



Funding source for this project provided by Illinois State University, Office of the Cross Endowed Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, SoTL Small Grant Program, FY14

Illinois State University

Learning through Service: The Contribution of Service-Learning to First Year Pre-Service Teachers

Miranda Lin, Ph.D., Alan Bates, Ph.D., & Ashley Olson
School of Teaching and Learning, Illinois State University



Abstract

This project explores how service learning (SL) helps pre-service teachers change their perceptions toward working with diverse populations and how they link SL to social justice. Participants included 28 first year early childhood education (ECE) pre-service teachers and five directors of pre-k programs that serve low income families. After the projects were completed, students responded to guiding questions which focused on the impact of the experience. Results indicated that pre-service teachers valued the SL experience and gained new insight regarding teaching students of diverse backgrounds. However, students focused more on surface level learning and also had some difficulty connecting SL with social justice. Program directors support the idea of service learning and believe the real world experience benefit the pre-service teachers in the long term.

Purpose

SL experiences provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to better understand the real-world experiences of individuals of all walks of life in their immediate communities, especially in the culturally diverse and low-income community. Research on service learning has shown positive effect on student learning outcomes (e.g. Baldwin et al., 2007; Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Mainly, SL has an impact on pre-service teachers' dispositions toward teaching in diverse settings, cultural awareness, social issues, and social responsibility. However, it is unclear what factors are related to more effective programs (Celio et al., 2011). This study attempted to determine student outcomes of SL experiences in general and specific to social justice.

References

- Baldwin, S., Buchanan, A., & Rudisill, M. (2007). What teacher candidates learned about diversity, social justice, and themselves from service-learning experiences. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*, 315- 327.
- Celio, C., Durlak, J., & Dymnicki, A. (2011). A meta-analysis of the impact of service-learning on students. *Journal of Experiential Education, 34*, 164-181.
- Chambers, D., & Lavery, S. (2012). Service-learning: A valuable component of pre-service teacher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 37*, 128-137.
- Chambers, T. (2009). A continuum of approaches to service-learning within Canadian post-secondary education. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 39*, 77-100.

Conceptual Framework

The goal of SL is to enable students to become engaged citizens and critical thinkers. The outcomes can be educational, vocational, and social according to Chambers (2009). Chambers argues that students who are engaged in service learning are more likely to choose service orientated professions. He also states that SL helps reduce racial stereotyping and cultural understanding. Chambers proposes four underlying theories of SL: experiential education, social learning, student development, and liberatory education. Not all SL leads to social justice. Depending upon the type of SL experience, individuals may experience different outcomes of SL. The goal of the SL this study was to help students experience a liberatory education as the projects were embedded in a multicultural education course. It was hoped that the learning experience would be meaningful and critical and would have a great impact on the community as well as on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward teaching.

Research Questions

1. How does SL help pre-service students as future educators?
2. How does SL change students' attitudes towards teaching diverse student populations?
3. How do students link SL to Social Justice?
4. What do program directors see as the benefits of service learning to pre-service teachers?

Methodology

Data for this study were collected from ECE pre-service teachers' reflections and interviews with program directors. The guiding questions for the student reflections and the director interviews focused on the impact of the experience on pre-service teachers, the needs of the center, and service learning in general. Questions regarding social justice were also asked to the pre-service teachers.

Student reflections and director interviews were coded and specific themes emerged from the analysis. The analysis of the pre-service student reflections resulted in 5 main categories: personal benefits, professional benefits, social issues, social attitudes and civic responsibilities. The analysis of the director interviews resulted in 2 main categories: benefits of SL to pre-service teachers and improving the experience for pre-service teachers.

Findings and Discussion

Students' guided reflection papers were analyzed based on each of the research questions. In regards to the first research question, the impact of SL on pre-service teachers, 37% of the responses were project specific, indicating students learned specific skills related to the project and 44% of responses involved social attitudes, such as an understanding of lower income schools and those less fortunate. Over 50% of the students included some mention of specific professional skills that were learned, such as learning how to organize classroom space or time management skills. The second research question focused on students' attitudes towards teaching diverse student populations. Responses regarding this topic also varied significantly. One encouraging finding in this area was that 32% of respondents mentioned a stronger desire to work in a low income or more diverse setting. The third research question focused on students' ability to link service learning and social justice. Students had difficulty in this area, with 24% of the students not responding to the guiding questions focused on this topic, more so than any other area discussed. However, 33% of the students discussed how their project met their particular school's needs and in doing so, supported social justice. The last research question focused on director's responses. All five program directors saw benefits of SL and how SL can better prepare pre-service teachers. The real world experience for pre-service teachers and the opportunity to work in the community with children from varying SES as well as experienced teachers were also mentioned by the program directors.

Overall, it was clear that students learned from the SL experience, however, the learning regarding diverse populations and social justice was not as deep as was hoped for. Participants did not reach the level of liberator education as proposed by Chambers (2009).

Implications

To better prepare first year pre-service teachers, effective guidance regarding SL projects is needed. They need to learn and/or be provided with more information regarding the community. In addition, pre-service teachers need more foundational information to develop a better understanding of diversity and social justice. On-going discussion with the students and program directors is needed throughout the course of the SL project and the specific school's needs must be addressed. Nevertheless, perhaps the goal of SL for first year pre-service teachers should center on experiential education, social learning, and student development rather than liberatory education. Getting pre-service teachers out into the community and having them work with people who are different from them may be more helpful and more of a realistic goal.