

Service-Learning & Early Childhood Teacher Education: A Qualitative Exploration of Professional Preparation Standards

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ABSTRACT

Preparing teachers to work with children and families cultivates high-quality early learning. This study explored the impact of service-learning on early childhood pre-professional students (candidates) and community partners (CPs). Focus group transcripts illustrate connections between service and professional preparation standards. Service-learning and professional standards intersect through the experience of candidates and CPs. Findings support the use of Kolb's model as a foundation for service-learning in early childhood teacher education and can inform service-learning in other disciplines.

Keywords: Preservice teachers; standards-based education; focus group research; community engagement; community partner perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The field of early education is grounded in an ethos of service to and engagement with the community (Morgan, 2011). As teacher educators examine and evaluate effective approaches to professional preparation, it is imperative to provide evidence that the pedagogy of service learning is, indeed, a valuable channel for early childhood pre-professional students (commonly referred to as candidates) in the field to create knowledge, build understanding, and practice application of course content. Thus, the current study was conducted in order to examine the applicability of a service-learning course as a means to address the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards, the basis for the accreditation of early

childhood teacher education programs. Through the examination of qualitative data, we explored the impact of service-learning on the early childhood teacher education candidates (candidates) and the community partners (CPs).

In recent years, early childhood education has gained national attention as a critical issue for communities' economic development and commitment to the early years (Bartik, 2011; Hyson & Tomlinson, 2014; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Concern for young children and their families spans a range of complex issues: school readiness; health and safety; and quality, affordability and accessibility in health care (Goffin & Washington, 2007; Hyson & Tomlinson, 2014; Kostelnik & Grady, 2009). As the spotlight from institutions, public policy initiatives, community and

family resources shines on early childhood care and education, well-prepared teachers are the key (Hedges, 2006; Hyson, 2003; Whittaker & Harden, 2010). Teacher preparation involves authentic experiences for candidates to observe first-hand high-quality, accessible, culturally responsive caregiving to develop reciprocal relationships with families and communities. Service-learning is an appropriate means to practice strategies for addressing these issues (Dowell, 2009) as well as for high-quality teacher education.

Theoretical Framework for Service-Learning

To frame the service-learning experience in the current study, Cone and Harris' (2003) "Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators," which is an adaptation of Kolb's "Model of Experiential Learning" for service-learning, was implemented. The six components of this adapted model include 1) the learner; 2) the issues surrounding the service-learning project; 3) the service experience in the field; 4) critical reflection; 5) mediated learning; and, finally, 6) a return to the learner's intellectual and personal growth (Cone & Harris, 2003). For more details regarding Kolb's original model, review Kolb (1984, 2014).

In the early childhood service-learning course in which the current study was conducted, candidates (learners) arrive with unique backgrounds, individual histories, and specific interests. These distinctive characteristics were considered when a candidate was placed at a service-learning site in order to enhance existing strengths and motivate learners with a relevant project. Next, issues surrounding the service-learning project were explicitly examined before a candidate began with a community partner. Both conceptual and pragmatic aspects of the experience were discussed, including theories that candi-

dates are expected to apply in the field as well as the logistical concerns of professional behaviors. Formal classroom instruction and lectures and informal conversations continued throughout the service-learning experience. Ongoing reflection included written journals, responses to prompts, verbal and interactive responses, as well as some less conventional means for instance photo journals and exercises such as mingling to music, a variation of musical chairs that incorporated sharing with a partner. The community partner and instructor acted as co-teachers during the mediated learning phase of this model. Each co-teacher took responsibility for supporting candidates' evolving knowledge, skills and emerging understanding. Finally, the conclusion of the course brings the focus back to the candidate and the experience of learning about partnerships among children, families, schools, and communities. The cyclical nature of the Model of Experiential Learning reinforced the iterative process of learning and reflection that is central to the pedagogy of service-learning.

Service-Learning in Early Childhood Teacher Education

The early childhood teacher preparation program at Purdue University Northwest, formerly Purdue University North Central, a mid-sized regional campus of a large public research institution, is based on the philosophy of John Dewey. In this program, candidates develop their skills and knowledge in authentic contexts interacting with children, families, and community agents. Standards for professional preparation also include an emphasis on developing positive relationships with families and the community (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2011a). During the first year in the program, early childhood teacher education candidates take the course "Child, Family,

School and Community Partnerships,” which includes a weekly immersion experience with a local community agency. Such a service-learning project is integral to the program as the student is “actively engaged in community service that has a significant positive impact on everyone involved—the student, the instructor, the community service provider, and the people within the community” (Schoenfeld, 2004, p. 2).

In the early childhood teacher education program, a service-learning approach is used in many of the courses to facilitate candidates’ developing and clarifying their knowledge of diversity, social justice, and community needs as they apply their skills to serve diverse families and children in a real-world situation (Meaney, Griffin, & Bohler, 2009; Miller, 2000; Swick, 1999). Schoenfeld (2004) asserted that service-learning is steeped in reciprocity that allows for students, in this case the candidates, to give and to receive: “The student offers time, energy, knowledge and creativity to address a specific need in the community and in return receives professional advice and direction from community service providers, mentors, and faculty” (p. 2). Through critical reflection on the service-learning experience, candidates can articulate their role in the classroom and within the larger community with feedback from instructors so that stereotypes about children, families, and the role of early childhood professionals are not reinforced (Dunn-Kenney, 2010; Pigza, 2010). At the service-learning site, candidates observed and worked to foster an understanding of diversity and social justice (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007).

Professional Preparation Standards

Adherence to a set of professional preparation standards is essential to ensure

that early childhood professionals are effective educators. Highly qualified teachers have been linked to high-quality programs for children (Barnett, 2004). Purdue University Northwest’s early childhood teacher education program for initial licensure is nationally recognized by NAEYC, verifying that it is aligned with the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards.

The NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards (2011a) outline the specific knowledge, skills, and competencies for early childhood professionals. The teacher education curriculum in its entirety meets the six NAEYC standards:

- Standard 1: Child Development and Learning
- Standard 2: Building Family and Community Relationships
- Standard 3: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing to Support Young Children and Families
- Standard 4: Using Developmentally Effective Approaches
- Standard 5: Using Content Knowledge to Build Meaningful Curriculum
- Standard 6: Becoming a Professional

Individual courses are intentionally designed to address certain standards. Specifically, the service-learning experience in the “Child, Family, School & Community Partnerships” course helps pre-professionals meet NAEYC Standards 2 and 6 (Ehrenberg, 2016). The service-learning experiences are carefully crafted to help candidates gain “knowledge and understanding of diverse family and community characteristics” and have opportunities to “involve families and communities in many aspects of children’s development and learning” (NAEYC, 2011a, p. 31). Furthermore, weekly interactions with early child-

hood practitioners in the field demand that the candidates “identify and conduct themselves as members of the early childhood profession,” follow a set of ethical guidelines, and engage in informed advocacy for children and the profession (NAEYC, 2011a, p. 39). The Alliance of Early Childhood Teacher Educators acknowledges the role of reciprocal and respectful relationships with community field sites and stakeholders as a critical component to a highly effective teacher education program (NAEYC, 2011b).

METHODS

The data presented here were part of a larger, mixed methods study. While the quantitative data provided an overview of the participants’ background knowledge, dispositions, and motivations for involvement, here we focus on the qualitative aspect of the study as greater detail on the quantitative data was presented elsewhere (Eisenhauer & Weaver, 2012; Weaver & Eisenhauer, 2013). Following common qualitative procedures (Creswell, 2014), focus groups were conducted in order to explore the impact of service-learning on early childhood teacher education candidates’ achievement of NAEYC professional standards and on community partners’ capacity to meet the community’s needs. The focus groups were conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative survey and as a means to delve deeper into the motivations and meanings underlying the initial survey responses. The Institutional Review Board at Purdue University approved all procedures for this study. The study was funded with support from a Sponsored Research Grant from Indiana Campus Compact.

Participants

Early childhood candidates (referred to as “candidates” throughout the findings)

were drawn from the pool of students who had completed the required course, “Child, Family, School and Community Partnerships,” in the Early Childhood program at the institution any time during 2009-2011, or were enrolled in the course when the study was conducted (in 2012). Representatives from all community partner agencies (identified as “CP” throughout the findings) who had participated as a service-learning site for early childhood candidates enrolled in the course any time during the same time period were also invited to participate in the current study. Twelve candidates and eight CPs participated in the focus groups. The majority (74%) of the candidates who participated in the study had completed the course in the most recent two years. All of the candidates took the course during their first year in the early childhood teacher education program.

Measures

The survey data were reviewed to develop the focus group questions. Focus group questions (e.g., “briefly describe the project you engaged in at your service learning site” and “the early childhood education program adheres to the NAEYC professional standards. Thinking back to this course, describe the course learning goals as they relate to the NAEYC standards”) allowed participants to expand on their survey responses and enabled researchers to ask follow-up questions (e.g., to request clarification or specific examples). The focus group questions and protocol for both candidates and CPs were developed based on work by Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, and Kerringan (2001).

Procedures

Candidates eligible to participate in the current study were contacted via email and provided a link to the survey and were also invited to join a focus group with other

candidates. They were informed that participation was voluntary and, if they were willing to participate, were asked to complete the survey within two weeks. Recruitment of CPs was conducted in a similar manner, with an email sent to all eligible organizations inviting a representative to complete the survey within two weeks and to take part in a focus group with other CP agencies. All participants provided informed consent, per the approved study procedures.

Two candidate focus groups were convened at the main campus, and two CP focus groups were also convened—one at the main campus and another at a satellite campus. Both candidate and CP participants were able to select the respective focus group session that was most convenient. Each of the focus groups followed the same procedures and all were audio- and video-recorded. The focus group meetings typically lasted for one-and-a-half hours. One faculty member and the coordinator of the institution's Center for Service Learning and Leadership facilitated the meetings. After the protocol was explained to the focus group participants, the facilitators opened with scripted questions. The focus groups were conducted as a conversation and participants were encouraged to respond to the questions with no need to raise hands or in a specific order. As the participants responded to the prompts, the facilitators asked for clarification or further explanation when needed.

Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using basic qualitative analysis procedures (Creswell, 2014) whereby salient themes were identified and described in a codebook and organized into a hierarchical order. Then the data were organized using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, version 10 (QSR, Melbourne, Australia). Analysis

of the qualitative data was grounded in the Model of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984, 2014) as well as the framework of professional preparation standards from NAEYC.

The data were considered from two perspectives. First, the adapted Cone and Harris (2003) model was a useful tool to organize the data as related to the service-learning experiences. Next, the set of NAEYC Standards (2011a) was a natural structure for the analysis and accentuated the aspects of professional preparation standards.

FINDINGS

Impact on Early Childhood Teacher Education Candidates

Because well-prepared early childhood educators are critical to the quality of early care and education, a primary focus of this study was to capture the candidates' experience with service-learning in relation to professional preparation (Hedges, 2006; Hyson, 2003; Whittaker & Harden, 2010). Cone and Harris' (2003) "Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators," an adaptation of the "Model of Experiential Learning," was a useful framework for data analysis as it begins with the learner (i.e., the candidate) within the context of service-learning that incorporates reflection and ultimately leads to learning. Finally, the learner's resultant growth and development are considered.

The learner-candidate. As service-learning pedagogy was the means for the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards to be met, the candidates' background knowledge and experience with community engagement was measured. Almost 70% of the candidates had prior experience and beliefs about service in the community. All of the respondents agreed that service to the community was important and felt it was

their responsibility. Eighty-nine percent of the candidates reported that they had any volunteer experience before taking this course.

Candidates shared their personal approaches to the service-learning experience. While they were not always able to identify or connect to the NAEYC Standards, many of them alluded to the general idea of professional preparation with comments such as, “The teacher I was working with...she let me interact with the kids. I didn’t get to just sit along the side and do just what she wanted me to do. I was interacting with the children and actually got to take part in what they were doing as well.” Another admitted that, “When I went into [the service-learning site], I was kind of scared. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t know what I was going to do.” Only 22% of the candidates responding to the survey had no experience (volunteer or otherwise) working with children ages birth to grade 3 before coming to this course.

A CP noted the importance of understanding children as a critical part of professional preparation, stating “I see a difference in the more recent years but for a while I felt like, gosh, do people know kids? Because you have to know kids, I felt like that was lacking for a long time. I see a little improvement here as of late.” This CP’s observation echoes the NAEYC Standard 1 statement, “Candidates prepared in early childhood degree programs are grounded in a child development knowledge base” (2011a). The CPs also recognized that each service-learning student had unique characteristics and past experiences to share at the different sites. One CP observed, “They’re all different. We’ve had six [candidates] now and every one of them has been different...that is interesting for us.”

The service-learning experience.

Involving candidates with meaningful service projects to gain professional experience was the primary focus of the entire course and intended to meet the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standard 6: “Candidates prepared in early childhood degree programs a) identify and conduct themselves as members of the early childhood profession” (NAEYC, 2011a). From the variety of sites available, 66% of the respondents were placed with a school, child care agency, or early intervention site to work directly with children. The others worked with community organizations that were engaged in ongoing efforts to support early childhood professionals. The CPs were informed about the course goals and the requirements that candidates provide a service to fulfill a need identified by the agency or community. Establishing open and direct communication among candidates and CPs was identified as a critical element to an impactful project, as were clear expectations.

Candidates suggested that it was important to be placed at a site to do something different from their past experiences. When asked what they would suggest for future students in the course, several candidates made comments similar to this, “I would say, ‘do something different’. Like if you’re used to working with the community, do something more with the children.” The notion of being open-minded was foundational for many. “It was a real eye-opener,” according to one. Another candidate in the same focus group went on to say, “...I honestly had no idea what I was doing. But talking one on one and actually visually seeing what we were supposed to do that helped out a lot.”

Many of the CPs noted that the range of candidate development was a major factor in the experience for all partici-

pants, offering statements such as, “I think placement is very important. Not only do you want it to be a good experience for the student [candidate] but you also want it be a good experience for the placement site and not have somebody in there who’s going to be disruptive” and, “the thing that I thought was great about this program was that this student [candidate] had to really create her very own project...”

Critical reflection. NAEYC notes that candidates should demonstrate “evidence of reflective approaches to their work, analyzing their own practices in a broader context, and using reflections to modify and improve their work with young children” (2011a, p. 41). Reflection is also an important component of service-learning as a process to integrate concepts and ideas learned in the classroom and experienced at the service-learning site. A candidate articulated the meaning of this experience, “I never felt like it was a chore. I didn’t feel like ‘oh, I have to go do this.’ I was excited to do everything I had to do for this course, so I would say learning is a huge aspect in service-learning. The service is important too, but you’re learning really from what you’re doing.”

The CPs expressed interest in being more involved with the candidates’ reflections; one suggested this prompt: “Maybe a reflection of ‘what do you think about your agency so far? What do you wish was different?’ That would be helpful for us to know.” Another CP elaborated on this idea, stating, “we don’t have a lot of time to really sit and chitchat too much...”

I could help with as the director [sic] to find... what they need from our end on that and what would make it more beneficial for them.” Candidate reflections can be a window into which course concepts they are

learning and how they are making sense of the service-learning experience.

Mediated learning. Candidates’ learning about the course content, especially NAEYC Standard 2—building partnerships with children, families, and communities—was integrated through the service-learning projects. During weekly lectures, candidates studied core concepts and then applied them in an authentic environment. One candidate summed it up with this observation: “You’re providing a service for the community, so not only are you learning but you are helping out in your community.” A CP’s comment echoed this notion, “It’s not as simple as just going and volunteering for that day...it’s deeper than that.”

One goal for the course is to increase candidates’ awareness of community resources. As stated in NAEYC Standard 2 “Candidates prepared in early childhood degree programs... know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children’s families and communities” (2011a, 30). Over half of all candidates indicated that they had become more knowledgeable or involved with different community resources. For example, 81% responded “yes” indicating that they had learned more about available community programs and resources and 65% agreed that they have an increased knowledge of community resources. For future professionals, this is critical knowledge that will enhance candidates’ effectiveness in working with children and families. One candidate observed, “There are many people in a community that can help families,” and another stated, “I didn’t realize how much people were really willing to help.” As Cone and Harris’ (2003) “Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators” predicts, the experience was a mean-

ingful way for candidates to learn about children, families, and communities.

Service Learning and NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards

The NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards (2011a) were constructed as a way to unify a national vision for the field of early childhood education. The standards were written with growing complexity from knowledge to understanding to application. Service-learning pedagogy parallels this progression and provides candidates opportunities to bring theory into practice. The NAEYC Standards also provide guidelines for appropriate field experiences, which are also addressed through the service-learning experiences.

One of the main purposes of the current study was to examine the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards for early childhood educators, with a targeted focus on Standard 2: “Building Family and Community Relationships.” The data indicated that the early childhood teacher candidates and CPs had the most experience with Standard 2 as well as three others: Standard 1: “Child Development and Learning,” Standard 4: “Developmentally Effective Practices,” and, especially, Standard 6: “Becoming a Professional.” The findings illustrate that the service-learning projects provided candidates with an opportunity to address Standards 1, 4, and 6 in addition to the targeted Standard 2.

NAEYC Standard 1: Child Development and Learning

The variety of placements for the service-learning projects provided candidates wide-ranging exposure to different age groups, settings, needs, and strategies to use with young children. Both candidates and CPs commented on this variety as a benefit of the experience. A candidate said,

“I worked with four and five year olds and one and two year olds.... I got to see the difference between two age groups, which I liked.” Another remarked, “Working with each kid you learn something different about them and their family.” The CPs confirmed this, noting that candidates worked with “different ages and styles... Learning is a process; that not everyone will learn this skill on this day, and I think that's really important that working with kids is not easy no matter what level.” A CP described a specific incident where a candidate was able to learn more about possible factors that influence development and how to address an issue, such as biting. The CP worked with the candidate and demonstrated how to help families use strategies to eliminate this challenging behavior.

The candidates and CPs alike identified the importance of knowing about, understanding, and applying principles of child development. Many of the service-learning projects allowed candidates to have direct contact with young children and experience the nuances and intricacies of individual children’s development. For some of the candidates, this was their first exposure to working with young children. Such an experience cannot be simulated within the college classroom.

NAEYC Standard 2: Building Relationships with Families and Communities

Through this study, it became very clear that the service-learning sites provided multiple opportunities for candidates to gain more experience with this standard. Most revealing, perhaps, was that relationship-building was a highly valued competency for candidates and CPs. As a CP observed of the candidates, “This is such a diverse region but sometimes people don’t experience that diversity because they’re in their own high school or they’re in their own neighborhood, and so I think that these

[service-learning courses] allow them to experience the richness of diversity and to learn from that. And hopefully some of the misconceptions and preconceptions will be changed because of that interaction and that [candidates] will learn and they will also bring new experiences to the kids they're working with." A candidate's comment confirmed the truth of this statement as she shared, "I grew up in a dominant Caucasian environment, so I really never grew up around different ethnicities; and even up until starting this program, this early childhood education program, I had never really been around different ethnicities, so it was a huge learning experience for me to learn about the different cultures and...language barriers sometimes and behaviors and why [children] do the things that they do."

Candidates also recognized that they learned about both families and communities, and how to establish strong partnerships, as outlined in the professional preparation standards. When describing the service-learning project experience, one candidate stated, "As a professional you have to be aware, not all families are the same and you can't really treat all families the same. You have to work with the families depending on their situation. Not everyone is going to be the same." Another shared, "My project with the parents or grandparents coming into the classroom, one of the last days I was there, I want to say [that] every student had someone, besides one little girl, and it was nice to be able to get the whole family into the classroom besides just for teacher conferences or a whole school activity..."

Candidates also learned about the importance of CPs and the role of early childhood professionals in establishing partnerships. As one candidate said, "to be [an] advocate for young children. You're advocating for them. You're bringing the family together, you're bringing the school together, you're bringing the community together

all in order to benefit that child and give them a healthy start to life and their education." Another noted, "The community was on the outside, but that was where our main focus needs to be. We need to draw the community into it and make sure everyone is a part of young children's learning."

NAEYC Standard 4: Developmentally Appropriate Practices

The early childhood teacher candidates had opportunities to observe and implement developmentally appropriate practices when working with young children at their service-learning sites. Several CPs identified opportunities, making comments such as, "I know they learned through their grant projects about what would be developmentally appropriate with the guidance of the teacher before they purchased the materials or brought the project into the room. You know, well that book might be a little bit old or a little too young so they gained that. They also gained the experience of knowing that it's not always an ideal world because there are so many children with different developmental delays and/or needs." Another CP described a candidate's Earth Day project in a kindergarten classroom as "very simple, but [with] activities that [children] could do with their parent and/or family member that was able to join that day...It gives the university students [candidates] a taste of what [teaching] is like."

The candidates recognized that their service-learning projects afforded them chances to practice relationship-building and teaching strategies, with one noting, "I loved working with the [younger] children and doing literacy and developmentally appropriate things." Another candidate's comments related to Standard 4, summing up her experience in an early childhood setting, when she learned "...different things where maybe you feel like you are building

relationships then because once that child feels like you know them and you know their culture. You're kind of really building the relationship there."

Recreating an environment in which the future professionals can interact with young children and families is not possible in the college lecture hall. Rather, service-learning experiences serve as real-time, think-on-your-feet situations. Early childhood service learning experiences contribute to candidates' knowledge, skills, and beliefs about working with diverse families and communities because the candidates are intentionally placed in environments where they must synthesize their learning and apply it to the situation.

NAEYC Standard 6: Becoming a Professional

Factors contributing to becoming an early childhood professional were a recurring theme that emerged from the focus group discussions. Both candidates and CPs referred to the growth in candidates' professionalism. A candidate commented, "I learned more from this experience than I have ever learned in a class...time management, communication, how to write a grant; there is just a broad picture of what you can learn from one experience." A CP affirmed this: "I initially had doubts about what they'd be able to do but they grew a lot and became much more professional with their interactions with me and each other and all those outside resources."

Through service-learning experiences, many candidates clarified their career goals. A candidate said, "It's given me many different options. I know that I don't have to necessarily take care of the children. I know I can actually do more with the community, and I really didn't know that before." Another highlighted her professional development thus: "It feels like this project helped me mature a lot... like

taking leadership and learning how to communicate better with students more [professionally]."

Community Partner Impact

A significant characteristic of service-learning is the reciprocal relationship between candidate and CP. An imperative part of this experience was to increase the capacity of the CP to accomplish its mission. Therefore, another important goal of this study was to examine the impact of the service-learning component on the CPs' capacity to offer programs and acquire funding.

Regarding how interactions with the service-learning candidate(s) influenced the capacity of the participating organizations to fulfill their missions or affected them economically, most of the CPs indicated that participation helped them identify new volunteers, enhanced their focus on early childhood professional preparation (preparing the next generation of employees at such facilities), helped them complete projects, and enhanced the offerings of services they were able to provide. Slightly less than half indicated that they made new connections and networks with other community groups because of the project or that the project resulted in an enhanced focus on child, family, and school partnerships. Between one-quarter and one-third of participants felt that the project increased the value of the services they offer, fostered new insights about their organization and its operation, or increased organizational resources. On the other hand, almost one-quarter of participants reported no financial impact of the project. None of the respondents indicated that the project had no impact on their organization or that the project affected their organizational direction.

Qualitative data expanded on the impact of the project on their organizations.

For example, one CP reported that "...they [candidates] kind of constructed this really nice activity for the children and then used it in the classroom and did a nice evaluation of the activity...", which allowed the organization to offer an activity they might not otherwise have been able to. Another CP reported that "...they [candidates] can do things that are amazing and that enhance our own program." Furthermore, CPs indicated that the project could have long-term implications for the types of organizations that partnered with the university for this project. One CP shared that "...there are now four trained educators who hopefully will stay in the region and work..."

Whether or not the students created new programs, simply having them placed in the organizations bolstered CPs' energy and provided more hands to help. As one CP put it, "...we also then, as a nonprofit, look for many volunteers because we need volunteers in order to continue with some of our programs, and so it is just a really good mix for us. We definitely benefit from having them there..." Similarly, another CP reported that candidates "jazzed up the

classroom and brought fresh ideas and what is new in education, so I think that was awesome."

DISCUSSION

Implications for Service Learning in Early Childhood Teacher Education

Three themes emerged from the results and suggest implications for using the pedagogy of service-learning in early childhood teacher education. These themes follow Cone and Harris' adaptation of Kolb's "Model for Experiential Learning" in that it focuses on the candidates (learners), the issues in the service-learning projects, the critical reflection, and the lessons learned (Cone & Harris, 2003; see Table 1).

The learner-candidate. The first lesson learned is that individual candidates bring a variety of beliefs, biases, and backgrounds to the service-learning experience. Uncovering these individual characteristics of the learner is important for providing a meaningful placement for candidates in which they can grow and develop a deeper understanding of families and communities

Table 1. Alignment of the Lessons Learned with Cone and Harris (2003) Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators

Cone & Harris' Adapted Lens Model for Service-Learning Educators	Themes from Early Childhood Teacher Education Service-Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learner • The learner's intellectual and personal growth 	Meeting the differing needs of the learner-candidate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issues surrounding service-learning pedagogy • The service experience in the field 	Identifying the challenges for implementation of the service-learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical reflection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Connecting the abstract to the concrete to acquire knowledge • Mediated learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Engagement in critical discourse around course concepts 	Shared understanding and meaning-making

and practice their skills. Candidates and CPs alike shared many examples of how candidates demonstrated growth in understanding the standards of professional preparation. To foster this growth, instructors need to be aware of individual candidates' backgrounds, learning preferences, temperaments, and personalities to provide a meaningful placement. The range of differences among learners, CPs, and sites presents challenges because a service-learning project like this one cannot be a one-size-fits-all; rather, this is a true exercise in differentiated instruction.

The service-learning experience.

Next, the issues surrounding service-learning and the service-learning experience in the field indicate that identifying the challenges of using a service-learning pedagogy is important for creating a meaningful experience. While the CPs identified several benefits to establishing partnerships with the undergraduate program, such partnerships are not without challenges. Understanding the roles of all partners and setting up ways for open communication is especially important. Having conversations to explicitly outline the expectations must occur while establishing the partnership. One concrete challenge is limited resources at the sites. Many of the CPs talked about the semesters when candidates had access to mini-grants to fund their projects and how the grants were mutually beneficial because they increased capacity for the agency and the candidates gained an important skill in writing grants. One way to offset this challenge is to seek funding to support student projects. Another way to address limited resources is to focus on growing capacity with human resources. Helping the CPs to track the contributions—financial or personnel—would provide data to share with their supporters, the institution, and others.

Critical reflection and mediated learning. Finally, the third lesson from this

project draws attention to the critical reflection and mediated learning components that are essential to service-learning. All partners and participants should have a shared understanding of the purpose of the service-learning so that CPs can support candidates at the site, candidates can self-monitor through reflection, and instructors can guide the projects. To make this kind of service-learning experience truly successful, the course goals and NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards need to be fully and explicitly aligned. Additionally, in this study CPs asked for an expanded role as co-educators and more time for relationship-building with the candidates. Providing a systemized means for reflection about professional behaviors and the dynamics of the partnership are other means for strengthening the partnerships to ensure a positive, impactful, and rewarding experience in professional development.

CONCLUSION

Service-learning is an excellent way to deliver a high-quality early childhood teacher education program. Beyond the alignment with the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards, service-learning is an authentic field experience during which candidates are immersed in the real world of early childhood education. There is no better or more meaningful way to prepare educators.

This study highlights the value of service-learning to acculturate preservice teachers into their chosen profession. Service-learning pedagogy offers the opportunity for candidates to apply their emerging skills and knowledge about professionalism, family and community partnerships, and child development in an authentic setting. The study served as a means of evaluating candidates' experience and soliciting feedback from CPs and could be replicated

in other settings. This course, as a model, could provide information for several course-related factors associated with service-learning projects, including course evaluation, appraisal and updating of partnerships, and a needs assessment to identify future projects. As a research study or used in a single course, the focus groups used

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