Chapter 3

“It Depends on the Type of Program”: Student Perceptions of Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Effects of the organization on TESOL candidates’ experience of service-learning were studied. Participants were 11 students enrolled in a graduate TESOL program. Students completed a 20-hour service-learning experience in a community-based organization that serves English learners and their families. Students filled out questionnaires, kept a journal, and participated in a class discussion. Analysis of the questionnaires indicated that students learned a lot about their organization, including its mission or purpose, curriculum, staffing, and training of volunteers. Journals revealed that students had a variety of experiences, that they learned a lot about their organizations, and that they learned valuable lessons about teaching in these organizations. Class discussion highlighted the variation in how organizations are organized and managed. These findings suggest that: 1) The organizations in which they serve affect candidates’ experience of service-learning and 2) Teacher preparation programs should prepare candidates for the realities of this experience.
“It Depends on the Type of Program”

INTRODUCTION

A great deal has been written about service-learning, especially for pre-service teachers. Scholars have written about different types of experiences conducted in different settings and have cited the benefits of service-learning for teacher candidates and for the communities they serve, both in the US and abroad (Al Barwani, Al-Mekhlafi, & Nagaratnam, 2013; Amaro-Jiménez, 2012; Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011; He & Prater, 2013; Holsapple, 2012; Kim, 2010; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Micek, & Harr, 2010; Sakar & Ozturk, 2011; Smolen, Zhang, & Detwiler, 2013; Uzum, Petrón, & Berg, 2014). Yet students’ experience of service-learning seems to vary with the goals of the program they serve and how those programs operationalize their work. For example, while students in some programs express frustration with lack of funding, organization, and volunteers, students in other programs are impressed generally by the way the programs function and specifically by their focus on learning and socialization goals (J. Monseur, personal communication, November 9, 2014). The present study seeks to improve service-learning by illuminating the relationship between students’ experience and the programs in which they serve.

BACKGROUND

Many studies of service-learning emphasize its benefits for participants, especially pre-service teacher candidates. Amaro-Jiménez (2012) describes a service-learning project that operates in conjunction with a free after-school program run by a public library in a large city in the southwestern USA. The project’s goals are to help pre-service teachers apply what they learn in the classroom to what they do in the field and to help meet the needs of the community. The pre-service teachers commit to volunteering at least two hours per week for 16 weeks, and they connect course material to service-learning by participating in classroom discussions, writing weekly reflections, and creating “developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate” materials for participants in the after-school program. “Thus far,” in Amaro-Jiménez’s words, the project has given over 200 pre-service teachers “opportunities to grow personally, professionally, academically and civically” (p. 212). Another study yielded similar results with a different population of students in a different type of setting.

Smolen, Zhang, and Detwiler (2013) describe a service-learning project connected to a TESOL program where they explored teacher candidates’ experiences teaching English to Karen refugees from Myanmar (Burma) in a Midwestern city in the US. Interviews with, and reflections by, the candidates indicated that the project “contributed to their academic and personal development and enhanced their aca-
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