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## Service-learning: A Valuable Means of Preparing Pre-service Teachers for a Teaching Practicum.

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## **Service-learning: a valuable means of preparing pre-service teachers for a teaching practicum**

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*Abstract: The use of service-learning as a teaching methodology is in its infancy within Australian tertiary institutions. Parker et. al., (2009) noted that, until recently, community service-learning has been under-utilised within the Australian higher education system. Within teacher education programs, service-learning has been used primarily as a means of providing real-life experiences for pre-service teachers as well as developing their personal and professional skills. The research conducted in this study focused on ways involvement in a service-learning experience could contribute to the preparation of pre-service secondary teachers for their first teaching practicum. The participants included Bachelor of Education, Master of Teaching and Graduate Diploma of Education pre-service teachers, all of whom completed a service-learning unit prior to a 10-week practicum. The results indicated that pre-service teachers found that participating in a service-learning program had been of assistance, from both a personal and professional perspective, in helping to meet the challenges of their first practicum.*

### **Introduction**

Since the 1990s service-learning programs have been used increasingly within teacher education as a means of developing skills and providing real-life experiences for pre-service teachers (Anderson, 1998; Bates, 2009). Examples include the use of service-learning programs in the development of active citizenship (James & Iverson, 2009), social awareness (Lavery, 2007), diversity (Glazier, Charpentier & Boone, 2011), multicultural education (Boyle-Baise, 2006), critical inquiry and reflection (Anderson, 2000) as well as social justice and special needs education (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Such service-learning programs within teacher education usually aim to provide pre-service teachers with hands-on experiences in areas that are potentially outside their comfort zone (Colby, Bercaw, Clark & Galiardi, 2009). These experiences often increase self-esteem in pre-service teachers, promote personal development and enhance a sense of social responsibility and personal competence (Anderson, 1998; Chambers & Lavery, 2012). What is less evident, however, is the use of service-learning programs as a means of preparing pre-service teachers for a teaching practicum or internship experience. This article explores the experiences and perceptions of secondary pre-service teachers who completed a social justice service-learning course prior to undertaking a 10-week practicum.

The theoretical perspective for this study entailed an interpretive epistemology incorporating a symbolic interactionist lens. The goal of interpretive social science is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it. Interpretive inquiry strives to discover what is meaningful or relevant to people being studied and attempts to gain a feel for their social reality (Newman, 2006). Essential to the notion of

symbolic interactionism, a specific theoretical perspective within interpretive social science, is the positioning of oneself in the setting of those being studied, of considering situations from the viewpoint of “the actor”. Methodologically, symbolic interactionism directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with this perspective, the current study allowed the researchers initially to explore the service-learning experiences of the secondary pre-service teachers. Subsequently, the researchers examined the pre-service teachers’ opinions concerning the relevance of these service-learning experiences as a preparation for their teaching practicum.

## **Service-Learning**

Service-learning can be viewed as both an educational philosophy and an instructional method. As a philosophy of education, service-learning reflects the conviction that education should promote social responsibility and prepare students as involved citizens in democratic life (Anderson, 1998). As an instructional method service-learning enables students to apply academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to meet genuine community needs. Specifically, through teacher-guided reflection, appropriate assessment and the knowledge that they are making a difference within the community, students gain a deeper understanding of course content, develop their sense of self-efficacy and begin their future as active citizens (Georgia Southern University, 2014).

The best service-learning activities are those that equally emphasise student learning and addressing community needs, thus promoting a partnership of mutual benefit between students, faculty and community partners (Colorado State University, 2014). This approach stands in contrast to other methods of experiential learning such as community service, internships and various forms of field experience. For example, community service involves students providing assistance directly or indirectly to individuals, organisations or the community. Direct assistance can take the form of serving soup and bread from an agency van or preparing meals in a shelter for homeless; indirect assistance can entail raising money for a cause, or clerical work for a service agency. In all these cases, the primary emphasis is providing the service and the primary beneficiary is the service recipient. Conversely, the emphasis in internships and other forms of field experience is on the student and the main beneficiary is the service provider. Service-learning blends the key elements of community service and internships so that both the service-providers and the service recipients equally benefit (Anderson, 1998). An important feature of service-learning is that wherever possible those being served should control the service provided and define what the service tasks entail. It is a critical element of service-learning that the needs and the dignity of those being served are respected at all times (Jacoby, 1996).

Fundamental to the successful implementation of any service-learning program are four basic components, which can be grouped into preparation, action, reflection and demonstration (Kaye, 2010). Through preparation a need is identified, investigated and analysed. This need is then addressed through an action plan based on the elements identified through the preparation. As the students implement their action plan they begin a process of reflection that enables them “to consider how the experience, knowledge and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their communities” (Chambers & Lavery, 2012, p. 2). Finally, through demonstration the students showcase their learning in ways appropriate to the service-learning context, drawing on the previous components of preparation, action and reflection (Kaye, 2010).

Within teacher education, service-learning has the potential to challenge pre-service teacher assumptions concerning traditional approaches to schooling, to serve as a method for

education reform and to involve pre-service teachers in projects centred on the needs of young people (Root, 1994; Boyle-Baise, 2006; Lavery, Cain & Hampton, 2014). Service-learning experiences can help pre-service teachers prioritise and understand the intricacies of student learning as opposed to a perception of teaching as “a simple and mechanistic process that entails little more than a one-way transfer of information from teacher to student.” (Lawrence & Butler, 2010, p. 156). Service-learning can develop pre-service teachers, both professionally and personally, where they develop attributes such as empathy, leadership, self-reflection, confidence (Chambers & Lavery, 2012), professional knowledge and cultural awareness (Lavery, Cain & Hampton, 2014). Moreover, many pre-service teachers find service-learning meaningful and worthwhile (Glazier, Charpentier & Boone, 2011), where their experiences help to put a human face on things learnt in class (Boyle-Baise, 2006).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The underlying purpose for the study was to ascertain the potential of a service-learning program to contribute to the professional and personal development of pre-service teachers as they subsequently undertake a 10-week teaching practicum. Specifically, this research focused on the experiences and perceptions of pre-service secondary teachers who completed a 12-hour service-learning commitment as part of a service-learning and social justice unit. In the light of the purpose of the research there was one primary research question: In what ways does a service-learning experience contribute to the professional and personal development of pre-service teachers?

### **Significance**

The significance of this study is two-fold. Firstly, the findings have the potential to highlight ways a practical service outreach experience can impact the professional and personal development of pre-service teachers. Secondly, this research has the capacity to identify means by which the service-learning program can be improved and refined to support the preparation of pre-service teachers for their first 10-week school placement. As already noted, the use of service-learning as a teaching methodology is underdeveloped within Australian tertiary institutions. This fact stands in contrast to considerable developments in service-learning within Australian Catholic secondary schools (Lavery & Hackett, 2008) and the United States secondary and tertiary education sectors (Bringle, Phillips & Hudson, 2004; Kaye, 2010). The proposed research has the potential to add to the understanding of ways a service-learning experience can positively influence the preparation of pre-service teachers for teaching placements within an Australian setting.

### **Context**

The University offers a social justice service-learning unit for secondary pre-service teachers. The unit is compulsory for students undertaking the Bachelor of Education degree and is an elective for pre-service teachers studying the Graduate Diploma of Education or Master of Teaching courses. It is offered in the first semester of the university year. There are two components to the unit: workshops and community placement. The workshops provide a theoretical understanding of social justice. Topics include poverty, third world debt, ecology, Indigenous Australians, and refugees. Community placement involves pre-service

teachers undertaking 12 hours of service-learning. Placements accessed by pre-service teachers include learning support centres (Primary and Secondary), aged care, working with the homeless, Blind Association, drug rehabilitation, refugees, prison inmates, pregnancy support (for teenage mothers), horse riding for the disabled, Oxfam community aid, St Vincent De Paul, Salvation Army, Red Cross, soup vans, and hospitals.

Time is allocated at the beginning of the unit to prepare pre-service teachers for their twelve hours of service. During this time the notion of service-learning is explored and possible placements discussed. Reflection is undertaken in the form of group discussion, formal classroom presentations and journal writing. Examples of past pre-service teachers' reflections are also provided to demonstrate the depth of reflection that is required. There are three designated sessions in the program to monitor the progress of the pre-service teachers where they share experiences, successes and challenges. At the final workshop pre-service teachers deliver an oral presentation on their service-learning experiences and submit a detailed reflective journal. The unit is founded on the notion of integrating personal values, beliefs and service by providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to consider and contribute to the common good. The unit aims to develop a culture of serving others, to prepare young people for service leadership, and to promote values by attending to specific needs of the community, especially those of the underprivileged (Lavery, 2007).

Pre-service secondary teachers complete their first 10-week school experience following completion of the service-learning unit. For the Bachelor of Education and Master of Teaching pre-service teachers, this school experience commences almost immediately after completion of the service-learning unit (school term 2). The Graduate Diploma of Education pre-service teachers undertake their teaching internship at a later time (school term 3). For this cohort of pre-service teachers, the school experience is the only 10-week experience in their course and, as such, they must demonstrate their capacity to meet the Graduate Standards as mandated by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. For all pre-service secondary teachers, the expectation is that they would teach students ranging from Years 7-12 during these practical experiences.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in two stages. Stage 1 entailed data collection prior to the pre-service teachers undertaking their 10-week practicum and involved two components. The first component was a 25-30 minute questionnaire that pre-service teachers completed at the conclusion of the service-learning unit prior to undertaking the 10-week practicum (Appendix A). The questionnaire afforded the opportunity for pre-service teachers to respond to a set of structured questions which explored the degree to which they believed the service-learning unit was useful in preparing them to undertake their first school experience. Sixty pre-service teachers volunteered to answer the questionnaire: twenty-three Bachelor of Education, six Master of Teaching and thirty-one Graduate Diploma of Education. This number represented a participation rate of 82%. Thirty-seven of the pre-service teachers were female and twenty-three were male. The age range of the participants was between nineteen and forty-two years.

The second component involved a review of pre-service teacher field placement evaluation forms. These forms are completed by supervisors where the pre-service teachers undertake their service-learning and are submitted to the unit lecturer at the conclusion of the service-learning placement. The forms require supervisors to judge the pre-service teachers

on a four-point scale (Excellent, Very good, Good, Fair) over nine criteria. These criteria include: punctuality and general behaviour; cooperation and willingness; level of engagement with clients; level of engagement with staff; ability to comprehend instructions; acceptance of criticism; standard of work; initiative and ability to work unsupervised; ability to deal with difficult situations. It should be noted that each of the supervisors has been previously involved with the service-learning unit and has developed a strong understanding of the grading criteria for the unit. Supervisors are also invited to make comments where applicable. This review provided an external perspective as to how effective the pre-service teachers had undertaken their service-learning.

Stage 2 involved the collection of data from pre-service teachers following completion of their 10-week practicum. There were two parts to Stage 2. Part 1 entailed an online questionnaire that asked the pre-service teachers to reflect on their practicum in the light of their service-learning experiences. Ten Bachelor of Education pre-service teachers completed the questionnaire (Appendix B).

Part 2 of Stage 2 involved a 40-minute focus group interview that involved eight Bachelor of Education pre-service teachers. This interview was audiotaped for later transcription and protocol analysis. Four Graduate Diploma of Education pre-service teachers also volunteered for the focus group interview but due to time constraints were unable to participate. Three subsequently completed written responses to the interview questions; one consented to an individual interview that was audiotaped and transcribed. The questions for the post-school focus group interview are outlined in Appendix C.

### **Data Analysis**

Content analysis was the process used to explore the secondary pre-service teachers' responses to the focus group interview questions, to the open-ended questions in the pre-practicum and post practicum questionnaires, as well as to the placement supervisors' written comments. Berg (2007) describes content analysis as "a careful, detailed systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings" (p. 303). Specifically, the researchers used an interpretative approach to analyse the data where social action and human activity can be treated as text (Berg). The interviews were transcribed into written text for analysis in conjunction with the pre-service teachers' open-ended written responses to the two questionnaires and data from the supervisor field placement evaluation forms. Each of the four sets of data was analysed separately using the format described by Miles and Huberman (1994): data collection, data reduction, and data display and conclusion drawing/verification. The quantitative data from the multiple response questions in the pre and post practicum questionnaires were displayed in frequency column graphs.

### **Limitations to the Research**

There was one limitation to the research: time constraints militating against pre-service teacher involvement in the second stage of the data collection process – the post practicum data collection. Pre-service teachers experience a host of academic and other demands following the completion of the 10-week practicum. This situation is especially exacerbated for the Graduate Diploma of Education students who are required to complete five five-week intensive units immediately following the practicum just prior to graduation. Ten pre-service teachers only from the sixty who completed the initial pre-practicum

questionnaire completed the questionnaire following the 10-week practicum. The authors advise that any generalisability relating to findings from stage 2 of the data collection needs to be considered in the light of the low response rate. Time constraints also meant that organising one, or even two times for all volunteers to participate in a focus group interview became “impossible” and, as mentioned above, alternative data collection methods were required to accommodate particular volunteers.

## **Results of the Research**

The results of the research are presented in two sections that reflect the data collection process. The first section examines themes generated from the data post the service-learning experience but prior to the 10-week practicum. The second section explores themes stemming from the data gathered post the 10-week practicum.

### **Pre 10-week practicum**

#### **Pre-service Teacher Surveys**

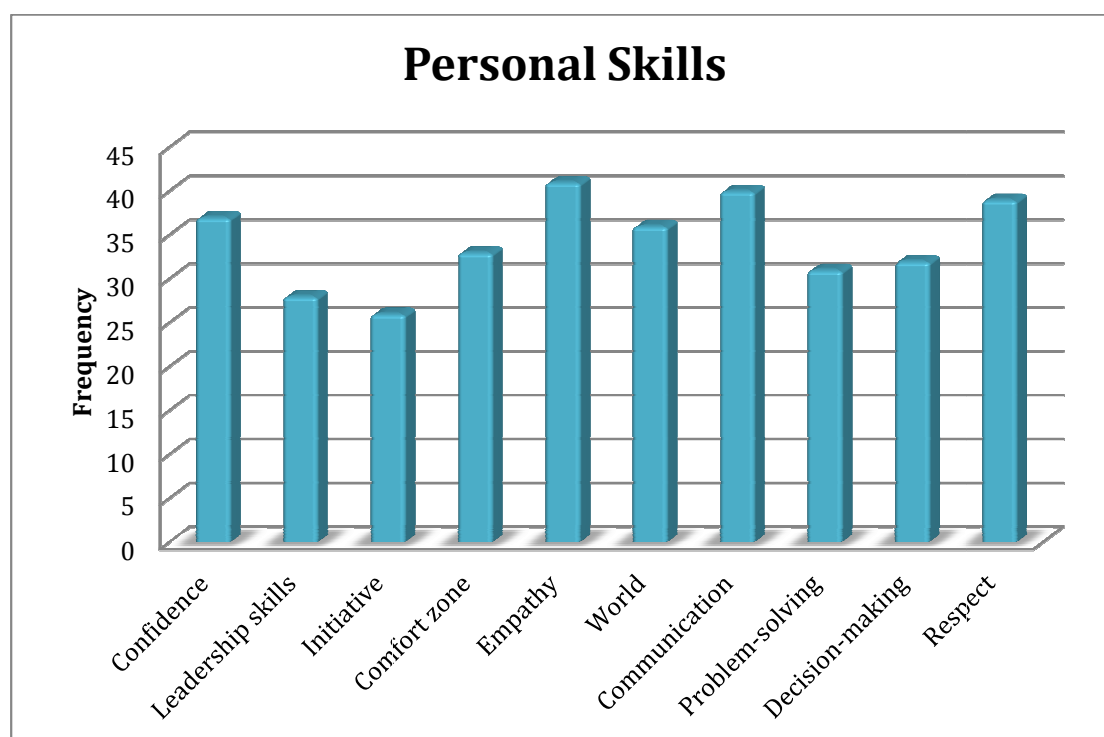
The results of the pre-service teacher surveys completed following the service-learning unit but prior to the first 10-week school experience reveal that pre-service teachers had been impacted by their service-learning experience at both a personal and professional level. Chief amongst the areas that they chose to comment on was the degree to which their service-learning experience had contributed to their understanding of, and capacity to relate to, adolescents. They commented that their service-learning opportunity had enhanced their ability to work with and get to know adolescents. Despite the fact that the pre-service teachers had undertaken their service-learning in a diverse range of settings, 35 respondents indicated that the experience had enhanced their ability to work with adolescents. They spoke of their newly developed ability to communicate with and listen to adolescents as well as their capacity to empower young people. An appreciation of the importance of developing relationships with students was frequently alluded to as well as the need to accept every student as an individual. One pre-service teacher wrote that the service-learning experience had helped her to “look beyond the initial issues and never assume anything” when dealing with students. Another wrote that “sometimes being unsure if I was saying the appropriate thing and ensuring I was always sensitive to individual backgrounds” had been a challenge. Similarly 37 respondents indicated that their empathy had increased as a result of their service-learning. Interestingly one student lamented that an issue for her was “knowing in the short time I was there my impact was minimal”. Clearly for this student, the opportunity to engage in service-learning had provided an important reality check. For other pre-service teachers, the challenge lay in getting to know the students in the short time they were on their placement.

Another area that many respondents chose to comment upon and which is closely related to the development of relationships was the manner in which the service-learning experience had enhanced their understanding of student diversity. Whilst a number of the pre-service teachers identified student diversity as a challenge many also commented that their preparation for the first school experience had been enhanced because they now had a better appreciation of student diversity and catering to different learning styles.

A further area that the pre-service teachers commented on was the manner in which the service-learning experience had augmented their understanding of how classrooms operated. They could appreciate the dynamics extant in classrooms with one pre-service

teacher commenting on the encounter of seeing the manner in which “one student’s challenging behaviour [could] affect the whole class”. At an equally pragmatic level, pre-service teachers remarked that they had a better appreciation of how quickly time passed within a lesson.

Figure 1 provides an overview of ways undertaking a service-learning program had impacted on the pre-service teachers’ personal development. Key areas identified were greater empathy and compassion (n=41), communication skills (n=40) and respect for others (n=39). These aspects of personal development are aligned with the areas identified above in the discussion concerning the development of relationships with adolescents. The students believed that they had improved their capacity to communicate with young people as well as empathise with the adverse circumstances confronting some adolescents.



**Figure 1: Personal skills developed through Service-learning**

Figure 2 provides an overview of ways pre-service teachers believed undertaking a service-learning program had impacted on their professional development. Key areas identified were enhanced confidence (n=37), greater empathy and compassion (n=37), developing skills with adolescents (n=35), and being forced out of one’s comfort zone (n=35). A number chose to comment on specific skills such as time management, the importance of preparation and working as a member of a team. The various opportunities that arose during their service-learning experience had provided an excellent opportunity for pre-service teachers to gain an appreciation of the importance of being flexible and working effectively with other members of staff.





Figure 2: Professional skills developed through Service-learning

### Field Placement Evaluation Forms

Placement supervisors were especially positive in their written evaluation of the pre-service teachers. Fifty-six (78%) were categorised very highly, gaining an ‘excellent’ on all nine criteria assessed, fourteen (19%) obtained a combination of ‘excellent’ and ‘very good’ evaluations across the nine criteria, while the remaining two (3%) were assessed overall as ‘very good’ on the criteria. These criteria are restated for the convenience of the reader: punctuality and behaviour, cooperation, engagement with clients, engagement with staff, ability to comprehend instructions, acceptance of criticism, standard of work, initiative and the ability to handle difficult situations. The authors would argue that opportunities to develop such characteristics are extremely useful for pre-service teachers.

What was perhaps more instructive were the many favourable comments recorded by placement supervisors. Comments included: “‘Peter’ has been a great asset to the Learning Support Centre”; “‘Jordan’ was excellent”; “‘Carla’ was an absolute pleasure to have around”; “beautiful student to have working with the boys”; “‘Alistair’ is a wonderful addition to our team”; “it has been a pleasure to have ‘Joanne’ attend as a volunteer to support our students”; “we would gladly ask ‘Jilly’ back for future events”; “‘Chris’ is an absolute legend and was totally immersed in all activities. He was an asset to our camp and the kids loved him”. Such remarks are indicative of a high level of engagement, a willingness to contribute, and a preparedness to enter into the various aspects of the service placement.

Many of the supervisors’ comments also highlighted specific teaching behaviours of the pre-service teachers. For example: “her ability to engage with the students and her great initiative made her presence here valued and appreciated”; “he was very good with the younger children and was only too keen to assist”; “she interacts well with both students and staff, works well as part of a team, and has provided a valuable support for our students, especially those experiencing learning difficulties”; “his skills in the classroom have been very much appreciated by the teachers he has been supporting, where he has worked with some of our more academically challenged students”; “she is a cheerful, willing worker who

related well to the girls, showing initiative in assisting individual students as needed”; “he is very resourceful, maintains control while at the same time developing an easy rapport with the students”; “she has contributed in ways she did not even know she had – the boys loved her demeanour and eagerly looked forward to the sessions she conducted”. Finally, there is the personal note sent to one of the authors:

Just a quick one to let you know ‘Jane’ was outstanding in her 18 hours assisting us with our school clinics. Her maturity shone through and she has a lovely manner with the kids. She was in control right from the outset.

It is noteworthy that many of these pre-service teachers will soon be in schools and a prior opportunity to work with children who are disadvantaged can provide a most rewarding and valuable learning experience.

### Post 10-Week Practicum

Following the 10-week practicum pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on their service-learning experience and comment on the degree to which it had impacted their capacity to meet all of the challenges of their school experience. Students had two opportunities to share their reflections: anonymously by completing a short survey or by participating in a focus group. As with the pre-practicum survey, the focus of the questions centred on the personal and professional aspects of student development. Figure 3 shows the student responses about ways their service-learning unit had enhanced their personal skills, whilst Figure 4 indicates results related to professional development.

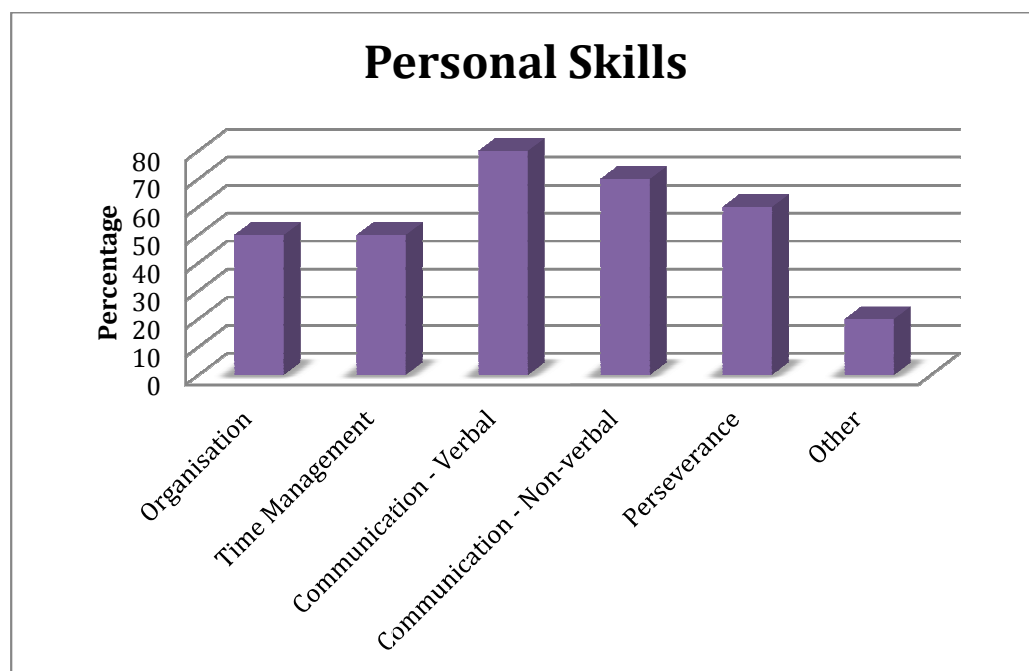


Figure 3: Personal skills developed through Service-learning

Pre-service teachers were first asked to identify any challenges that they encountered on their practicum and a range of responses was forthcoming. Challenges such as coming to grips with lesson planning, behaviour management and student diversity were frequently cited by the students. Time management was another issue mentioned by the students. One commented:

Another big thing for me was managing my time effectively and planning around the daily timetable. Teaching is very demanding work and I had to ensure that I had enough time at recess and lunch to rest a little, to eat, speak to whom I needed, etc. to get me through.

A number of pre-service teachers also remarked that developing relationships with their mentor teacher was also difficult as well as adjusting to the teaching styles of their mentor. One stated:

Coping and adjusting to the style of teaching being practised in the classroom I found difficult. I arrived at my practice placement carrying the message that there is a range of teaching styles you can draw from: creativity, collaborative, pupil centred learning. I found it very difficult to attempt drawing from these because the mentor teacher did not encourage me to differ from her approach.

Many pre-service teachers enter the teaching profession with the expectation that they will 'make a difference'. The first school experience provided a sobering opportunity in this regard. As one pre-service teacher noted:

I went into the school experience wanting to make a difference and thinking this would not be easy; I quickly became aware that in this public school there were many needs related to the demographic characteristics and what appeared to be an attitude of total non-interest by many of the students. I found that the amount of time in class dedicated to 'needy' kids resulted in some of the compliant kids displaying inappropriate behaviour so they too would get the attention they sought.

The pre-service teacher commented further that she 'found it very difficult to get the students focused on the learning objectives; it was exhausting.'

Pre-service teachers were then asked if their service-learning experience had helped them to meet the challenges that they identified. As indicated in Figure 3 students reported that they felt that their service-learning experience had contributed to an increase in many areas of their personal development but more especially in terms of their communication (both verbal and non-verbal), perseverance and time management. A number commented that having previously undertaken service-learning in a particular type of school-related environment, such as with children with special needs or with children from a refugee background, had been particularly helpful. Various aspects were commonly cited. The first related to the benefit of having undertaken service-learning in a school related environment and having some familiarity with the rhythms of the school day as well as the demands that teachers faced. Comments include:

Experiencing a classroom setting with secondary students who, for the most part, lacked motivation. It was great to be exposed to the realities of teaching. It is a rewarding profession but can also be very taxing, especially when students regularly sabotage their own learning.

It showed a way of teaching content through emotional engagement rather than presenting mere facts. This technique showed me that allowing students to see an empathetical side to an issue or fact may help them to engage with it further than merely memorising content.

Pre-service teachers also noted that their capacity to cater to the diversity of students within a more 'mainstream' environment had been enhanced from having a previous service-learning experience in a classroom. For example:

I worked with students with disabilities and that really helped having that experience when I had to face this on prac. It taught me good teaching strategies when confronted with problems in that area. Working with staff who are equipped to deal with these

issues sets a hands-on example you cannot learn from a text book. It was great to see professionals in action!

In addition, the theoretical component of the service-learning unit had proven helpful. One pre-service teacher commented:

The focus of the service-learning unit on the need to develop an objective, unbiased attitude to lower socio-economic students helped me in building my relationships with my students. The impact of the ‘out of school’ situations that had been discussed during the Service Unit quickly became apparent. Personally it made me realise that my own school experiences were built on a fairly privileged background. I had never experienced anything like the situations that confronted these students.



Figure 4: Professional skills developed through Service-learning

It can be seen from Figure 4 that pre-service teachers, on reflection, believed their service-learning experience had improved their professional skills in a variety of aspects. In particular, they emphasised confidence, being able to work outside their comfort zone, communication, decision-making, working with adolescents and respect for others. At a pragmatic level one pre-service teacher in the focus group commented on having developed an appreciation of the need to learn quickly the names of their students, develop a sense of humour and look for students who might otherwise ‘fly under the radar’. Pre-service teachers had learned that gaining the respect of school students would be facilitated through knowing the students well. One related the following experience:

I was offered an opportunity to share personal experiences that I thought might interest the students. I decided to share aspects of my recent service-learning experience related to working with asylum seekers.

The pre-service teacher noted her surprise at the positive impact this sharing had on the students and served as a strong foundation from which to build her relationships with the students.

Several members of the focus group, together with 60% of survey respondents, indicated that undertaking a service-learning placement had developed their communication skills. One pre-service teacher noted:

It helped me develop my non-verbal communication skills. For example, due to my height, I tend to tower over students. As I learned during my two week service-learning in a primary school, this can come across as intimidating. I was very mindful of how I positioned my body when addressing students and took that knowledge into my first prac.

Another commented that she had learned the impact that body language can have when “communicating and interacting with others.”

Not all pre-service teachers participated in a service-learning experience in a school environment. Irrespective of this fact, many commented that the knowledge gained from their placement had impacted their preparation as teachers. For example, one pre-service teacher remarked on her newfound “appreciation for the value older people placed on education”. As she stated:

When I would ask most people at the aged-care facility if they would change anything about how they spent their life, they said that they would have taken their education more seriously. This helped me realise the impact that teachers can have on students not only in adolescence but for the remainder of their lives.

Another commented:

My experience has placed a lot more perspective on my role as an educator and the opportunity to make a difference. When I was talking to people in the facility and saying I was studying to be a teacher, they would mostly brighten and be able to rattle off a few details about their favourite teachers.

The pre-service teacher noted that despite the time that had elapsed since last the people were in schools they still had fond memories of their teachers – this reflection resonated deeply with the pre-service teacher.

Participants in the focus groups were asked to comment specifically on the importance of their service-learning experience in terms of their personal and professional development. A variety of responses was given but the general tenor centred on the manner in which the students felt that the service-learning placement had helped them to understand the important role that they would occupy as a teacher. For example one observed:

During the service-learning experience I was able to remove the blinkers and look at myself in relation to many of the social issues facing some students. It encouraged me to ask myself “What can I offer children in these circumstances.”

Another commented:

I learned that consistency and continuity were most important to students who arrived at school carrying non-school issues. I also learned that sometimes it was very simple things that had a positive impact on students (knowing their names, a smile, a brief word of support).

The following statement exemplifies the profound impact that pre-service teachers noted about the value of completing a service-learning placement prior to their first school experience:

It has been a while since I undertook my volunteer position, but I believe every experience shapes who we are today. I learned a lot about other countries and cultures where I believed I already had a lot of empathy for, but by experiencing it face-to-face with children I knew made the impact more real. I feel that my approach to interacting

with all students, particularly those experiencing hardship, language difficulties, culture change, loneliness, and isolation has developed. I feel that each day in the classroom, I learn more about everyone and everything. It is inspiring and exhausting but I love every moment of it!

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This research highlighted that a service-learning program not only provides real-life experiences for pre-service teachers, it indicated that pre-service teachers' personal and professional skills could be enhanced through participation in a service-learning program. Such findings are supportive of literature on service-learning and pre-service teacher development (Anderson, 1998, 2000; Boyle-Blaise, 2006; Bates, 2009; Chambers & Lavery, 2012). More importantly, this research suggested that undertaking a service-learning program can provide valuable learning experiences upon which pre-service teachers can draw during the school experience components of their course. In particular, the pre-service secondary teachers in this research reflected positively on the influence of their service-learning experiences in terms of dealing with challenges in their practicum. Additionally, they felt more confident about undertaking a practicum as well as being prepared to operate outside their comfort zone. Importantly, pre-service secondary teachers noted the value of their service-learning experience in preparing them to work with adolescents in a school context.

As a consequence of the results, the authors offer three recommendations for consideration. First, institutions responsible for pre-service teacher education look at the feasibility of embedding a service-learning unit in their courses. Second, institutions that do have service-learning units in their pre-service teacher programs ensure that, wherever possible, the service-learning units run immediately prior to a practicum. Third, that further research is undertaken on ways service-learning units can be used to effectively prepare pre-service teachers for a teaching practicum or internship experience.

## Appendix A

### Pre-practicum Questionnaire

1. Gender
2. Pre-service teaching course
3. Where did you undertake your service-learning experience?
4. What were the most memorable aspects of this service-learning experience?
5. What were the challenges that you faced on your service-learning experience?
6. What would you like to have known prior to commencing your service-learning experience?
7. What aspects of the service-learning experience do you believe have prepared you for your school placement?
8. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program impacted on your professional development?
  - a. Enhanced confidence
  - b. Developing leadership skills
  - c. Showing initiative
  - d. Working outside of one's comfort zone

- e. Greater empathy and compassion
  - f. Appreciation of the world outside of the classroom
  - g. Developing skills working with adolescents
  - h. Professional practice
9. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program impacted on your personal development?
- a. Enhanced confidence
  - b. Developing leadership skills
  - c. Showing initiative
  - d. Working outside of one's comfort zone
  - e. Greater empathy and compassion
  - f. Appreciation of the world outside of the classroom
  - g. Developing communication skills
  - h. Developing problem-solving skills
  - i. Developing decision-making skills
  - j. Respect for others

## Appendix B

### Post Practicum Questionnaire

1. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program prepared you for the teaching profession?
- a. Enhanced confidence
  - b. Developing leadership skills
  - c. Showing initiative
  - d. Working outside of one's comfort zone
  - e. Greater empathy and compassion
  - f. Appreciation of the world outside the classroom
  - g. Developing communication skills
  - h. Developing problem solving skills
  - i. Developing decision-making skills
  - j. Respect for others
  - k. Developing skills working with adolescents
  - l. Professional Practice
2. Which of the following personal skills has this service-learning experience helped you to develop or improve?
- a. Organisation
  - b. Time management
  - c. Communication – verbal
  - d. Communication – non-verbal
  - e. Perseverance
  - f. Other (please specify)
3. What aspects of the service-learning experience have helped to prepare you for your school experience?
4. In what ways has this service-learning experience helped to prepare you to work with young adolescents?
5. To what extent do you believe that your service-learning experience has contributed to your development as a teacher?

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What were some of the challenges that you faced on your 10-week school experience?
2. Was there anything that occurred during your service-learning experience that helped you to meet these challenges?
3. What would you like to have known before you commenced your school experience?
4. Was there anything that you think could have been added to the service-learning unit that might have helped you address these needs?
5. What were the benefits of having completed a service-learning unit prior to going on your first school experience?
6. How important do you think the service-learning experience was in terms of your personal and professional development?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on?

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