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Service-learning in preservice teacher education

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Abstract

This national study was designed to gain an understanding of the status of service-learning in teacher education programs. Results indicate that service-learning is introduced to preservice teachers in the majority of teacher education institutions (59%), while 37% prepare their teacher candidates to use service-learning as a teaching method. Although service-learning exists in the language and curriculum of the majority of teacher education programs, it still resides largely on the periphery. The quality, depth, and integration of service-learning are very limited. Teacher educators need increased institutional support and a deeper understanding of service-learning theory and practice for it to become a more fully integrated component of teacher education.

Teacher education programs across the nation are addressing the challenge of integrating service-learning into their curricula. Many teacher educators are becoming aware that successful service-learning activities in preservice teacher education can contribute to effective practice in P-12 schools when graduates enter the teaching profession with preparation in and commitment to implementing service-learning in their classrooms (Wade et al, 1999). They are also are focusing on the benefits that K-16 service-learning partnerships can bring to teacher education programs, K-12 schools, and the wider community (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001). Numerous teacher educators and educational organizations, including the California Department of Education (1999), are recommending the inclusion of service-learning as a vital instructional strategy in teacher education programs (Swick, 1998; Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1995).

Prospective teachers typically engage in service-learning by working with children in need through schools and community agencies, assisting P-12 teachers in the design and implementation of service-learning with their students, and developing service-learning activities for use during student teaching. Teacher educators offer a variety of reasons for integrating service-learning into their courses, ranging from preparing new teachers to use service-learning as a pedagogy to helping to socialize new teachers in the essential moral and civic obligations of teaching, including teaching with "care" and developing a commitment to advocate for social justice (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001). There are also serious challenges to the successful use of service-learning in preservice teacher education - including the already overcrowded curriculum, the difficulties arranging successful P-12 and community service-learning sites, and lack of alignment of service-learning with institutional faculty roles and rewards (Anderson & Pickeral, 2000). In addition, service-learning is a complex teaching method that requires faculty to have a clear understanding of service-learning theory and principles of good practice in order to achieve desired outcomes.

In this study we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the status of service-learning in the curriculum of U.S. preservice teacher education programs. Specifically, the study is designed to address the following questions: 1) What is the extent of service-learning in preservice teacher education? 2) How is service-learning included in the preservice curriculum? 3) What types of institutional support are provided to facilitate the use of

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service-learning? and 4) What are the goals for service-learning use in preservice teacher education and to what degree are these goals perceived as being achieved?

Literature Review

Root and Furco (2001) estimated that 200 teacher education programs across the U.S. incorporate service-learning. Despite this increasing use of service-learning, Furco and Ammon (2000) report that service-learning was not widely understood by teacher educators in the state of California. They found that 65% of survey respondents indicated that their teacher education program introduced teacher candidates to service-learning and 65% also used service-learning as a method in education courses. Furco and Ammon concluded that service-leaning is not a primary element in California's teacher education programs, and that this state of affairs reflects not opposition to service-learning but a lack of understanding of this method, particularly among faculty at research institutions. Potthoff and colleagues (2000) reported a general lack of understanding of service-learning among teacher educators nationwide. However, Jones, Ryan, and Bohlin (1998) found that service-learning was the second most frequently used approach to character education among a national sample of teacher education programs, with 54% of their respondents citing it as being a component of their program. Research also suggests that a strong majority (83%) of beginning teachers who participated in service-learning during their preservice preparation intend to use it as a pedagogy with their P-12 students (Anderson, Connor, Grief, Gunsolus, & Hathaway, 1996). Additionally, a study of beginning teachers prepared in the use of service-learning in four different preservice programs revealed that about 30% implemented service-learning in their first few years of classroom teaching (Wade et al, 1999).

Methodology

The data were collected through a survey sent to all 754 institutional members of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). The same survey was sent to 120 randomly selected teacher education programs not affiliated with AACTE. A total of 499 (66.18%) AACTE institutional members and 29 (24.16%) non-member institutions returned completed surveys for an overall response rate of 60.41%. Respondents included 107 Doctoral/Research Universities, 185 Master's Colleges or Universities, 155 Baccalaureate Colleges, and 81 others (no response, don't know, combination of classifications). Data analysis involved two phases. First, basic frequencies, percentages, and other descriptive statistics were calculated regarding the 26 survey items. These descriptive statistics were then tested to determine whether statistically significant differences exist between AACTE member institutions' responses to particular survey items and responses from non-member institutions. A Students t-test analysis indicated that no statistically significant differences exist between the two groups responses on any survey items.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of these data are presented in relation to the four questions. We highlight some of the most important findings from this investigation and discuss issues pertaining to the quality of service-learning in U.S. teacher education programs.

What is the extent of service-learning in preservice teacher education?

Fifty-nine percent (312) of survey respondents indicated that their teacher education program introduced teacher candidates to service-learning but only 37% (195) actually prepare candidates to use S-L as a pedagogy for use with their future P-12 students.
When asked what percentage of the preservice teachers at their institution experienced service-learning as part of their required coursework, respondents varied widely in their responses. Twenty-four percent responded that all students experienced service-learning, while nearly the same number (23%) responded that none of their students participated in service-learning. Regarding the percentage of full-time teacher education faculty that included service-learning in a class they teach, in the majority of cases the number of faculty participating was on the low side. In slightly over half of the institutions (51%), only one to 32% of faculty participated in service-learning.

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"None" was the favored response for 19% of respondents. Only 4% of institutions had service-learning imbedded in at least one course taught by each full-time faculty member.

With 312 respondents indicating that service-learning is included in their teacher preparation program, it is clear that the term "service-learning" has moved into the mainstream of teacher educators' vocabulary. However, when a closer look is taken at the data, it appears that this familiarity with service-learning does not necessarily translate into programs with service-learning integrated into core courses and practica that involve all teacher candidates and key faculty. In fact, in most programs that include service-learning, many teacher candidates exit without any service-learning experience at all, due to the fact that service-learning is only offered in an elective course or in one of several sections of a required course. In addition, in most programs service-learning is included in coursework by less than one-third of the full-time, tenure-track faculty. The status of service-learning is most teacher education programs is that of being recognized as a promising innovation that is used by a few faculty members with some teacher candidates in a somewhat haphazard manner. In addition, only about one-third of survey respondents prepare teacher candidates to use service-learning as a pedagogy.

How is service-learning included in the preservice curriculum?
The most frequent S-L-related experiences and methods included in teacher education courses included school-based service activities (50%) and non-school service (31%). Lectures on S-L were reported in 31% of programs. The most frequent courses in which S-L was implemented were foundations courses   21%), methods courses (13%), teaching English as a second language courses (32%), and student teaching (86%). A large majority of teacher education programs (86%) indicated that the student teaching experience provided to their students does include service-learning while only 37% claim to prepare their teacher candidates to use service-learning as a pedagogy. This result could mean that many student teachers are sent into the public schools being encouraged by teacher educators to "try out" service-learning with their K-12 students without the benefit of any preparation in how to do so. In addition, 18% of these programs report that they have preservice teachers develop a service-learning lesson plan, and 20% pair teacher candidates with K-12 teachers experienced with service-learning.

Due to the complex nature of service-learning it can be a challenging pedagogy for many teachers to implement successfully. Without sufficient preparation, student teachers' initial experiences with service-learning may be less positive than expected for both them and their K-12 students. Teacher educators experienced with service-learning recommend that instruction in the use of service-learning as a pedagogy for preservice teachers include: 1) classroom instruction regarding the use of service-learning as a pedagogy and as a philosophy of education, including the creation of a written service-learning lesson plan or unit of instruction; 2) participation in two types of service-learning experiences; first, engage in service themselves along with reflection activities, and second, experience working with K-12 teachers, students, and community partners to design and implement service-learning projects (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001). In addition, Wade et al. (1999) concluded that teacher educators need to provide multiple service-learning experiences for preservice teachers through classes, practica, and student teaching. These experiences should be positive ones in which the preservice teachers take responsibility for essential aspects of project planning and implementation. The data indicate that most teacher education programs

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that involve service-learning have not refined their students' service-learning experiences to the point where these suggestions are implemented. Another explanation for the high percentage of teacher education programs that include service-learning with the student teaching experience may be that these teacher educators perceive the student teaching experience itself to be a form of service-learning. Considerable education may need to be done to help teacher educators fully understand the crucial distinctions between internships such as traditional student teaching and well-designed service-learning experiences.

What types of institutional support are provided to facilitate the use of service-learning?

About half of the institutions surveyed (49%) have a campus-wide service-learning staff person. Of those institutions who had a staff-person, about two-thirds (67%) were administratively housed outside the education program. Over one-third (37%) of these staff members arranged community placements, while a slightly smaller number (30%) provided advocacy for service-learning on campus. Smaller numbers actually provided classroom instruction (17%), professional development (22%), logistical support (22%), or provided funding (20%). While over one third (37%) of institutions' missions explicitly mention service, only 14% provided earmarked funding for that purpose. A key ingredient in institutional integration at the college or university level is whether a task is included as a criterion for tenure and promotion. Nearly one in five institutions (18%) report that S-L is mentioned explicitly in tenure and promotion criteria. With fewer than half (49%) of the institutions surveyed reporting that they have a campus-wide service-learning staff person, and most of these staff persons not arranging community placements (67%), nor providing advocacy for service-learning (70%), nor providing classroom instruction (83%), professional development (78%), nor logistical support (80%) for service-learning in teacher education programs, it is clear that most teacher education faculty members are left to fend for themselves when it comes to integrating service-learning into their courses. The existence of these kinds of service-learning support is essential for sustaining successful service-learning efforts. Without them service-learning often becomes either a low-quality add-on project or the extra work involved results in faculty burn-out.

What are the goals for service-learning use and to what degree are these goals perceived as being achieved?

When asked to respond to a list of rationales for using service-learning, institutions reported that exposing their students to the communities in which they would serve (60%) was the most frequently cited reason for adding service-learning to their teacher education program. Other frequently indicated rationales included exposing students to diversity issues (58%) and enhancing students' personal and social development (53%). The least frequently reported rationale (18%) was "to improve prerservice teachers academic achievement". Respondents, with almost all identifying at least four, endorsed a wide diversity of goals but the degree to which these goals were perceived as being achieved was modest. None of the goals were described as being fully achieved by more than 20% of the respondents, including: appreciation of diversity (18% indicating the goal as fully achieved), connecting students to the community (16%) and meeting licensure standards (16%), developing personal or social competence (13%), enhancing altruism (13%), helping preservice teachers develop habits of critical inquiry and reflection (11%), understanding community needs (11%), and developing career awareness (10%). Twenty-five percent of the respondents indicated that one of their goals for the use of service-learning is to prepare preservice teachers to use service-learning as a pedagogy; 12% fewer than the overall percentage

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of respondents who reported that they do prepare their preservice teachers to use service-learning. This discrepancy may be due to some programs finding that their graduates do use service-learning as a pedagogy even though their preparation program didn't have this outcome in mind. Since only 3% of the respondents indicated that this goal was being fully achieved (the lowest achievement rating of any of the goals included in the survey) it appears that this is a component of service-learning in teacher education that needs considerable improvement.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest a rather broad but shallow penetration of service-learning into the curricula of U.S. teacher education institutions. When used, service-learning appears to encourage the kinds of outcomes for which advocates hope, but the idiosyncratic nature of its implementation makes widespread impact questionable. Service-learning is found in a majority of programs but often only in a few courses. Even when present, indicators of deep institutionalization are contradictory. Future research studies should examine in detail the impacts of engagement in service-learning on preservice teachers, and seek to determine the degree to which specific components of service-learning courses contribute to achievement of desired goals. Researchers should also study preservice teacher education programs that are perceived as being relatively successful to determine how these programs were developed and the types and degree of institutional support they receive. As teacher educators develop deeper understandings of service-learning theory and practice through participation in local and national institutes and training programs, increased support from peer mentors, and conducting research regarding their service-learning efforts, we believe they will be better positioned to advocate for increases in institutional support and as a result, more fully achieve their desired outcomes for teacher candidates and their communities.

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