly, community partners are not included in the assessment practices of teachers upon the completion of projects.

Although the projects in the PK-5th grade classrooms do exhibit direct connections to course content,

the academic learning goals associated with the pre-service teachers' projects are less clear. Service-learning in teacher education has the potential to lead to more interdisciplinary considerations, a more active citizenry, a greater knowledge of diversity and multicultural education, more constructivist teaching methods, and a teaching force concerned with challenging standardized curricula (Butin, 2003; Krummel, 2013). However, academic rigor and goal-alignment in such courses must be communicated clearly and consistently to students and must remain central components of service-learning course design.

The work of Stenhouse et al. (2014) represents an admiral direction in service-learning: encouraging those who are typically considered recipients of service to become agents for change in their own communities. The authors present a model that challenges the traditional "field experience" requirement in most education programs, thus potentially leading to a more critical, interdisciplinary, and activist teaching force. Through work like the Problem-Solution Project, teachers can begin to realize an empowering education both for themselves and their students through service-learning, critical pedagogy, and constructivism.

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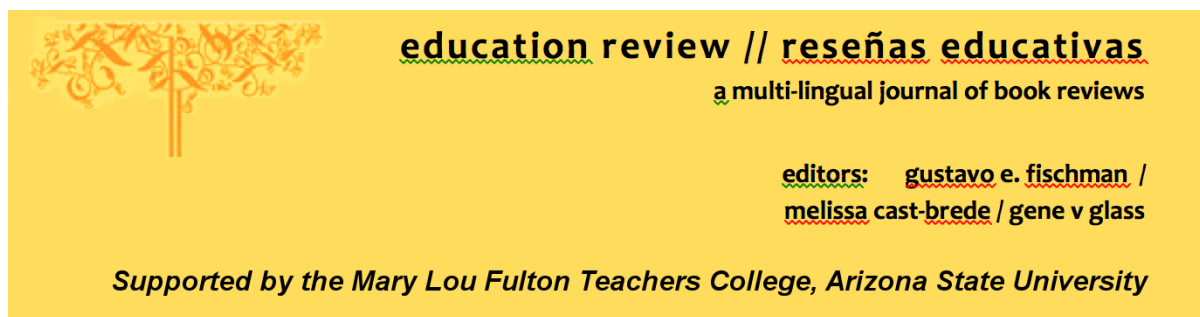
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