

Language Learning & Social Work

by: Catherine Keith

Introduction

I was a little kid when I first discovered my passion for language learning, and I was nineteen years old when I discovered my passion for social justice. These two interests of mine finally culminated when, at twenty-two years old, I became a language teacher. It became apparent to me that language can indeed be a tool of social justice, and in my study of social work through Alice Salomon Hochschule, I have viewed the profession of social work through the lens of what I already know, language teaching.

For my project, I chose to undertake four separate but related project components dealing with language teaching in conjunction with social justice. Each of these different components offered extremely varied types of experiences at different points of time from 2016 to 2017. Each portion of the project helped me grow as a teacher and future social worker as I gained new insights into how to be effective in using language teaching for social justice.

My theoretical reference point is the study of Critical Race Theory, which encourages critical examination of the role that race plays in society. For me, this means considering how my racialized identity and other privileges affect me in different environments. This self-critical reflection is especially important in work where the majority of my students come from marginalized demographic groups, which is the case for two of the four components of my project. Coming from the Critical Race Theory mindset, I wanted to pay close attention during my project to how effective I was truly being in my work.

In my project, I intentionally chose types of work and involvement that would focus on different areas of social justice-based language teaching, specifically that I would work both directly with students, and also more “behind the scenes” developing curriculum and working on other aspects aside from the direct teaching.

The first three parts of the project involved direct work with students face-to-face. The fourth consisted solely on other types of work with developing ideas and teaching materials, doing public relations, etcetera. The third part of the project sometimes addressed human rights issues more directly whereas the other three used language teaching to in and of itself be a social justice-oriented tool to help immigrants and others from marginalized or underrepresented groups be self-reliant.