Chapter 3

Service–Learning as Authentic Practice for Teacher Candidates to Work With English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how the incorporation of service-learning to a teacher education course changes teacher candidates’ perceptions of English language learners (ELLs). It also examines the benefits and challenges of the service-learning project in which preservice teachers worked with ELLs individually or in groups in the elementary classroom. Through course artifacts and focus group interviews of 48 preservice teachers at a large Midwestern U.S. university, the impacts of service-learning as authentic practice with ELLs are discussed. Findings reveal that the experience reduced participant anxiety about working with diverse populations, provided opportunities for self-reflection, and promoted a sense of confidence and competence which led to professional growth for teacher candidates. This chapter concludes with recommendations for teacher educators interested in implementing service-learning in a teacher education program as well as directions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in the classroom across the U.S. has been growing rapidly, approaching 10% of all public-school students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Of importance in this demographic trend is the increasing presence of ELLs in classrooms beyond border states, across the more rural settings of the U.S. Midwest. For example, Kansas has witnessed the largest percentage-point increase in ELL enrollment---4.9 percentage points---in the country between 2002-2003 and 2012-2013.

In increasingly diverse classrooms, the skills necessary to adapt lessons to ELLs’ linguistic and cultural competence is of central significance to prospective teachers who will be working with such diverse learners (Garcia, Arias, Harris Murri, & Serna, 2010). Yet, there is a mismatch between cultural and linguistic diversity in the student population and the comparative lack thereof within the teaching profession. Over 80 percent of classroom teachers in the U.S. identify as non-Hispanic White on the National Teacher and Principal Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-2016). In their study of a rural teacher education program in Wyoming, Cho, Rios, Trent and Mayfield (2012) found that white teacher candidates’ attitudes towards classroom language diversity as a whole were positive, but that a sizeable percentage (30%) reported feeling “fearful/anxious about working with ELLs” (p. 75). Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, and Driscoll (2005) also found lower levels of instructional confidence among teacher candidates without significant preparation for working with ELLs. In rural areas, challenges in working with diverse populations were especially acute due to scarce resources. Therefore, teacher educators face the imperative need to implement curriculum and learning experiences in the teacher education program so that they can better prepare future educators to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. It is in this context that service-learning stands as an opportunity for preservice teachers to engage authentically with such diverse student populations and prepare themselves for the realities of their future classrooms.

BACKGROUND

Service-Learning as Authentic Practice

Authentic practice in education is defined as instruction that allows learners to discuss, explore, and meaningfully construct and develop connections between concepts which involve realistic situations that are relevant to the learner (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). Recent scholarship on teacher education has promoted a shift from traditional notions of teacher preparation which involve “front-loaded coursework in isolation from practice” with a relatively short amount of student teaching at the end of a program, to more practice-based approaches (Peercy & Troyan, 2017, p. 26). Practice-based teacher education is not a new concept in teacher education historically (Forzani, 2014; Zeichner, 2012). However, change can be seen in the focus of practice-based approaches to teacher education. Previously, emphasis was placed on the amount of time in the field whereas current promotion of practice-based approaches focuses on the quality of practice (Jenset, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; Troyan, Davin, & Donato, 2013; Zeichner, 2012).

Research has affirmed the importance of complementing pedagogical knowledge about teaching and learning with early field experiences that allow preservice teachers to see practice enacted in authen-
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