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Higher Education Teacher Training: An Exploration of Civic Engagement Beyond the Classroom

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Abstract

This article explores service learning as an instructional method for pre-service teachers. The qualitative study identified the importance of service learning projects in a teacher training program, and the effect it has on pre-service teacher's perspective of social injustice within their future classrooms. The study utilized social injustice as the application topic for the service learning project. Pre-service teachers identified learning growth at the conclusion of the study and expressed the benefits of service learning in higher education teacher training programs.

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Keywords: Service Learning, Teacher Preparation, Social Justice

Introduction

Service learning is a current curriculum topic within higher education institutions. Some researchers state that service learning changes "the nature of faculty work, enhances student learning, better fulfills campus missions, and improves town-gown relations" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000, p. 273). When properly implemented, service learning instruction offers hands-on experiences that foster academic growth and create positive community connections. Teacher training programs in higher education use hand-on field experiences to train their pre-service teachers in the proper implementation of methodology, pedagogy, and classroom management, which require pre-service teachers are trained in K-12 classrooms as they well should be. Additionally, educators need to also have a firm understanding of the community organizations that support the vast social injustices their future students may face. Pre-service teachers should have experiences working with community agencies during their teacher training as those community organizations may be of assistance to them as they enter the classroom.

This study examined the effects of pre-service teachers who were required to participate in a service learning projects that addressed the following social injustices: homelessness, sexual orientation, stereotypes, domestic violence, child abuse, immigration policies, and poverty. The primary goal of the service learning experience was for pre-service teachers to walk away with an understanding of their chosen injustice, the community agencies that address their injustice, and the impact that their selected social injustice has on the educational setting. The secondary goal of the service learning experience was to provide participants with the ability to reflect on their experience, which is a universal expectation of all educators. The initial research questions were focused on determining what pre-service teachers already knew about social injustice and the community organizations that address them, and how the service-learning project will or will not affect them as classroom teachers.

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Literature Review

Higher education institutions implement, support, and maintain service learning as it fosters civic and social responsibility, develops empathy and multicultural understanding, and maintains traditional academic goals of critical thinking (Butin, 2006; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). Often these components are part of the institution's mission statement which provides an array of hands-on learning opportunities. Service learning is an example of an instructional method that supports hands-on learning.

Service learning is an experience that places students in a community-based educational setting that is connected to learning outcomes within a course (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; O'Byrne, 2001). It requires the application of reflective and critical thinking skills that heighten learning outcomes generated in a course (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Canada, 2001; Jenkins & Sheehy, 2011; O'Byrne, 2001). Service learning opportunities apply academic content knowledge in real-world problem-solving situations. It fosters a learning process that creates a longer retention of content and allows for easy transfer to new situations (Jenkins & Sheehy, 2011; O'Byrne, 2001). Unfortunately, service learning is often compared to internships or practicum, but internships/practicums are usually the capstone experience "that offers students a chance to use what they have learned throughout a major" (O'Byrne, 2001, p. 80). Service learning is also often compared to volunteerism; however, volunteering is not generally connected to learning outcomes (O'Byrne, 2001).

Research has shown that students who participate in service learning exhibit learning outcomes that build their "self-confidence, social responsibility, civic-mindedness, self-esteem, and personal efficacy" (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001, p 154). Service learning provides the ability for participants to interact with professionals and apply their knowledge to real life experiences (Canada, 2001). There is also the opportunity to participate in "realistic communication with a real audience" (Canada, 2001, p. 49). Service learning has influenced pre-service teachers' attitude toward cultural differences and demonstrated enhanced cognitive understanding of multiculturalism (Keen& Hall, 2009; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001).

Although service learning provides an authentic experience, some pre-service teachers do not prefer this method of learning. They are uncomfortable with the autonomy it provides, which they find stressful because of low self-efficacy or limited support when participating in service learning (Bandura, 2009; You & Rud, 2010). The autonomy may also generate feelings of being disconnected to the higher education institution (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996) because of the lack of faculty supervision on site. Pre-service teachers can find it emotionally challenging as they experience "people's needs and situations" that they have not previously encountered (You & Rud, 2010, p. 38). They may lack the ability to work collegially, acquire and utilize new skills, and effectively communicate which can also make service learning a challenge (Jenkins & Sheehey, 2011).

Service learning not only provides the opportunity to work collegially, but to also work with community agencies. The term social injustice has several different definitions. Miller (1999) defines social injustice as the disadvantages that are distributed to individuals within society (Miller, 1999), while Reisch (2002) prefers the term distributive justice instead of social injustice. Reisch (2002) states that distributive justice is:

Equal rights (to intangibles such as freedom) and equal opportunity to obtain social goods, such as property; Equal distribution to those of equal merit; Equal distribution to

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those of equal productivity; Unequal distribution based upon an individual's needs or requirements; Unequal distribution based upon an individual's status or position; Unequal distribution based upon different "contractual" agreements. (p. 345)

With both definitions in mind, studies show that social injustices negatively affect student academic performance (Bankston & Caldas, 1996; Miron, Warner, & Branscombe, 2011), and pre-service teachers need to learn how to assist their students who face social injustice. Service learning is an instructional method that provides pre-service teachers the opportunity to personally experience social injustice as well as how society is attempting to address those injustices.

Methods

Qualitative data was compiled directly from the participants in an undergraduate course designed for prospective K-12 teachers who were all recipients of a state scholarship for future educators. The course was titled Community Based Understanding and was held at a four year NCATE accredited institution.

Participants

Forty-two participants (six male and thirty-six female) self-selected to take the course which lasted a full academic semester. All participants were K-12 education majors, recipients of the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Scholarship, and intended on entering the professional field of education upon graduation.

Study Design

The focus of this study centered on the learning objectives for an undergraduate pre-service teacher course. The learning objectives for the course were as followed: research and define social injustice; identify a local community organization whose goal or mission was focused on inclusivity; and analyze the impact of community organizations and assist them in meeting organizational goals through a project.

In order to meet these learning objectives, pre-service teachers were allowed to choose a topic of interest during the first in-class session. Seven social injustice topics (bullying, child abuse, domestic violence, gang violence, sexual orientation, immigration, and poverty) were written on pieces of paper and placed around the room. The pre-service teachers were asked to stand under one injustice that pulled at their hearts; as a group, they talked about why they were drawn to that particular injustice. Then, the pre-service teachers brainstormed at least ten things that they could do to combat their social injustice, and documented those ideas on a large poster board. Each group presented their social injustice list of action items to the class. After each group shared, participants were allowed to move to a different topic, if another injustice called to them more than their current selection. Table 1 (see below) demonstrates the topic choices and outlines group distribution for each social injustice.

Table 1
Topics Selection and Group Member Enrollment

Topic	Group 1 Members	Group 2 Members
Bullying	3	4

Child Advocacy	3	4
Domestic Violence	3	4
Gang Violence	3	3
Immigration	3	N/A
LGBTQ	3	2
Poverty	3	4

In their chosen groups, the pre-service teachers conducted research on their social injustice and provided a summary to the instructor. Participants then contacted a community organization that focused on their injustice. They met the organization's leadership to determine a need. Pre-service teachers designed and implemented an event, activity, or other need of the organization that contributed to addressing the organization's social injustice. Upon completion of the event or need, each participant wrote a reflection that addressed several learning outcomes of the service learning project. The reflection papers served as the data for this study, which had IRB approval from the participants' university.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was coded by hand through initially placing the data in categories based on open-ended probing questions outlined in the final reflective essay. The probing questions used for data analysis were grounded in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (n.d.) High-Impact Practices. The responses were collectively examined and coded into categories under the following questions, without consideration of selected social injustice:

- What is your personal response to the work you did?
- How do you feel about your project's outcome?
- Explain your group dynamics. How did everyone work together or not?
- Have you changed as a result of this project, either in opinion or in attitude? If so, how did the experience change you? If not, why do you think you were not affected by the service project?
- Did this project impact you as a future teacher? Why or why not?

The categories were then reviewed for patterns in the responses. The second level of coding identified the repeating text to find patterns in the participants' responses (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) as well as outlier responses in each category. The third level of coding was theoretical coding that identified core themes within the responses (Kendall, 1999). The theoretical constructs provided data for the theoretical narrative, which connected the researcher's "concerns and the participants' subjective experience" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 40). In order to avoid any biases in all levels of coding, both researchers examined the coding processes separately using Google Docs, and then came together to further analyze the data. The following are the themes that were generated from the third level of coding: understanding the community, educational impact, and reflection on prospective, which triangulated the data. The themes were constructed through examining the patterned responses and multiple discussions between the two researchers.

Findings

As a result of the coding three themes emerged: understanding community, educational impact, and reflection on perspective.

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Understanding Community

In order to be an effective educator, one must understand the community represented in the learning environment. Through the service learning project, many pre-service teachers identified they needed to learn the community in which their student population resides in order to effectively teach those individuals. One participant noted that the service learning project, "opened [their] eyes to a world [they] thought about fleetingly, but never tried to change".

Some pre-service teachers stated their perception concerning social injustice was not altered, but disposition concerning the public's ignorance of awareness toward the social injustice was eye-opening. Their view of the public was altered as well as their realization of the community truly valuing their service. During their project, some of the participants stated that the community members expressed appreciation of their service efforts. Several pre-service teachers relayed that their organization expressed a sincere appreciation for their services. One participant reported that the organization's workers called them 'angels' and a "godsend'.

Participants indicated that there was a greater need in their local community than they had previously thought. "I feel like this project has given me a new perspective on how we can impact the community. No matter how big or small, an impact is an impact. What matters is that you're making an effort to help others." The pre-service teachers' preconceived notions that the community they reside in had limited or no social injustices was impacted through this experience.

The project allowed participants to experience the vast discrepancy among citizens and gain a greater understanding of the community needs. One participant stated they "have new information that {they] never knew before this project and a newfound appreciation for this community. [They] also learned how much help being an ally is!" Another emphasized this by stating: "Next time I am downtown and someone approaches me asking for money I can tell them all about The Good Shepherd and the resources and items they have." The participants' perception of the social injustices was altered, but so was their understanding of how easy it is to serve the community. The project allowed participants to realize how important community organization are, and how easy it is to get involved to support our community.

Educational Impact

The pre-service teachers felt successful as their awareness about social injustices in their local community increased. They expressed this project was pivotal for future teachers because it allowed them to personally become aware of the social injustices their future students will encounter. It also allowed pre-service teachers to experience how to be an advocate. Several pre-service teachers expressed how the project strengthened their passion to teach, and they now felt better prepared for their teaching career.

The project allowed participants to gain an understanding of how to assist parents or guardians of their future students. Participants acknowledged that they were now aware of the various community organizations that assist people with social injustices: "I realize that as a teacher we are more than just a person there to educate our students but we are also there to provide for them in any way possible." The pre-service teachers expressed a desire to reach out to parents because they know parents are an important aspect of academic success.

In addition, the project allowed them to not just read about other people's life experiences, but to experience it in some capacity: "I have now seen the true meaning of diversity and also seen how great it is when a group of people just sit and talk about their differences and why it is ok to be different." Providing the opportunity to experience aspects of

other people's lives, also taught the participants the importance of creating a safe zone where all students are free and respected in their classrooms. Participants collectively expressed that as they enter the classroom, they must be observant. One participant stated "as a future teacher it is ever so important to have experiences outside of my normal life in order to open my eyes to different lifestyles I may encounter." Teachers are often the first ones to identify if a student is entrenched in a social injustice, and it is up to them to serve as first reporters.

The project also provided the opportunity to have a hands-on learning experience of a teaching strategy that they could utilize in their future profession. Many of the participants' experienced an understanding of the value of promoting service learning in their classrooms. As one participant stated: "I would like to personally educate my students in my classrooms and make sure they know what resources are available to them if they need help." It also ignited a desire to become leaders in their schools by hosting events that address social injustices that are predominant in their schools as well as placing it in their curriculum. "I saw this project as an example of what I should be doing when I am working as a teacher. I do not want to simply be involved on the academic level. I feel that we are responsible for giving back through extra-curriculars, community events, etc."

Reflection on Perspective

The service learning project indirectly influenced reflection concerning civic responsibility. When implementing a service learning project, one key component for maximizing the advantages of the experience is reflection (Chesbrough, 2011). The required reflection component of the assignment allowed the pre-service teachers to maximize their understanding of the experience. One participant reflectively stated that they "were not only able to make a difference on [their] own, [they] were able to help others to make a difference as well". Through this experience, participants expressed their attitude towards service had changed. The pre-service teachers began to see service as a civic duty or communal responsibility instead of it being an additional burden. Some stated that they were more apt to donate to the local food pantry or assist immigrant children as a result of the project. A participant's comment strongly supported this by stating: "Part of me thought that I was doing something extraordinary by helping out but now I see it more as a civic duty than anything else." The pre-service teachers were able to see the reciprocal benefit of the service learning project, where not only did their groups learn about what is actually happening in [their] community and how to combat it, [they] were also able to teach [their] peers as well. They found that even a small amount of time could have a huge impact on their community.

The findings indicated that service increases compassion and ownership of a community, as well as improve concern for the well-being of its citizens. The participants noticed a change in their views, and found they had more compassion and desires to help social injustices as they worked with the community. The participants did not measure their success on the number of resources raised or the amount of money earned, but instead they measured their success on the lives touched by their service. One participant state, "The program was a success in my eyes because I know we at least reached one person".

Many pre-service teachers even mentioned how they would like to continue offering community support. For example, one participant said, "In the future, I will think of ways that I can help the community and try to volunteer in more service opportunities." Participants felt a driving force to continue to help others and support the common good of their community. They voiced their passion for making a difference even on a small scale because there is always work

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to be done. The pre-service teachers also emphasized that no matter how small the resources are or how big of a problem, every little bit of service can go a long way, and if everyone does a little that that can add up to a lot.

Discussion

The social injustice project not only impacted pre-service teachers' classroom methodology, but also their knowledge of civic engagement. The overwhelmingly positive results at the conclusion of the project, validate the importance of service learning in higher education as an instructional tool for pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers in this study stated, in their reflections, that they did not have a clear understanding of how community organizations address social injustice prior to their participation in the project. However, upon completion, pre-service teachers identified the connection between understanding the services community organizers provided, and how it impacts their future students. Implementing service learning in teacher training programs will foster understanding of community organizations as well as provide pre-service teachers with applied learning concerning social justice. Service learning allows pre-service teachers to 'walk a mile in another person's shoes' and then take what they have learned from that walk and apply it into their classrooms to create an environment that promotes equity. Requiring pre-service teachers to work with community organizations also builds on their understanding of the diverse backgrounds their students come from. It also provides the knowledge of where to find support in the community when faced with social injustices that they are not equipped to address. However, further studies should be conducted concerning validation of learning outcomes around service learning projects outside of classroom methodology for pre-service teachers in order to statistically strengthen the evidence.

Limitations

The study provided affective and cognitive growth in the pre-service teachers who participated; however, it did have several limitations. One limitation centers on dependability as the data was collected from only one sample of pre-service teachers during one semester. The outcome of the results may differ with a larger population pool.

Also, the data coded lacked negative reflections concerning the project. Several participants stated that it was time consuming as well as difficult to communicate between group members and community organizations, but none of them reported not obtaining the learning outcomes. Their responses may not be creditable as the reflection was a graded assessment and participants may have felt they needed to respond in such a way to obtain a good grade. Confirmability is also a limitation as one researcher was the course instructor. However, the other researcher was disconnected from the course and objectively examined the data when coding, and the other researcher was unfamiliar with the project as well as the students.

Conclusion

Service learning opportunities have the potential to change societal norms. In order for change to occur for the common good of all citizens, individuals need to become advocates. The study provided evidence that service learning should be one of the criteria for higher education teacher preparation programs. Requiring service learning as an instructional method increases pre-service teachers' awareness of the educational implications in the community prior to entering the teaching profession. A pre-service teacher participant summed up the importance of

service learning, social injustices, and its impact on the educational setting by stating, "This project has made a few things obvious to me: people aren't aware, teachers don't know the signs and not enough is being done to help."

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