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Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Service-Learning



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ABSTRACT

The study explored preservice teachers' experiences and perceptions of implementation of service-learning into the teacher preparation program and its use as a teaching methodology in their own teaching. Through quantitative data generated from a survey instrument, the concept of service-learning as a viable teaching method was well received. After an initial introduction to the concept of service-learning methodology, a moderate percentage of preservice teachers stated they would likely use it in their own teaching. Data suggests no systematic relationship between certainty of teaching as a career choice and perceptions of service-learning. However, the data does suggest significant differences in the types of service-learning projects implemented and the grade the preservice teacher was expected to teach.

INTRODUCTION

The use of community service combined with the school curriculum is not new and can be traced to progressive thinkers such as Dewey (1916, 1966) and Kilpatrick (1918). These early educational leaders believed that formal classroom learning must be given perspective through meaningful practical experience. This perspective provided the catalyst for what is currently known as service-learning.

Through service-learning, students are empowered to use their innate abilities, discover strengths and develop their thinking skills in a community setting working purposefully to make a difference. Under the supervision of a creative and knowledgeable teacher, this experience should lead students to enhance academic learning and personal development (Alt, 1977).

Today, across the country, service-learning has become a vital part of the public school cur-

riculum and is becoming increasingly important in teacher education programs. Research continues to show a positive relationship between school academic performance and service-learning. For example, in the area of cognitive growth, Silcox (1993) found that both American and Russian students who participated in an environmental project showed significant gains in scientific knowledge. Other researchers investigating the area of academic engagement found that service-learning contributed directly to increased school attendance and in hours spent doing homework (Melchior & Orr, 1995).

Another major outcome of service-learning programs has been the civic, social and moral development of students. Assessing this impact, numerous studies have demonstrated a link between service-learning, social and personal responsibility (Boston 1997, 1999; Kraft et al. 1993; Ridgell 1995). Schollenberger (1985) found that participants engaged in service-learning

ing demonstrated high levels of thinking about social problems.

The research cited above suggests that service-learning makes a major contribution to student-learning. Both students and the communities they serve stand to reap substantial benefits from engaging in service-learning (Jacoby, 1996). Similarly, service-learning, when used in teacher education, provides a valuable pedagogy that contributes to preservice teachers' learning. Teacher education faculty who integrate service-learning methodology into the curriculum provide their students with a valuable tool to help future students connect classroom learning with service to the community. At least one study (Hamm, Dowell & Houck, 1997) reported that service-learning helps undergraduate students focus on why they are going to school and their long-term goals. The same study also said that undergraduate students reported being very conscious of projecting a positive image role model for public school students. This methodology can add an additional dimension to preservice student learning by building self-esteem and the feeling of accomplishment. One powerful comment made by a student after completing a service-learning experience was, "I know I can make a difference, even though I am only one person" (Hamm, Dowell, & Houck, 1998). It also has the additional benefit of integrating multiple intelligence issues into the curriculum by appealing to different ways that students learn perhaps giving meaning to subject matter that would otherwise be lacking.

Although teacher education institutions are increasingly utilizing service-learning, research on the effects of having preservice students conceptualize, develop and implement service experiences is only beginning (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). Initial research studies (Hamm et al., 1998; Anderson & Guest, 1994) have shown that service-learning is a positive teaching strategy stimulating interest in subject matter that would otherwise be difficult for students to internalize. Studies have also shown that this pedagogy can help preservice teachers understand the moral and civic obligations of teaching. According to Erickson & Anderson (1997) these obligations include fostering lifelong civic engage-

ment, being able to adapt to the needs of learners with diverse and special needs, and being committed to advocacy for social justice and for children and families.

Service-learning is being investigated as a form of experiential education that may assist future teachers in helping their students relate classroom learning to community service (Jacoby, 1996). With this in mind, the authors have integrated a service-learning component into an introductory course required of all teacher education majors. Preservice teachers work with mentor-teachers in field placements in area schools to create and facilitate a service-learning project for the students in their specific classroom or school-wide.

To date, more than 250 students have been involved in service-learning activities in this course during the last two semesters. Research data is being collected to assess the impact and to make program adjustments. Because this is the initial exposure that the students have to service-learning as a teaching methodology, the purpose of this study was to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of this teaching method in the areas of gender, age and the expected grade they are to teach. More specifically, four questions were explored: 1) What are preservice teachers' previous community service experiences? 2) What type of service-learning did preservice teachers' use? 3) How do preservice teachers perceive the service-learning experience in teacher preparation course work? And 4) How likely will preservice teachers use service-learning as a teaching method in their future teaching?

METHOD

Participants

The participants for this study were 96 preservice students enrolled in Ed 201 (Diverse Learners in the Schools: Social/Cultural Context) class taught at a Northwest land grant institution. The University is a public university of about 11 000 students. There were 34 males (35.4%) and 61 females (63.5%). Seventy-nine of the students were under 25 years of age (82.3%), 11 ranged from 26-35 years of age (11.5

%), one was between ages 36-45 (1%), and 2 were older than 46 years (2.1%). The vast majority of students indicated an interest in becoming either elementary or secondary teachers. Of those participants, 24 (25%) reported their desire to become an elementary teacher, and 59 (61.5%) expected to teach secondary grades. Thirteen students (13.5%) indicated "other" as the category for their grade expected to teach. Most of the other students intended to work in specific areas such as child development, family counseling, or private education.

Data Collection

A Service-Learning Questionnaire was developed for this study. Previously used questionnaires, to survey students' perceptions of service-learning, provided the framework for the development of the instrument content (Anderson, 1998; National Service-Learning in Teacher Education Partnership, 1998). The questionnaire included 31 closed questions and 1 open-ended question (n=32). All questions pertained to preservice teacher's perceptions of service learning after they had been exposed to and participated in this teaching methodology. The questions were classified into six sets of categories: The first set involved nominal measurement scale questions that asked respondents about their general background (n= 3). The second set used Likert scale questions to determine respondent's previous service-learning experiences (n=3). The third set involved three Likert scale questions that explored participant's philosophy of teaching in general. The fourth set questions were constructed using the Likert scale, nominal measurement scale, and open questioning (n=12) to determine participant's perceptions of the actual service-learning project and experiences in the Ed 201 course. The fifth set of questions using the Likert scale asked questions regarding the general use of service-learning in education (n= 9) while the sixth set of Likert questions received data regarding participant's probable implementation of service learning in their own teaching upon certification (n= 2).

The data was collected at the end of the semester after the students had completed their

service-learning project for the introductory core education course. Participant consent forms were completed for research purposes.

Analysis

The major analysis for the data was the chi-square test procedure. Separate chi-square tests on each of the questions and each of the independent variables (gender, age, and grade expected to teach) were conducted. For all statistical analyses, alpha was set at .05.

RESULTS

In this study, preservice students' perceptions about service-learning project were obtained to determine if there were differences by gender, age, or grade expected to teach. Four categories of an analysis were explored: previous community service experiences, type of service-learning used, perceptions of service-learning project, and likelihood of using service-learning in the future teaching.

Previous community service experience: The first category of the analysis explored participants' previous community service experience. There were no statistically significant differences found between gender, age, and the grade expected to teach in and how actively they participated in volunteer community service before they attended college. Overall, 35.4% of the respondents indicated that they had either very actively or frequently participated in community service. There was no relationship found between the degree of respondents' previous participation in community service and how likely they will implement service-learning in their future teaching.

Previous Preservice Teacher Participation in Community Service

	Frequency	Percent
Did not participate	8	8.3
Seldom participated	13	13.5
Sometimes participated	18	18.8
Moderately often participated	22	22.9
Frequently participated	21	21.9
Very actively participated	13	13.5
Missing	1	1.0
Total	96	100.0

Type of service-learning used: With 95% confidence, there was a significant difference between the grade a preservice teacher was being trained in (elementary education, k-5th grade versus secondary education, 6-12 grade) and the type of community service performed. Those preservice teachers who are being trained in elementary education, provided service in different areas than secondary-trained preservice teachers. A majority of preservice teachers in both areas provided service to students in the practicum setting as part of the service learning project in the course. Elementary preservice teachers had a narrower spectrum of service-learning groups. Results indicate that elementary preservice teachers provided service to the school community or senior citizen groups in society. Secondary preservice teachers, however, provided service to a broader spectrum of community groups (school community at large, college students, students with disabilities, parents and families, students of low socioeconomic status, local businesses and agencies, and students that are home-schooled).

Preservice teachers' perceptions: The second category provided an analysis of preservice teacher's perceptions to the service-learning experience. Perceptions were provided with regard to evaluations of the project and what community group received service through the experience. Overall, 75.6% of students found the service-learning experience to be slightly positive to very positive experience. There were no significant differences found between gender, age, and the grade expected to teach.

Certainty of teaching as their career: The third category analyzed respondents' certainty of teaching as their career and likelihood of using service-learning in their future teaching methods. Gender did not play a statistically significant role in how sure the participants were about their choice of teaching as a career. We found, however, that there is a quite strong association between age and the grade expected to teach in relationship of how sure the students were about their choice of teaching as a career. The results reached statistical significance for age (value of 28.050=.005) and grade expected to teach (value of 21.522=.006). For these items,

we conducted follow-up tests, calculating phi coefficients. The observed significance level for age for the phi coefficient value of .561=.005, and for grade expected to teach value of .484=.006.

Regarding implementation by preservice teachers of service-learning as a methodology of teaching, 41.1% of respondents would likely or very likely use service-learning in their teaching. There was no relationship found between how sure the participants were about their choice of teaching as a career and how likely they will implement service-learning in their future teaching.

How Likely will Preservice Teachers Implement Service-Learning in Future

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all likely	5	5.2
Not likely	14	14.6
Undecided	25	26.0
Likely	33	34.4
Very likely	16	16.7
Total	93	96.9
Missing	3	3.1
Total	96	100.0

Although they were not polled as specific service-learning topics, participants were asked their likelihood of incorporating the following areas into their future curriculum: social causes, programs to help others, environmental projects, political debates, community based projects, and protection of the environment. Although no significant difference among groups was found with regard to the first five topics, females were found to be more likely than males to incorporate supportive efforts to protect the environment.

Preservice Teachers' Likelihood of Incorporating Supportive Efforts to Protect the Environment

Count							
		not at all likely	not likely	undecided	likely	very likely	Total
Gender of subject	Male	3	2	16	7	6	34
	Female	1	10	14	21	12	58
Total		4	12	30	28	18	92

CONCLUSION

The study explored preservice teacher's experiences and perceptions of implementation of service learning into the teacher preparation program and its use as a teaching methodology in their own teaching. Through quantitative data generated from the survey instrument, the researchers first explored the relationship between preservice teacher's previous experiences with community service activities and their likelihood to implement service-learning in their own teaching. The premise was that the more community service preservice teachers participated in, or were accustomed to prior to their education core courses, the more likely they would incorporate service-learning as a viable teaching strategy in their own classrooms. However, no relationship was found between previous community service participation and the future implementation of the service-learning teaching strategy. This suggests that preservice teachers previous volunteer community service experiences have no significant bearing on their personal decision to incorporate service learning once they have a classroom of their own. Nonetheless, the concept of service learning as a viable teaching method was well received by all participants. After an initial introduction to the concept of service learning methodology, a moderate percentage of preservice teachers stated they would likely use it in their own teaching. Preservice teachers had discovered the benefits of incorporating service-learning into their repertoire of teaching strategies, along with direct teaching, cooperative learning, and discussion, to name a few.

After this initial introduction of the concept of service-learning, the overall perception of the project as a positive experience, 51% of respondents, indicates a favorable impression of service-learning as a viable teaching method. However, no significance was found between the variables of gender, age, and grade expected to teach. These variables did not have a significant impact on the overall perception of the service learning experience. Gender, age, and grade expected to teach do not seem to be factors which determine or influence the overall perceptions of service learning methodology by preservice teachers.

The data suggests no systematic relationship between certainty of teaching as a career choice and overall perceptions of service learning. However, the data does suggest significant differences in the types of service learning projects implemented and the grade the preservice teacher was expected to teach. There seems to be a distinct difference in the types of service learning projects implemented, based on the grade level the preservice teacher is expected to teach. Preservice teachers in secondary grades seems to view service learning projects in the community on more of a broad scale, providing service to a number of community agencies, organizations, and populations of community members. However, preservice teachers in the elementary grade levels showed a strong bias of community projects to senior citizen organizations and retirement homes.

There are a number of implications of the research results for teacher educators. Teacher preparation programs should consider the incorporation of service learning across the core educational curriculum, not only methods courses. The data from this research indicate that after the initial introduction of service learning methodology in the core course, a moderate percentage of preservice teachers were likely to incorporate service learning into their teaching. With continued discussion and exploration of service learning across core curriculum, the understanding and support of this methodology could potentially improve. If continued attention is to be provided to service learning in the core curriculum, that curriculum should assist preservice teachers in identifying worthwhile and varied projects to be utilized in the classroom. The data suggested preservice teachers in elementary education need more guidance in determining projects for varied community members, not just the senior citizen population. Though this population is worthy and well deserving of many service learning projects, other community groups could be served through service learning projects in the elementary grade levels.

Investigation of service learning in teacher preparation programs suggests many positive outcomes for preservice teachers. However, there is a need for additional research in this area.

For instance, further exploration should address the differences found in this study between secondary and elementary service-learning projects conducted. In addition, this study found many preservice teachers were receptive of the service-learning upon an initial introduction of the methodology. Further research should explore whether this positive reception is maintained with and without further exploration of this strategy in the core education curriculum. In addition to this study's particular research findings, future research should explore mentor teacher's (current teachers in the schools who supervise preservice teacher practicums) responses to the service learning methodology incorporated into their classroom by the preservice teacher. What are the mentor teacher's reaction to this methodology? Have they incorporated this strategy themselves, or is this a new concept for them? If it is new, is service learning well received? Continued exploration should investigate the impact on community participants and local businesses involved along with the student's own reactions to the project. Do the participants, on all levels, receive satisfaction and benefit from the projects being implemented?

Service learning is a teaching strategy that may assist future teachers in helping their students relate classroom learning to community service. Bridging the gap between classroom content and community relevance is at the core of service learning methodology. Preservice teachers are beginning to recognize service learning as a viable teaching strategy, along with the traditional methods of teaching, to reach a diverse population of students. Once initially introduced to the methods involved in service learning, preservice teachers are beginning to recognize the vast number of benefits this strategy has on student's learning and academic performance, recognition of civic obligations and responsibilities, and moral development. As preservice teachers grow in their pedagogical understanding of service learning, the benefits reaped by their future students is immeasurable.

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