

The Impact of a Freshman Year Community-Based Service-Learning Experience on the Achievement of Standards Articulated for Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a university's freshman year community-based service-learning experience on the achievement of standards articulated for teacher candidates. Standards assessed included knowledge of community-based resources, demonstration of reflective processes, and recognition of the importance of collaboration with community-based professionals. Findings indicated that this early field experience facilitated achievement of professional development goals related to service identification; participants also demonstrated reflection on practice. A challenge revealed by this investigation, however, was related to the facilitation of collaborative dispositions in preservice teachers.

Key Words: service-learning, experiential learning, teacher preparation, professional standards, community partners

Introduction

Early field experiences, or those that occur prior to student teaching, are now common in teacher education programs (Huling, 1998; LaMaster, 2001).

According to a survey conducted by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (AACTE/NCATE), 77% of elementary-level and 70% of secondary-level teacher preparation programs require candidates to participate in field experiences during their first or second years of college (Huling). Advocates of early field experiences provide rationale for this practice based on developmental theories and constructivist perspectives of learning. While the integration of early field experiences is supported theoretically, research is needed in order to determine the impact of these experiences on specific professional development outcomes (e.g., Bonar, 1985; Boyle-Baise, 2005; Ducharme, 1994; Goodman, 1985; Huling; LaMaster; Maxie, 2001; Oppewal, 1994; Root, Callahan, & Sepanski, 2002; Silverman, 1998).

Previous research studies conducted to examine outcomes associated with early field experiences are based primarily on self-report data provided by preservice teachers. For example, preservice teachers report that early field experiences are beneficial to their professional development (Denton, 1986) and enhance their understandings of schools and students (LaMaster, 2001). Preservice teachers further report that they learn from observing teacher-student interaction and that specific placements and assignments contribute to their understandings of multicultural, urban settings (Boyle-Baise, 2005; Brookhart, 1997). In addition, analysis of preservice teachers' reflections suggests that this experience facilitates professional socialization in general (Silverman, 1998).

Several authors argue for the systematic study of particular features, context, or structural characteristics of the early field experience in order to better predict outcomes or align the experience with specific learning or professional development goals (e.g., Boyle-Baise, 2005; Denton, 1986; Goodman, 1985; Huling, 1998; Root et al., 2002). Field experiences vary, for example, in level of structure and supervision. Early field experiences that incorporate high levels of structure and supervision with opportunities for guided reflection may be more likely to enhance professional socialization (Bonar, 1995; Knutson Miller & Yen, 2005). In this context, experiences have clear purpose. Major concepts are introduced, relevant activities are designed, and cooperating teachers are prepared to supervise preservice teachers (Bonar). Research studies conducted previously indicate that these types of experiences enhance academic content knowledge (Knutson Miller & Yen; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002; Ross, Hughes, & Hill, 1981) and provide opportunities for career goal clarification (Blieszner & Artale, 2001; Malone et al., 2002; Weisskirch, 2003). Further research is needed to examine the relationship between structured field experiences and other professional development goals.

The specific context considered in this investigation was a service-learning experience; designated community partners included coordinators of Healthy Start, Even Start, and After School Learning Programs. Authors such as Sleeter (2000), Ginn (1996), and Ducharme (1994) advocate for community-based field experiences in teacher preparation programs. Teachers need to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to work in collaboration with human service professionals to more effectively meet children's needs and support families (Burnett, 1994; Caspe, 2001; de Acosta, 1994; DeJong & Goomes, 1996; Wade & Anderson, 1996; Wimer, Post, & Little, 2003). Ascher (1990) reported that teachers are oftentimes overwhelmed by the complexity of students' lives and generally lack information about how to obtain relevant services available in the local community. Teacher awareness of community-based resources, on the other hand, may facilitate constructive attempts to meet student needs and effective interaction with families (Sleeter).

Teachers may be among the first to notice challenges or difficulties that impact student academic achievement (Caruso, 2000), but need further awareness of community resources and skills for building partnerships with community members (Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992; de Acosta, 1994; Lontos, 1991). Community-based field experiences in teacher education provide opportunities for preservice teachers to develop such competencies. These experiences enhance the likelihood that novice teachers will identify relevant services and make referrals on the behalf of students and their families (Burnett, 1994; Swick, 1999; Wade & Anderson, 1996). Greater knowledge of community-based services may enhance the efficacy of beginning teachers as they gain resources that enable them to address student needs that impact learning, but appear beyond the educational scope seen as the more direct responsibility of practicing teachers (Bucci & Reitzammer; Lontos).

Previous research studies indicate that through experiences in communities, preservice teachers develop increased sensitivity to individual learners' needs (Root et al., 2002), appreciation for the roles played by other professionals in student learning, and commitment to working collaboratively with other professionals to meet children's needs (Wade & Anderson, 1996). After participating in community-based experiences teachers are more likely to view community members as resources (Boyle-Baise, 2005; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998), indicate appreciation for families, and report a more comprehensive view of a professional's role in society (Friesen, Whitaker, & Piotrowicz, 2004). Findings also suggest that in this context, preservice teachers demonstrate increased knowledge of community agencies and available services and understanding of how teachers might use this information to better serve children and families (Ginn, 1996).

The purpose of the present investigation was to investigate the impact of an early community-based service-learning experience on the achievement of standards articulated for teacher candidates. Standards reviewed included those articulated by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTE, 2001), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) project (1992), and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002). Professional development goals identified as relevant for this course and its associated field experience involve service identification, collaboration, and reflection. A synthesis of standards for the teaching profession indicates that teachers are expected to identify, foster relationships with, and use agencies in the larger community to improve professional practice through support of student learning and well-being (CCTE, INTASC, NCATE). Standards also articulate collaboration and reflection goals in that teachers are expected to work with local communities to improve professional practice (CCTE), understand the importance of collaboration with specialists and families (NCATE), and engage in reflective practice (INTASC).

Method

Participants

Participants included 36 undergraduate students enrolled in the Blended Teacher Education Program (BTEP) at California State University, Fullerton. All participants were 18-20 years of age and most were female ($n = 34$; 98%).

Program/Course Description

Students complete a major in either Child and Adolescent Development or Liberal Studies and requirements for a California multiple subjects (elementary) teaching credential in this four-year integrated program. During each semester, students enroll in at least one cohort course. In this investigation, outcomes associated with a first year, second semester cohort course were examined. The content of this freshman-level course focused on children, schools, and communities. Course projects and activities were designed to facilitate an understanding of the interconnected nature of these groups. Participants were placed with a community partner that served the needs of culturally diverse preschool or elementary-aged children and/or their families; partners included coordinators of Healthy Start, Even Start, and After School Learning Programs. Many of the services offered by these partners were coordinated through local elementary school campuses using an integrated services model. The preservice teachers provided approximately two hours of service per week with a designated partner site for a minimum of 20 hours and attended

weekly on-campus sessions where field experiences were connected to course themes and professional development goals through discussion, reflection, and structured course activities. Materials submitted by preservice teachers to fulfill course expectations were analyzed in order to determine the extent to which this experience facilitated professional development. Service activities typically involved interaction with preschool children and their mothers through the Even Start program or interaction with elementary school children and their families through enrichment activities sponsored by the Healthy Start or After School Programs.

Measures

Pre-/Post-Tests

Participants completed a pre-test in order to evaluate personal understandings of community-based programs and resources prior to the service-learning experiences. This test included both self-report and performance-type items. On self-report items, participants indicated their perceived levels of awareness of community-based agencies, services, and available resources using a Likert-like scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). For performance items, participants demonstrated their understandings in their abilities to (a) describe a minimum of five agencies/organizations that provide services for elementary school children and/or their families, (b) discuss services available through associated programs, and (c) describe how they would use this information as a teacher. These self-report and performance-type items were repeated in a post-test administered at the conclusion of the course.

Final Reflection Paper

At the conclusion of the semester, participants submitted a final paper as part of regular class activities. In this paper, participants incorporated personal reflections related to the interconnected worlds of children, schools, and community. Major themes corresponding to course goals and professional standards were identified through content analysis.

Analysis

Pre-/post-test results were analyzed by comparing participants' ratings of personal understandings at the beginning and conclusion of this course. Second, participants' abilities to list and describe community-based resources before and after the service-learning experience were examined. Finally, the content of final papers submitted by participants was analyzed to determine the extent to which knowledge and dispositions reflected achievement of designated professional standards articulated for preservice teachers.

Results

Paired sample t-test procedures revealed significant differences in self-report ability to describe the types of services provided by community agencies for elementary school children and their families at pre- and post-test administrations ($t = -8.52, p < .01$). Significant differences in self-report ability to describe ways in which families, teachers, and community service agencies are interconnected were also revealed ($t = -3.99, p < .01$). Ratings related to perceived importance of teacher awareness of services provided to children and their families by community-based agencies did not differ significantly at the pre- and post-test administrations ($t = -.78, p = .44$). It should be noted that participants perceived teacher awareness of services provided by community-based agencies for children and their families as important at both the beginning ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.01$) and conclusion ($M = 3.81, SD = .40$) of the course.

On the pre-test, participants' ratings indicated that they found the task of identifying and describing types of services provided by community agencies for elementary school children and their families as somewhat difficult ($M = 2.2, SD = .66$). Performance-based pre-test items supported this assertion. Participants were asked to list 5 agencies that provide services to elementary aged children and describe the services provided. The mean number of agencies identified by participants was 3.14 ($SD = 1.68$). Participant responses were as follows: (a) 25% listed 5 agencies; (b) 25% listed 4 agencies; (c) 15% listed 3 agencies; (d) 17% listed 2 agencies; (e) 11% listed one agency; and (f) 9% did not list any agencies. The agencies/organizations that were listed most frequently included the YMCA (listed by 64% of participants), Boys & Girls Club (listed by 47% of participants), and Boy & Girl Scouts (listed by 31% of participants). Pre-test results further revealed that while most students submitted a partial listing of agencies, few could provide basic descriptions of services provided; the mean number of agencies whose services were described by participants was 1.68 ($SD = 1.71$). Only 8% of participants could describe services provided by 5 agencies. An additional 8% could describe services provided by 4 agencies. Of participants, 14% described services provided by 1, 2, or 3 agencies (cumulative percentage was 41.7% for these categories); 42% of participants provided no description of services.

An analysis of post-test performance items and final course reflections showed dramatic improvement in overall ability to identify and describe services provided by community-based agencies for elementary school children and their families. The mean number of agencies identified by participants at the post-test administration was 4.97 ($SD = .17$). Participants described services provided by all agencies listed. Ninety-seven percent of participants

listed and described services provided by at least 5 community-based agencies. Agencies most frequently listed included (a) Even Start (listed by 67% of participants), (b) After School Learning Program (56%), (c) Healthy Start (42%), (d) YMCA (44%), and (e) Boy & Girl Scouts (22%). It should be noted that agencies listed by participants included the organization the participant performed direct service for as well as those with which fellow classmates were placed. Differences between participant performance at the pre- and post-tests was statistically significant for both agency identification ($t = -6.68, p < .01$) and description of services provided ($t = -11.88, p < .01$).

Finally, participants were asked to discuss how they might use knowledge of community-based services as a teacher. Content of participants' pre-test responses was analyzed to identify themes. The most common theme articulated by participants was referral, or providing information to parents and/or children about available services (69% of responses). Five participants discussed the relationship between referral and potential academic outcomes (e.g., refer parents and students to services, this will impact student learning). One participant discussed the relationship between service participation and social outcomes (e.g., participation in services may give children opportunities to interact with each other, developing social relationships). Six participants did not respond to this prompt. Only one participant focused on teacher collaboration with service professionals (e.g., co-authorship of grant proposals based on student needs).

Participants also responded to questions related to teacher awareness of agency services on the post-test and final reflection paper. Content analysis of these products revealed an even stronger emphasis on referral (92% of responses). Three additional participants discussed both the referral process and the process of building relationships with families and communities. Comparison of pre- and post-experience reflections revealed greater consideration of a "matching" process at the conclusion of the course. On pre-test measures, participants merely listed referral activities as a purpose for knowing about community resources (e.g., tell parents about services). On post-tests and final course reflections, participants indicated the need for problem identification and matching students/families to appropriate services (e.g., identify service most relevant to student/family needs).

Discussion and Conclusion

Both self-report and performance tasks indicated that participants' understandings of children, schools, and community increased as a result of this service-learning experience. At the conclusion of the service-learning

experience, participants reported greater levels of understanding with respect to the types of services provided by community organizations for elementary school children and their families, with 97% of participants able to list at least five agencies/organizations and discuss services provided. These findings indicate that this experience facilitated achievement of professional development goals related to service identification.

Participants also demonstrated the ability to reflect on practice and their service-learning experiences. Participants discussed ways in which teachers might use knowledge of services on behalf of children and their families. End-of-course reflections showed growth when compared to pre-test commentary. Early in the semester, participants merely discussed opportunity for referral (e.g., tell students/parents about services). In later course reflections, participants discussed needs identification and potential service implications in detail (e.g., addressing student/family needs may result in enhanced academic outcomes). At the conclusion of the service-learning experience, participants discussed a wide range of potential child/family needs and identified specific agencies that might contribute to meeting those needs in an effective manner (e.g., learner needs further time and assistance to master learning goals, these needs may be fulfilled to some extent through participation in the After School Program at Location X; I will share this information with learner/learner's family).

The final professional development standard considered here is related to understanding the importance of teacher collaboration with specialists and families. In pre-test performance-based items, one participant referenced opportunities for collaboration with community-based service partners. It was expected that participants would reference collaboration to a greater degree in the post-test and final reflection paper. In end-of-course assessment measures, participants discussed the value of this knowledge primarily in terms of the referral process. In detail, they described specific needs demonstrated by children and families in the communities of their service experiences and identified agencies providing relevant services. It was not clear, however, that participants viewed themselves as collaborators with agency personnel. In general, their comments were uni-directional. They viewed themselves as having an active role in the identification and referral process. They were pleased with the opportunity to gain knowledge of community-based resources so that they could refer children/families to appropriate service providers when needs could not be addressed within a classroom setting. Comments did not clearly indicate understandings or dispositions related to working *with* agency personnel to meet children's needs. It is recommended, therefore, that the level of teamwork expected in this context be explored further and with possible clarification in standards-based references to collaborative dispositions. Specification of these

expectations could lead to more precise recommendations for teacher preparation and professional practice.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a service-learning experience on the achievement of standards articulated for teacher candidates. Assessment of professional development included knowledge of community-based resources, ability to access relevant community-based resources, understanding the importance of collaborative processes, and demonstration of reflection on practice. In this investigation, both self-report and performance tasks indicated participants' understandings of children, schools, and community increased as a result of this service-learning experience. Participants also demonstrated reflective practice. One challenge revealed by this investigation was facilitation of collaborative dispositions. Participant comments suggested they perceived the responsibilities of teachers and community service providers to complement but also to be somewhat independent of each other. Future service-learning experiences might facilitate collaborative dispositions (i.e., working *together* to meet children's needs) to a greater degree if participants are provided with further opportunities to view collaboration in action. Appropriate site placements may be those where frequent collaboration between community-based service providers and classroom teachers is modeled by highly engaged professionals. In this context, participants may develop collaborative orientations as well as knowledge of community-based services and referral strategies.

It is also possible that collaborative dispositions might appear later in the professional development process. As reported by Root, Callahan, and Sepanski (2002), initial community-based service-learning experiences appear to sensitize participants to individual learner needs. They also contribute toward identification of services provided by relevant community-based service providers. In a study of the impact of service-learning on senior-level social work undergraduate students, researchers Drueth and Drueth-Fewell (2002) reported that an understanding of community and program services was integrated into direct interaction with service recipients at later stages of the service experience. Early community-based experiences in teacher education may contribute to knowledge of community resources and services as well as to the likelihood of teacher referral. Collaborative dispositions may be enhanced through extended participation in community-based experiences in teacher preparation programs where these dispositions are modeled by engaged professionals in classroom and community-based settings.

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