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Service Learning in Preservice Teacher Preparation: Building Foundations for Engaged Professionalism in the New Millenium

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Teacher Preparation and Engaged Professionalism

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The authors are tenured faculty in the Child and Adolescent Development departments at their respective California State University campuses. Each teaches discipline-based and practicum courses for lower and upper division students. Each is also involved in efforts to recruit and prepare teachers for contemporary classroom and to study the impact of infusing service-learning into their courses.

Abstract

We examine the impact of service-learning on future teachers' engaged professionalism. Analyses of pre- and post-experience data revealed sustained or enhanced civic engagement, enjoyment of working with diverse and English learners and interest in careers with diverse learners. Participants placed in CBO's reported greater gains in appreciation for being informed about public policy, and in knowledge about their placement community. Participants placed in schools reported greater gains interests in working with English learners and in teaching skills. Discussion focuses on program- and institution-level implications.

The Child and Adolescent Development departments represented in this cross-campus study have a mandate to prepare professional educators who have the interest in and ability to interact effectively with youth and families in a range of school and community settings. All three programs recognize that effective educators must be committed to working with families and other community members to establish an environment that supports children's learning and development. To accomplish this goal, all three programs have systematically integrated service learning experiences in both school and community contexts into their courses. This study examines the impact of some of those experiences. More specifically, the analyses reported here address three questions: (a) Do service-learning experiences impact future teachers' commitment to engaged professionalism? (b) Do service-learning experiences impact future teachers' attitudes about culturally diverse learners as well as their commitment to careers working with diverse learners? (c) Do service-learning experiences provide future teachers with the dispositions, skills, and knowledge necessary to becoming an engaged professional? For each of these questions, we further examine whether outcomes differ as a function of the kind of placement where the field experience occurs.

Our aim is to contribute to the professional dialogue concerning ways to best prepare teachers for 21st century public school classrooms. Thus, we begin with a review of the literature pertaining to the role of universities, in general, and service learning experiences, in particular, in nurturing engaged professionalism. We then turn to a presentation of our own study. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and of their broader institutional implications. With the start of the new millennium, documents such as the Wingspread Declaration (1999) and Campus Compact's Presidents' Declaration (2000) called for a rededication of American higher education to ". . . re-examine its public purposes and its commitments to the democratic ideal (p. 1)." The Campus Compact Declaration endorsed by a long list of university presidents,

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declared that "...There is no nobler task than committing ourselves to helping catalyze and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education (p. 2)."

Increasingly, service learning has emerged as a primary vehicle for universities to engage students in learning experiences that promote democratic ideals of civic engagement. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define service learning as a type of experiential education in which students participate in service in the community and reflect on their involvement in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, the discipline, and the relationship of the course content and discipline to social needs. Well-designed service learning experiences integrated across the teacher education curriculum facilitate career exploration, commitment to community involvement and civic engagement, leadership development and personal growth (Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; LaMaster, 2001; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002; Root, Callahan & Sepanski, 2002).

While there is ample evidence of positive outcomes associated with preservice teachers' placements in school-based sites, placements with other community-based organizations (e.g. parent education organizations or social service agencies) may also be beneficial. Sleeter (2000), Ginn (1996), and Ducharme (1994) specifically advocate for community-based service-learning experiences in teacher preparation programs. Such experiences have been shown to help preservice teachers better understand how to work with family members and various community agencies to support healthy educational and social-emotional outcomes for children (Knutson Miller, Dunlap, & Gonzalez, 2007; Ginn, 1996; Sleeter, 2000; Strage, Meyers, and Norris, 2002; Swick, 1999; Wade & Anderson, 1996; Wimer, Post, & Little, 2003).

Method
Participants. The data reported below were drawn from an archive collected during the Spring and Fall 2004 semesters from students enrolled in six undergraduate Child Development courses at three urban state university campuses, each of which included a required service learning component. The findings discussed in this paper were based on analyses of responses of students (N = 209) who had completed their service learning experiences in K-8 classrooms (n = 123 in Title I schools, n = 67 in non-Title I schools) or in community-based organizations (CBOs) (n = 19). The majority of the participants were White (63 %), female (92 %), and Child Development majors. They ranged in age from 20 to 47 years (M = 24.8 years of age). Almost all had prior experience with children. All participants completed a minimum of 20 hours in their respective placement sites over the course of one semester and engaged in ongoing reflection linking the service learning experiences to course themes.

Survey Instruments. Matched pre-and post-experience versions of a survey developed by the authors were administered to assess outcomes related to the research questions. The survey consisted of a series Likert-type items and open-ended, constructed response prompts designed to capture knowledge and dispositions related to civic engagement or engaged professionalism. Analyses reported here focus on participants' responses to questions about (1) their commitment to civic engagement, (2) their commitment to working with children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and (3) their perceptions of their teaching skills and knowledge.

Data Analyses. Changes in participants' attitudes about civic engagement and about working with children and families from diverse backgrounds were assessed with t-tests comparing

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respondents' answers to corresponding items on the pre- and post-service learning survey. Placement-type differences in outcomes pertaining to teaching knowledge and skills were assessed by one-way ANOVAs. Quotes from participants' narrative responses are included in the data presentation, as appropriate.

Results
We report on analyses conducted to identify how participants' service learning experiences affected their attitudes about civic engagement, their interest in working with diverse learners, and their assessments of their skills and knowledge relevant to teaching and engaged professionalism.

Civic Engagement
Participants answered four questions pertaining to civic engagement. First, they rated how important it was for them to make a difference in children's lives through their work. Responses indicated relatively high and sustained levels of engagement (overall pre-survey m = 3.89, overall post-survey m = 3.89, t = .174, p = .862). Pre/post means were relatively high and stable across groups (Title I pre-survey m = 3.91, post-survey m = 3.90 t = .229, p = .820; non-Title I pre-survey m = 3.87, post-survey m = 3.87, t = .000, p = 1.000; CBO pre-survey m = 3.84, post-survey m = 3.84, t = .000, p = 1.000).

Second, participants were asked how important they felt it was to be informed about public policy issues related to children and youth. Once again, overall pre/post means were high and stable (overall pre-survey m = 3.54, overall post-survey m = 3.58, t = -.855, p = .394). Pre/post means were similar across teaching placements (Title I pre-survey m = 3.58, post-survey m = 3.60 t = -.521, p = .604; non-Title I pre-survey m = 3.61, post-survey m = 3.58, t = .390, p = .698). However, participants placed in CBO's emerged with a greater appreciation of the importance of being informed about policy issues (CBO pre-survey m = 3.06, post-survey m = 3.39, t = -2.380, p = .029).

Third, participants were asked to indicate whether they believed that their service would/did benefit the school or community where they were placed. Responses indicated relatively high and sustained levels of agreement with the statement (overall pre-survey m = 3.32, overall post-survey m = 3.33, t = -.112, p = .911). Pre/post means were similar across groups (Title I pre-survey m = 3.36, post-survey m = 3.33 t = .427, p = .670; non-Title I pre-survey m = 3.19, post-survey m = 3.27, t = -1.043, p = .301; CBO pre-survey m = 3.56, post-survey m = 3.50, t = .369, p = .717).

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had a good understanding of the challenges and resources in the school or community where they were placed. Both overall and for each of the placement subgroups, participants reported significant increases in understanding (overall pre-survey m = 2.78, overall post-survey m = 3.23, t = -6.957, p = .000; Title I pre-survey m = 2.78, post-survey m = 3.22 t = -5.222, p = .000; non-Title I pre-survey m = 2.82, post-survey m = 3.19, t = -3.322, p = .002; CBO pre-survey m = 2.55, post-survey m = 3.55, t = -5.244, p = .000).

Comments from students in school placements revealed an increased awareness of challenges in their communities and of the value of becoming involved in efforts toward solutions. One respondent wrote of his experience in a Title I school: "It has helped me understand what the majority of children are struggling with. It also inspired me to work more in my local community, to improve some of the problems that were observed." Students placed in CBO's shared similar reflections. One wrote of her placement, "It made me really want to be a part of my community. I really love being part of the bigger picture."

Diverse Learners

Our analyses pertaining to the impact of the service learning experiences on respondents' attitudes about working with diverse learners focused on two dimensions: their enjoyment of their actual service learning placements and their longer term career interests. A first set of questions asked participants to report on their (anticipated or actual) enjoyment of working with children from diverse backgrounds and with English learners. Overall, at the outset, participants strongly expected to enjoy working with diverse learners, and at the close of the semester, reported that they had, indeed, enjoyed this experience (diverse pre-survey m = 3.44, diverse post-survey m = 3.49, t = -1.069, p = .287). These patterns were consistent across placement type (diverse Title 1 pre-survey m = 3.45, post-survey m = 3.52, t = -1.338, p = .184; non-Title 1 pre-survey m = 3.43, post-survey m = 3.43, t = .000, p = 1.00; CBO pre-survey m = 3.40, post-survey m = 3.47, t = -.564, p = .582.)

In contrast, overall, participants began with a relatively cautious set of expectations about how much they would enjoy working with English Learners. At the close of the semester, they reported that they had enjoyed working with English learners more than they had expected (EL pre-survey m = 3.12, EL post-survey m = 3.35, t = -4.208, p = .000). However, significant differences in anticipated and actual enjoyment were only noted for participants who had completed their service learning in a school setting (EL Title 1 pre-survey m = 3.18, post-survey m = 3.38, t = -3.188, p = .002; non-Title 1 pre-survey m = 3.03, post-survey m = 3.31, t = -2.509, p = .018; CBO pre-survey m = 2.50, post-survey m = 3.00, t = -1.000, p = .391).

With respect to longer term career goals, a second set of items asked respondents to rate their interest in careers working with English learners or with children from diverse backgrounds. Overall, participants emerged with a significantly greater interest in careers working with children from diverse backgrounds (pre-survey m = 4.10, post-survey m = 4.30, t = -3.059, p = .003). This change was noted primarily for participants who had completed their service learning in non-Title 1 school settings (diverse career Title 1 pre-survey m = 4.19, post-survey m = 4.34, t = -1.747, p = .083; non-Title 1 pre-survey m = 4.00, post-survey m = 4.25, t = -2.341, p = .022; CBO pre-survey m = 3.84, post-survey m = 4.16, t = -1.372, p = .187).

Overall, participants emerged with a significantly greater interest in careers working with English learners (pre-survey m = 3.25, post-survey m = 3.42, t = -2.132, p = .034). However, this change was significant only for participants who had completed their service learning in Title 1 school settings (English learners career Title 1 pre-survey m = 3.28, post-survey m = 3.52, t = -2.222, p = .028; non-Title 1 pre-survey m = 3.23, post-survey m = 3.40, t = -1.085, p = .282; CBO pre-survey m = 3.05, post-survey m = 2.89, t = .615, p = .546).

Professional Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions

Engaged professionalism requires that teachers have the requisite knowledge and skills to work effectively in diverse communities. Participants answered a series of questions pertaining to the impact of the service learning experience on their professional knowledge, skills and dispositions.

The first three items were fairly general in scope. Nearly all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the service learning experiences had enabled them to identify personal strengths and weaknesses (overall = 94.6%, Title 1 = 95.0%, non-Title 1 = 94.0%, and CBO = 94.4%). Nearly all respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that the service learning experiences had enabled them to develop their leadership skills (overall = 85.6%, Title 1 = 83.4%, non-Title 1 = 89.3%, and CBO = 88.2%). And nearly all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the service learning experiences had enabled them to develop their teamwork skills (overall = 83.7%, Title 1 = 85.2%, non-Title 1 = 82.6%, and CBO = 77.7%).

The final two items focused more specifically on teaching. Again, a very large proportion of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the service learning experience had helped them to

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develop teaching and classroom management skills (overall, 89.5% and 88.5%, respectively). Not surprisingly, these outcomes were reported more frequently by students who had been placed in school settings than by those who had been placed in CBO's (see Table 1). Visit issue website http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/fal2009.htm

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess whether service learning experiences infused into undergraduate preteaching courses would help future educators acquire the skills and dispositions necessary to become engaged professionals, including interest in and ability to interact effectively with diverse children and families in a range of school and community settings. Our results confirm and extend previously reported findings (e.g., Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Even from the outset future teachers recognize the opportunity they have to make a difference in children's lives through their work. Also from the outset, they recognized the importance of being fully informed about public policy issues relating to children and youth. And finally, even from the outset, they believed that their service would benefit the community where they were placed. But lest we conclude that their dispositions toward engagement were unchanged by the service learning, participants also reported learning a good deal about the resources and challenges in the communities where they were placed. Thus, the service learning sustained many of their initial feelings about community engagement, provided them with a more realistic picture of community needs and perhaps helped them to emerge in a better position to act on their "noble intentions" of being "agents and architects" of democratic change (Campus Compact, 2000, p. 2).

Engaged professionalism in contemporary contexts also requires a respect for diversity and a commitment to working in diverse communities. From the outset, our future teachers expected to enjoy the opportunity to work with diverse learners, and those positive feelings were maintained through to the end of the service learning. Furthermore, this enjoyment appeared to translate into a stronger commitment to careers working with diverse learners, regardless of the service learning placement. A slightly different pattern emerged with respect to participants' attitudes about English learners. Across the various placement types, our future teachers' ratings indicated that they ended up having enjoyed working with English learners significantly more than they had expected to at the outset. However, only those participants who had been placed in Title 1 schools emerged with a stronger commitment to careers with English learners.

Engaged professionals must also possess a strong foundation of knowledge and pedagogical skills to translate those dispositions into active engagement. Across all three types of placements, our future teachers reported that the service learning experience had helped them to identify strengths and weaknesses and develop leadership and teamwork skills. Not surprisingly, participants placed in school settings (both Title 1 and non-Title 1) reported that the service learning had also helped them to develop skills more specific to the classroom, including teaching and management strategies.

Implications and Recommendations

We close by considering some of the broader institutional questions pertaining to our findings. First, creating and maintaining service learning placements takes time and

effort, and in some cases, the returns on these investments may seem modest, especially when students enter their placements already at or near ceiling with respect to the dispositions that the placements are designed to enhance. Such was the case for some of the characteristics relating to community involvement and attitudes about working with diverse learners. It might be argued that in maintaining these already positive dispositions, service learning can provide a foundation upon which further multicultural competencies and dispositions toward community involvement may be built.

Second, it behooves advocates of service learning to consider the kinds of outcomes they seek for their students who participate in service learning experiences. As Anderson and Callaghan (2005) have reported, institutionalization of service learning often rests on clearly articulated connections between the mission of the college and the goals of the service learning program. Furthermore, meaningful interpretation of the impact of participating in service learning experiences is greatly facilitated by a coherent model of the various moral, political and social goals of service learning programs (e.g., Moely & Miron, 2005; Morton, 1995).

And finally, service learning placements are not equivalent and interchangeable. For our future teachers, some aspects of engaged professionalism were best developed in school placements. But there were important aspects of engaged professionalism that were better supported in the non-school placements, particularly those related to community engagement. This finding is of particular interest for teacher preparation programs, since often field experience placements are limited to school settings. If such outcomes are deemed important, teacher preparation programs should further consider the systematic integration of non-school placements into the formal professional training of future teachers.

The findings reported in this study provide a baseline for our understanding of the many beneficial roles that service learning can play in helping future teachers to become the engaged professionals our schools and communities need in the new millennium. Further questions pertaining to the role of service learning in teacher preparation, including the range of placements to provide and the sequence in which to provide them, remain to be considered further in future investigations.

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