

Connecting Multiculturalism, Sustainability, & Teacher Education

A Case for Linking Martin Luther King Streets & the Power of Place



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Introduction

In *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Kozol (2005) asked a question that many educators and other education stakeholders still wonder about in regards to the educational progress for many urban school students in the United States, "What do we need to do to alter these realities?" (p. 215). Altering realities requires

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new questions and creatively connecting educational issues such as multiculturalism, education for a sustainable living, and teacher education in different ways.

In this article, I ascribe an urban location to multiculturalism, sustainability, and teacher education to draw attention toward transforming the realities of urban bioregions with culturally diverse student populations to contribute to further eliminating the achievement and social gaps inherent in today's urban school communities. It is my contention that teachers and teacher educators can be a "force for responsibility and activism" (Mueller, 2009, p. 1050) in schools located in urban bioregions with a street named after Nobel Peace Prize recipient Martin Luther King Jr (MLK).

MLK Street (Michelson, Alderman,

& Popke, 2007) names are symbolic representations honoring Dr. King's life and legacy of challenging the status quo during the civil rights era and they continue to exemplify African-American culture and community (Michelson et al., 2007). Street naming as a strategy is "a part of a larger movement to address the exclusion of African-American achievements" (Michelson et al., 2007, p.122) and remains a significant conduit for African-American expression, identity, and sense of community (Alderman, 2006; Tilove, 2003). Ironically, MLK Streets have the dubious reputation of being economically disadvantaged and unhealthy environments (Alderman, 2006). While researchers agree that social movements that result in the renaming of streets to honor Dr. King extend beyond the field of multiculturalism and social justice

(Rhea, 2001), teacher education programs can and must prepare teachers for work in urban schools through interdisciplinary connections between multiculturalism, learning about place, and sustainability education.

This article examines the importance of interrelationships using an interdisciplinary framework for teaching sustainability within communities on MLK Streets. Teaching in an urban environment is racked with both culturally-complex and socially-varied issues, thus a systems thinking approach is an appropriate strategy to frame variables linking interdisciplinary studies, multiculturalism (Banks, 1993/2008; Sleeter & McLaren, 2000), sustainability education (Lowenstein, Martusewicz & Voelker; 2010; Sterling, 2010), place-based pedagogy and community (Alderman, 2007; Block, 2008; Galster, 2012; Johnson, 2012), and urban teacher education and K-12 schooling (Bowers, 2010; Corcoran, 2004; Noel, 2006; Reed 2009), all within the MLK Streets urban environment.

Sustainability education is a useful pedagogical tool for teaching about a more sustainable living environment on and around MLK Streets. Comprehensively, sustainability can be defined as

... the survival, the security and beyond these, the well-being of a whole system, whether this is seen at the local level, such as community, or at global level... it implies economic viability, ecological integrity, and social cohesion but also necessitating a operating ecological or participatory worldview which recognizes these qualities or systems conditions as mutually independent and co-defining. (Sterling, 2010, p. 512)

In other words, sustainability education is a broad expression referring to themes of environmental education, ecojustice education, and education for sustainable development. However, in this article the phrase "sustainability education" will encompass related, nuanced disciplines to signify ecological and participatory education inclusive of these other frameworks.

Yet other frameworks can and should also include ideals that systemically link environmental education to multiculturalism, or that concern ethnic diversity (UNESCO, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

One challenge of teaching sustainability in urban schools is finding a comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses the varied and complex issues

associated with a uniquely urban environment. Poverty, crime, and other social issues found on various urban streets compound the existing challenges of having to adhere to the standardized testing mandates (Sleeter, 2012), daily classroom management, and teaching a curriculum that proposes to emphasize sustainability education (Lowenstein et al., 2010; Stone, 2008) when the neighborhood ethos has more to do with survival and the common code of "every person for themselves."

Rather than examining social variables in isolation, a systems thinking approach factors in the whole environment in order to understand and address the complexities associated with education in urban school settings.

These and other variables, such as the absence of grocery stores and local employment opportunities, create a system of living which can provide valuable teacher insights on how the local community thinks and interconnects with itself to form a meaningfully social environment (Aronson, 1996; Flood, 2010; Galster, 2012). Nelson (2010) adds "what is required are emerging theoretical foundations and new epistemologies that reflect a systems thinking approach to teaching and learning" (p. 6). Flood (2010) also considers a systems thinking framework as the context where "valid knowledge and meaningful understanding comes from building up the whole pictures of phenomena, not breaking them into parts" (p. 269). Unpacking and understanding the parts of a community that surround a MLK Street provides profound insights on how to do education within the context of urban neighborhoods.

The systems thinking approach is conducive to problem solving of covert contextual issues. Instead of breaking issues into smaller problems by isolating the parts for inquiry, a systems thinking framework serves as an interface for a broader and more comprehensive inquiry of complex problems (Aronson, 1996; Stone, 2008). Emphasis on both the individual (Capra, 1996) and ecological intelligence (Bowers, 2010) helps teachers to locate sustainability education on the local community level and for teacher educators seeking to situate it within interdisciplinary studies.

A comprehensive, problem-solving framework is appropriate when problems are complicated in order to analyze inher-

ent educational practices. Rather than examining social variables in isolation, a systems thinking approach factors in the whole environment in order to understand and address the complexities (Aronson, 1996) associated with education in urban school settings. A systems approach offers community agents an organizational tool for analyzing the intersection between schooling and community issues in a holistic manner rather than in its isolated parts; it helps to illuminate recurring problems

affecting the environment that have existed without remedy and it approaches problems that may have obscured solutions (Aronson, 1996).

At its core, a systems thinking framework is interdisciplinary and provides for a broader way to analyze the contextual dynamics on and around MLK Streets. Thus, a systems approach to linking teacher education and sustainability education in urban schools "promises to construct meaning that will resonate strongly with people's experience within a systemic world" (Flood, 2010, p.270).

Literature on systems thinking and the importance of teaching sustainability education in urban schools is sizeable and continues to inspire other research (see Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2008; Mueller, 2009; Porter & Córdoba, 2009; Stone, 2008). Although literature is considerable about best teaching practices and sustainability education, none specifically examines a larger systemic link to communities surrounding MLK Streets.

In this article, I explore the possibilities that link multicultural teaching to sustainability education in response to two essential questions: In what ways do interdisciplinary understandings of sustainability among teachers and a culturally multifaceted community at large influence how teachers are prepared to work in those communities? What is the responsibility of teacher education in advancing sustainability education within schools and the communities in which those schools reside?

Understanding Place and Community

A systems approach to teaching sustainability education in MLK Streets schools includes the understanding of how place informs pedagogy. Proponents of place-based learning analyze the social values and cultural behaviors of location as a strategy to increase teachers' understanding of the student and community (Stone, 2008). Place-based learning considers how lived experiences influence student attitudes about education; place is a factor in building impactful relationships with students and the community (Sobel, 2004) and place incorporates local community history to better understand how to teach in a specific educational environment (Reed, 2009).

A growing body of research focused on geographical characteristics is important to understanding and addressing inequalities in housing, education, and other social structures (Galster, 2012). It is critical to link what we know about geographical location, or place, to what we know about the socio-cultural dynamics within diverse communities. Johnson (2012) defined place as "the ecological units in which populations are organized in accordance with economic and social forces and therefore distinguished by social, cultural, and economic characteristics" (p. 29).

Teachers and teacher educators are uniquely positioned around MLK Streets schools to engage in enacting and infusing new conversations regarding sustainable living practices. Urban places conjure up images of intense human experiences situated in unsustainable living conditions (Alderman, 2006; Tilove, 2003). However, they are not beyond the realm of transformation. Block (2008) put it this way, "We have to engage in a new conversation, one that has not been had before, one that creates an understanding of aliveness and belonging" (p. 32). He argued that a healthy awareness of community is an essential aspect of creating a community of "belonging and restoration urban communities desperately need." This is even a more meaningful explanation for intergenerational survival for MLK Streets stakeholders.

The geo-political ideologies (Alderman, 2003; Hagen, 2011, Hoglebe, 2012) of a commemorative MLK-named street and the relationship to interdisciplinary teacher education advances the significance of school location. Reasons for renaming a street after Dr. King are not the focus of this article. However, street-nam-

ing, both in terms of community identity and political ideologies (Alderman, 2006; Tilove, 2003), adjoins a social and economic perspective to the community. Discourse in teacher education around the ideologies associated with school location and the place where teachers are teaching is just as important as the content they are teaching. The relationship between education and the MLK Streets allows for dissecting and understanding various factors—environment, cultural groups of people, and social structures—so that teachers can better understand the areas of sustainability most relatable to the whole community.

Multiculturalism and Teacher Education

Education is the vehicle for social change, and many who are in the profession have a desire to be change agents seeking to realize a better and healthier community (Corcoran, 2004). Teacher education, sustainability education, and community activism understood separately offer potent arguments for changing perceptions and social outcomes in and around MLK Street communities. Even more compelling is the role and responsibility of teacher education in advancing sustainability which essentially asks teacher candidates, "what is education for?" (Sterling, 2010, page 514).

In his book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), Dr. King challenged readers to consider the idea that "effective teaching requires helping teachers to teach more effectively" (p. 194). Dr. King further suggested that teachers need to better understand family life and the social contexts in which students and families are embedded in order to teach in a manner that family background and circumstance would no longer become a part of the question about academic achievement gaps (King, 1967). In the case of students attending schools in MLK Streets communities, multicultural and sustainability education provide opportunities for students to take leadership roles in contributing to the viability and health of their local communities.

Multicultural education is one of the many progressive movements that emerged from the Civil Rights Era (Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & McLaren, 2000). Banks also argues that multicultural education is a way to provide equitable educational opportunities for diverse groups of students in the classroom that are reflective of the whole community (Banks, 2008). Yet, the original intent of multicultural education,

to contextualize inequalities and to heighten the power of families and marginalized communities (Sleeter & McLaren, 2000) seems today somewhat fragmented. Standardized testing and a narrow and rigid pedagogy have supplanted the transformational aspects of multicultural education, thus too often relegating multiculturalism to simplistic cultural celebratory occasions (Sleeter, 2011/2012). If teachers remain committed to making a concerted effort to impact academic achievement in urban schools, then multicultural education must be centered at the core of teacher education programs in order to promote students' ability to "function effectively in a pluralistic, democratic society" (Banks, 1993, p. 5).

In addition to traditional academic content knowledge, teachers and teacher educators should promote interdisciplinary modes of inquiry about sustainable living practices and why this pedagogical approach is critically important for the whole community (Banks, 1993; Orr, 2005). For example, Banks (2008) points to the importance of knowledge construction, which he defines as teacher ability to facilitate students' knowledge formation. In the classroom, K-12 teachers illustrate this dimension by reading books related to environmental justice or sustainable practices and creating student-led projects in direct response to the students' community's ecological issues (Lowenstein, et al, 2010; Stone, 2009).

Similarly, a Multicultural environmental education-based (MEE) program places the emphasis of environmental education on equitable practices among culturally diverse community participants rather than on what knowledge the participants have of the ecological environment (Marouli, 2002). MEE-based activities include training and curriculum for building community partnerships. Inquiries into various programs of this type can impact teacher education programs.

The impact that teacher education has on the influence of education for sustainability (Marouli, 2002) cannot be understated. Teachers must have vision and commit to be coming life-long learners in service to the community in which they teach (McArdle & Mansfield, 2006). For example, Noel (2006) engages urban, in-service teachers, integrating them directly into the community through integrated programs, peer-tutoring, and guided mentoring.

First, these experiences help teachers comprehend the lived environment in which children reside. Integrating place-based

pedagogy into sustainability education in low-performing urban schools is necessary for changing the community and the mindsets of teachers and students (Stone, 2008) from a lesser priority to one that raises an awareness of the importance of education for sustainability. Teacher and student teacher involvement in community-based engagements and conversations is critical aspect of understanding and impacting

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community attitudes and behaviors (Block, 2008; Moore, 2008; Noel, 2006).

Second, interdisciplinary and experiential approaches to pre-service teacher education and teacher development education enables educators to think outside the box when faced with complex issues in a multicultural, urban school setting. For example, in *Smart By Nature: Schooling for Sustainability*, Stone (2008) contends partnerships with local environmental groups provide ways to build school community gardens, conduct integrative planning sessions that involve both school and community members, and involve teachers in redesigning the school setting with innovative ways to educate for a sustainable environment. Interdisciplinary knowledge is critical to advancing sustainability education in teacher education programs. In consequence, it is both beneficial and necessary to becoming more culturally and environmentally responsive educators in schools.

Towards an Interdisciplinary Study of Sustainability Education

One can view a system by analyzing overall patterns of behavior, examining individual behavior, and then settle on if and how the general patterns are a result of the interactions among components (Newell, 2011). Relatedly, Newell and Greene (1982) define interdisciplinary studies as “inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights” (p. 2). They suggest that this happens “while reconciling inconsistencies... or combining them into a larger whole if they are consistent” (p. 27). If the relationships are working together to create a complete picture, then interdisciplinary knowledge

is working (Newell, 2011). In other words, everything matters.

Davidson and Venning (2011) suggest that responding to complex urban sustainability measures require decision making frameworks related to social constructs, and tools such as environmental policy analysis in order to join together with a systems thinking approach (see Davidson & Venning, 2011). Thus, connecting sus-

tainability to a systems thinking approach increases the effectiveness of sustainable development in urban areas.

For example, community development through place-based education encourages students to make greater connections to their community (Sobel, 2004). Lowenstein et al. (2010) posit “eco-justice education as the analysis of a worldview organized by logic of domination, and offers teachers and students ways of responding in their own communities” (p.101).

A shift from cause and effect, from linear thinking to a non-linear system of underlying structures and patterns of behavior which limits sustainable living outside of classroom, is particularly critical for teachers in schools on or near MLK Streets (Krasny & Tidball, 2009; McClure, 2011). Krasny and Tidball (2009) suggest that non-linear thinking shifts the focus from who is to blame for environmental patterns of behavior to understanding how everything circuitously works together to create those patterns. Teacher education programs will need to modify pedagogical strategies that are infused with systematic, interdisciplinary studies in order to accommodate learning about complexities inherent in school environments.

Teaching sustainability education in urban schools means moving from questions and mindsets based on fear and failures to hope and promises (Block, 2008). Interdisciplinary study within a teacher education should include sustainability as a contextual strategy for engaging teacher and teacher educators in their understanding of MLK Street schools.

Concluding Remarks

The interdisciplinary role of multiculturalism, place and community, and

teacher education focused on sustainability education addresses the mental outlook of learning in communities surrounding MLK Streets. Rather than a silo-like, one-size-fits-all approach to schooling in areas surrounding MLK Streets, taking a systems thinking approach helps to uncover multifaceted issues concerning sustainable living. This systems thinking approach as a strategy is a collective framework for school leadership and teacher education programs to jointly study and take appropriate actions in the community (Minarik, Thorton, & Perreault, 2003).

Exploring the notion of systems thinking and teacher education, at first glance, seems to move away from what we ought to be able connect to sustainable living knowledge. However, in addition to understanding what shapes perceptions of students in the classroom, teacher education programs can also encourage students in their understanding of the systems at work in urban places such as MLK Streets. Understanding place means viewing issues through the eyes of a diverse student population. It means adapting to the ability to perceive the contributions human experience through the eyes of the both student and community while understanding the impacts of the environment—the air they breathe, the food they eat, and their health. Through a focus on place, teachers educators perceive and understand the economic impacts of life on a “MLK Street”—poverty, despair, wanting, hope, and family structures.

Further studies will examine how teachers and teacher educators contextualize interdisciplinary knowledge while attending to multicultural education with regards to MLK Streets schools. Further research will also explore how teachers recognize environmental factors that challenge students to make decisions that impact their communities. Consideration of Dr. King’s legacy, simply bearing the street name MLK, signals a call for a deeper understanding of the purpose of education to alter the realities of many urban schools across the nation.

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