



The impact of the type of projects on preservice teachers' conceptualization of service learning

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The experiences resulting from differences in the type of project created different outcomes.
- Working individually with children who are at risk created more complex understandings.
- Project goals have a potential to limit student thinking about community needs and social problems.
- Newcomer volunteers need to understand the interest of people in need in the first place.
- The discrepancy in students' ideas about the origin of the problems needs to be critically examined.

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effects of the type of project undertaken for a community practice course on preservice teachers' conceptualization of service learning. The goal of the projects is to enable participants to engage with service practice in a reflective manner. Through the examination of the reflective logs kept by students using Butin's framework and by comparing the themes that emerged, it was found that differences in the experiences of students, which reflected the project content and the characteristics of the children being served, created different learning outcomes for each group of students.

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1. Introduction

Service learning has gained international prominence, becoming a popular field and prompting research which includes case studies of effective models around the world, at every level of education and in every type of community (Holland, 2010). Various research projects have contributed to making the language of service learning consistent across nations (Holland, 2010). Not all countries are concerned about the same issues, but most of them "seem to share the fundamental belief that an educated citizenry is essential to the practice of a democratic society. This doesn't mean we are necessarily teaching citizenship; more often it means we want students to understand the role of a person in society" (Kenworthy-U'Ren, Petri, & Taylor, 2006, p. 126).

It has long been acknowledged by many universities that one of the ways to promote high quality academic learning with personal

growth and civic responsibility is to integrate community service practice into teacher education programs. In designing the teacher education curriculum, one of the goals needs to be effectively preparing students for the realities of the community contexts in which they will teach and to function as socially responsible citizens in a society and world that is increasingly socially and racially pluralistic (Grant & Gomez, 2001) as well as linguistically and culturally diverse. Thus, preservice students need to think critically, develop empathy, appreciate personal and social responsibility, grow in self-esteem, and change their disposition toward teaching in diverse settings (Carrington & Sagers, 2008). According to Brown (2005), students should learn how to become cultural mediators who are culturally responsive to the needs of all students and are able to foster social justice in schooling. Complex learning and learning about diversity and social justice depends on the opportunities provided by both their service learning placements and the teacher-advisors who are responsible for their service learning.

Groundwater-Smith (1992) defines teaching as a social practice because of the many complexities of its professional demands. Thus,

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providing opportunities for social practice is more important than practicing technical strategies. Many of the teacher education programs are criticized for educating students primarily on the basis of academic ability and for assuming that they are getting teachers ready to teach everyone, which leaves students unprepared to teach culturally different and diverse communities (Sleeter, 2008). In this respect, aside from developing students' academic achievement, teaching needs to be culturally relevant, requiring teachers to support the development of students' cultural competence, or the ability to function effectively in one's culture of origin. Furthermore, teacher educators should work to develop critical consciousness, fostering an understanding of the ways that social structures and practices help to reproduce social inequities and to systematically exclude groups of people from social benefits (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, preparing teachers for diversity and teaching in diverse educational environments through building their understanding of cultural diversity and social justice remains one of the challenges of teacher education programs (Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006). If students are not provided with opportunities to engage with issues of diversity and social inequities in their teacher education programs, their assumptions and awareness of diversity and social justice issues tend to be simplified, unexamined and overgeneralized (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995), because prospective teachers would often prefer not to discuss such societal issues (Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004).

Service learning activities are worthwhile experiences for reinforcing students' learning about inclusive education, the community, and diversity, and they also help students become aware of the power dynamics in society. Service learning in teacher education enhances outcomes for students, and motivates students to grow personally, socially and emotionally; it also develops their skills of reflection and ability to question their assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices as well as their understanding of their roles as teachers in the community (Wade, 2000). These activities also provide promising opportunities for students to learn from their personal experiences and from the community they have worked with and contemplate more deeply their own experiences, and they also enable them to undertake investigations of their community using a wide range of informants (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). However, a more complex understanding of diversity and the learning experiences which contradict students' learning about diversity depend on the experiences preservice teachers have in their service learning placements (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007).

Brown (2005) supports service learning as a means of assisting future teachers, raising their consciousness of political agendas and the diverse and conflicting needs of the school community, prompting them to develop strategies to meet these needs, and negotiating the expertise needed to implement beneficial service learning in the context of social justice. Accordingly, Brown (2005) developed a five-point outcome criterion to assess service learning. The activities should be *purposeful* to raise the self-esteem and academic skills of student providers as they perform needed services. The current and future impact of service learning activities and outcomes, both on themselves and on the recipients, need to be examined in a *reflective* way through debriefing, analysis, journaling, and discussions. *Experiential* activities assist students in meaning-making and realizing connections between theory, school political agendas, classroom practices and school needs. Service learning is a *reciprocal* activity that provides real benefits for both the provider and the recipient. *Transformative* experiences have the power to raise cross-cultural cognizance and to help in overcoming their biases and perceptions, thus permitting them to become agents for social justice (Brown, 2005; Brown & Howard, 2005).

When we examine the studies that have explored the impact and beneficial outcomes of service learning pedagogy we notice

that each service learning practice involves the description of what kind of project or coursework students were assigned. It might be argued that different service learning projects provide different learning experiences. Although we cannot say that it is only the service learning projects that cause the learning differences, they are an influential element in forming preservice teachers conceptualization of service learning, because students work with different groups following different processes, which thus allows them to have different experiences. For instance, when students have direct contact with marginalized or disadvantaged groups they naturally begin to consider the people they serve. Conway, Amel, and Gerwien (2009) suggest that service learning courses deliver some key types of outcome, but if particular outcomes are being targeted the service learning experiences need to be designed accordingly. Lake and Jones (2008) found that service learning projects are vehicles for empowering the children being served as well as the preservice teachers who developed and implemented the projects. Bell et al. (2007) looked at the differences in the learning outcomes of preservice teachers for their understanding of diversity in two similar but notably different service learning experiences. One group took part in mentoring the other group and joined tutoring sections that were differentiated by the people with whom they interacted, the location of the work, and the opportunities to learn implicit in the experiences. They found mentoring service learning experiences facilitated the development of a more complex understanding of diversity because they undertook activities with non-traditional power dynamics in multiple contexts. It would therefore be informative to examine the student outcomes that were associated with the service learning experiences of students looking at the relationship between the context of the project and the preservice teachers learning.

There are different conceptual frameworks that we may draw upon to understand and analyze the conceptualization of service learning. Teacher educators use service learning to promote diversity, social justice, multicultural awareness, or social transformation. As the reasons for integrating service learning into teacher education vary, different frameworks are used by different researchers to provide meaningful ways of viewing teacher learning from a conceptual level.

Paine's (1989) framework for understanding the complexity of preservice teachers' learning and orientation toward diversity has four categories: the individual, categorical, contextual, and pedagogical. Wade's (2001) framework for service learning about social justice focuses on five principles: the experiential, collaborative, intellectual-analytical, multicultural, and activist. Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000) identify four categories of service learning as deficit, affirmative, pragmatic and activist. According to Butin (2009), service learning can be "read" through different theoretical lenses.

Butin's framework has been found to be more powerful in allowing us to view teachers' understanding or conceptualization of service learning because all the modes of it are explained with the philosophical orientation in which they embedded. Butin (2003, 2005b) explicates four distinct conceptualizations of service learning – technical, cultural, political and postmodern. This framework provides a range for exploring service learning from technical to diverse and socially just practices with a comprehensive understanding.

Butin's (2003, 2005b) framework for the technical understanding of service learning focused on pedagogical effectiveness and best practice principles including service learning program characteristics (i.e., quality of placement, impact of academic effectiveness) and the perceived impact on teaching and learning (i.e., cognitive outcomes). The cultural conceptualization of service learning emphasizes the meanings of practice that allow students

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