Chapter 4

Service-Learning as a Means for Preparing Preservice Teachers to Work With English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores ways in which preservice content-area teachers were engaged in service-learning as part of a teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) methods course at a public research university in the U.S. Midwest. It describes the reflections of 26 undergraduate students majoring in English Language Arts, Math, Science, Foreign Languages, and Social Studies Education, who were involved in service-learning as a medial field experience. Findings reveal that the experience contributed tremendously to their understanding of the backgrounds of English language learners as well as the challenges these learners faced in and out of school. As a result of this “eye-opening” experience, teacher candidates reported a commitment to valuing diversity and equity in their future classrooms, as well as a responsibility to advocate for their culturally and linguistically diverse learners. The chapter concludes with suggestions for implementing service-learning for preservice teachers across content areas in a teacher education program.

INTRODUCTION

Research has long indicated the benefits of service-learning for preservice teachers in teacher education programs (Kirkland, 2014). Service-learning provides “a form of experiential education” (Jacoby, 2015, p. 1) in which transformative learning experiences take place that contribute to the lives of the students and the members of the community where they serve (Kinloch & Smagorinsky, 2014). Unlike typical
fieldwork or volunteer experience, the reflection aspect strongly encouraged by service-learning creates space for preservice teachers to more deeply consider the mutually beneficial experiences of their learners and their own professional growth (Carrington & Selva, 2010). In particular, research suggests that intercultural competence and the ability to adapt instruction for English language learners (ELLs) is becoming an increasingly necessary skill for all teachers (Garcia, Arias, Harris Murri, & Serna, 2010) as immigration patterns in recent years have indicated a shift to non-traditional destinations, such as the Midwestern U.S., largely driven by the availability of employment (Massey, 2008). The changing landscape of America underscores the importance of field experience components in teacher preparation. The current work builds on this scholarship by emphasizing the importance of a field experience focused on ELLs for preservice content-area teachers.

BACKGROUND

Service-learning has now long been a popular concept in academic communities, particularly in the field of preservice teacher education. While some have doubted the depth of the practice’s permeation into the education community (Anderson & Erickson, 2003), the scholarship has consistently pointed to positive personal and professional gains for teacher candidates participating in service-learning. On a basic level, service-learning that is related to the curriculum being taught in the classroom has been shown to improve academic outcomes by enhancing students’ ability to understand and apply the material (Simons & Cleary, 2006; Roldan, Strage, & David, 2004). Other benefits documented include social development, an increased awareness of social justice issues, appreciation of diversity, and increased self-efficacy and ability to work well with others (Anderson & Hill, 2001; Cho & Gulley, 2016; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Wade, 2000). Furthermore, studies have found that service-learning positively affects a preservice teacher’s views of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, in addition to enhancing their desire or willingness to work with diverse students (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Garcia et al., 2010; Sleeter, 2001).

The area of teacher preparation in which service-learning has perhaps been most widely employed and studied is multicultural education. Here service-learning is operationalized as a strategy to address what Ladson-Billings (1991) refers to as the “multicultural illiteracy” of a teaching labor force overwhelmingly composed of white, middle-class individuals, generally females, who tend to have little previous experience that prepares them to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The result is that teachers often enter the workforce feeling unprepared for the diversity of learners they face in classrooms following graduation, especially in relation to ELLs (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). Service-learning has been widely documented as a medial method to bridge the broad cultural gap that exists between the predominantly white teacher population and an increasingly non-white student population. Emerging scholarship has supported the notion that service-learning in a methods course is of particular value in enhancing a medial field experience in this regard (Sulentic Dowell & Meidl, 2016).

The efficacy of a service-learning approach in this regard has been supported by the literature, with some important qualifiers. Proponents assert that service-learning allows for preservice teachers to have positive encounters with diverse learners as a way of dispelling biases and stereotypes that may otherwise develop through learning generalizations about different cultures in a classroom setting (Boyle-Baise, 1998; Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007). Without careful guidance and self-reflection, studies have found that service-learning experiences may be “miseducative,” serv-