

Service-Learning and Social Action:
Feeding the Souls of Pre-Service Education Students

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Abstract

Pre-service teacher education candidates reveal personal and professional benefits of participating in a service-learning project helping a local food pantry and participating in a fasting activity. Student reflections revealed that the service-learning component had an impact on participants' sense of their own preconceptions about hunger. Data uncovered 1) participants perceived a greater empathy in themselves toward the students in their field experience classrooms with low socio-economic standards (SES) and 2) participants perceived personal growth as a result of participating in the service-learning project.

Pre-service teacher education candidates in many research institutions are currently engaged in service-learning projects which are integrated into their professional education courses and aligned with relevant standards. Similar in its fieldwork to internship, service learning principally involves a focus on civic engagement and social responsibility as indicated in the Education Commission of the States document (Anderson, 2000). Service-learning is a pedagogy which involves

... a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p.112).

Service learning encourages higher achievement and retention rates at all levels of education (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) and may eventually foster career advancement (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000) and student satisfaction with college (Astin & Sax, 1998). Evidence of state and national attention to service learning include initiatives such as *Turning points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (1998) calling for more extensive service-learning integration in the core instructional curricula. As a result of the significant evidence of benefits to many institutional curricula, many university mission statements now include community service learning and civic engagement along with academic objectives.

A critical ingredient to revealing the benefits of service learning is immersion in direct experiences followed by thoughtful reflection (Scales, 1999; Dewey, 1933). Through the critical element of reflection, candidates are able to document and rethink the importance of their experiences and plan thoughtfully for improved implementation of future activities. The purpose of this study is to report the experiences of the personal and professional benefits of inclusion of a service-learning component within an early field experience of a teacher education course.

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Service learning is a form of experiential education through which “students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby et al. 1996, p.5). Eyler and Giles (1999) cited the transformational potential for learning experiences in terms of a transition from the “patronizing role of charity” (p. 47) to “a more systemic view of social problems and a greater sense of the importance of political action to obtain social justice” (p. 135). Their work has been used widely to discuss the benefits of service learning for students’ development as “effective citizens” (Einfeld & Collins 2008; Hinck & Brandell 1999; Jones 2002; Kahne et al. 2000). Through extensive survey data and intensive interviews, Eyler and

Giles found that “participation in service learning leads to the values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment that underlie effective citizenship” (p. 164). From these findings alone, a pre-service teacher education program or instructor would be motivated to incorporate a service-learning activity into the curriculum. Couple this motivation with the ever increasing economic crisis experienced in many communities across America in which jobless families are finding it increasingly hard to put food on their tables, and therein lie the makings of an opportunity for pre-service teacher candidates to simultaneously participate in service learning and take social action.

The problem-based learning activity occurred during two consecutive semesters of *Social Studies Methods in the Elementary Grades*, a required teacher education course for Elementary Education Majors. This course is taken the semester before the student teaching semester and includes methods classes for all the core academic subjects. The methods program had historically included a service-learning component which consisted of asking cooperating

teachers and principals if there was a project in or around the school that needed attention and performing these tasks as a service to the cooperating school and children serviced by that particular school. Typically, projects ranged anywhere from repainting hallways, to weeding school gardens to repairing playground equipment. The major intention of the inclusion of a service-learning component was to introduce candidates to the myriad of experiences of teaching children by immersion in a service-learning activity in a real school environment.

Our pre-service teachers targeted perceived needs within their schools and surrounding community. Through a problem-based learning activity they began to focus their attention on the subject of the elementary students in a particular school in which 95% of the population were participants in the free or reduced lunch program. The pre-service teachers noted their apparent poverty and questioned how the elementary students who ate both breakfast and lunch at the public school fared during their times away from school. Since the course was Social Studies methods and the pre-service teachers had found their area of interest, further research was done, and they learned the local food pantry was a source of food for many families. In addition, they learned the food pantry was nearly empty and urgently needing donations. The decision was made to hold food drives to restock the food pantry as well as to volunteer at the pantry working in the warehouse and during distribution times.

Class discussions revealed the pre-service teachers had never experienced neither hunger nor the challenges of depending on someone else to obtain food. As discussions evolved, they realized they had no idea what it felt like to be hungry. They decided to get a glimpse of what it felt like to be hungry. As an optional activity, the pre-service teachers decided to participate in an organized, 48-hour fast, to experience hunger.

Method

In this study, we used the phenomenological tradition for the qualitative study of college students' perceptions regarding hunger. We wanted to explore the lived experiences of families in the community who did not have food. It was important for our students to share a similar understanding of the phenomenon, which is one of the roles of phenomenology (Cresswell, 2007). For this study, phenomenology was used by the researchers to explore the meaning college students give to their hunger experience. We reasoned that this would be the best approach because of the focus on giving voice to the students' experiences.

Participants

The participants in this study included 312 fourth-year teacher candidates from a four year comprehensive university located in Texas. Ages of university participants varied from twenty-two years of age to forty -five. There were 11 male participants and 301 female participants, all participants self-identified as Caucasian.

Instrumentation

All participants completed demographic questions prior to completing the reflections, following the informed consent process. Students answered reflective questions related to their fasting experience. Participants were asked to reflect on the following questions: *What have you learned about yourself as a result of participating in this experience? Have you come to think differently about teaching as a result of this experience? What do you think might be the impact of this experience for you in the future? How did the service-learning activity affect your views of children in poverty?* The reflective questions were developed based on the literature available on civic engagement.

Data Collection

We obtained approval for this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to

beginning participant identification and data collection. Participants were recruited from a required teacher education course for Elementary Education Majors at a university in Texas. Participants were recruited at the beginning of the fall and spring semesters. Interested students contacted the primary researcher for more information and to schedule a time to complete the reflection. Potential participants were then screened to ensure they were healthy to complete the fast. Inclusion criteria and private completion of the reflections was scheduled in a confidential location. Each participant was informed about the nature of the study and signed an informed consent prior to the completing the reflection. Participants also chose a pseudonym that was used during the reflection for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality in the study. Data was stored in the primary researchers locked university office and then the reflections were destroyed after information from the reflections was used.

Data Analysis

The procedure for data analysis we used followed the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological data analysis. During the initial analysis, we found significant statements in the reflections that reflected the participants' experiences surrounding the phenomenon (horizontalization) of being hungry. Next, we grouped those statements into meaning units (textural descriptions) and began to develop categories and themes allowing the words from the categories and themes to emerge from the words of the participants. Finally, we developed a description of how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants and developed, from those themes, an overall description of the essence of the experience. Before, during, and after the data analysis process we worked to set aside all prejudgments, by bracketing our experiences through journaling and debriefing (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, (2008).

Trustworthiness

The researchers took several steps to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results of the study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Onwuegbuzie and Leech, (2007), the authors of qualitative studies must establish trustworthiness by selecting specific methods to address possible threats to the credibility and validity of the research. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also pointed out that trustworthiness in a qualitative study can help support the argument that the research findings are credible and valid. To achieve trustworthiness we consulted with each other during every step of the research process (peer debriefing), especially during the transcribing of the reflections to reduce potential bias (Creswell, 2007). Second, the lead researcher had prolonged engagement in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), as she had been a method professor for this group and had knowledge regarding the participant's culture. Third, the lead researcher kept a reflective journal from the study's inception through the writing process. The intent of the journal was to capture the ongoing research process and ensure the potential transferability of the study results. The lead researcher followed the suggestions of Patton (2001) and also included thick descriptions of the setting and reactions to the interviews throughout the reflection process. Finally, the process of member checking was utilized in order to establish the credibility of the data as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Member checking documents were sent to participants via email and asked the participants to indicate if the data accurately depicted their experiences. In all cases, participants replied affirmatively.

Results

Each participant provided reflective data that was used to develop a definition of what it means to experience hunger, these used participants' perspectives as they experienced fasting. In the following sections, we will discuss how this service learning project evolved, present the themes, their descriptions, and the participants' words, and the overall description (essence) of the service

learning hunger experience.

Themes

Following the analysis of each of the reflections we were able to uncover three themes. To qualify as a theme, a minimum of five participants had to endorse a particular category. The three identified themes are: (a) *relevance to career*, (b) *awareness of social issue*, (c) *expression of enjoyment and feelings of community*. In the following sections, we will provide a description of each of the themes.

Relevance to Career. Two hundred out of the 312 participants described relevance to career to as a vital lesson learned during this process. The following quotes are representations of participant statements:

I plan on going to an inner-city school to teach. This experience has opened my eyes to the great need out there and reconfirmed my commitment to do this.

Another student described relevance to career in the following words:

I didn't know that the backpack food for the weekends came from the food pantry.

Another student completed the description of the theme relevance to career when he stated:

I don't see how bringing canned food is making me become a better teacher.

Awareness of Social Issue. One hundred participants spoke specifically about how completing this experiment helped with their social awareness with hunger. They saw fasting for 48 hours as a unique experience that has a lasting impact. One participant noted her awareness of this social issue in the following words:

During this service learning experience, I learned very much about the prevalence of hunger in the world. I didn't know where Ethiopia was on a map, but now I can name the top ten countries suffering from hunger in the world off the top of my head.

Another student stated:

There is a difference between nations who work hard and have food and those who do not have food.

Finally, one student reflected on personal growth by stating,

This experience helped me to understand that world hunger is not just in Africa, but also here in our own nation.

Expression of Enjoyment and Feelings of Community. Different types of people and different activities seem to make a great impact on attracting diverse people to ambassador organizations. Eight participants agreed that being an ambassador has helped them to provide diversity to their organization as well as their college/university. One participant expressed the enjoyment and feelings of community that had a life-changing impact on her:

This activity was nothing short of life-changing for me. I had never been truly hungry before. I plan on volunteering at the food pantry wherever I am.

Another student expresses the sentiment of the other students by describing enjoyment and feelings of community as:

Working at the food pantry was fun. I enjoyed my time getting to know my fellow classmates while working on a food drive together.

Participant Reflections

Participants completed reflections at four-week intervals with a final summative reflection during both semesters included in this study. The four-week interval reflections began with a summary of what students had done concerning the service-learning component and followed the service activities of the participants. For the final reflection, students responded to specific questions regarding their work with the students, the course, and the benefits of working with a non-profit organization during a service-learning activity. The students who chose to participate

in the 48-hour fast completed an additional set of reflective questions. Those reflective questions were used along with the reflections of the students who did not participate in the fast. Participants' reflections allowed the researcher to gain insight and understanding of the participants' perspectives on their views about the social issue of world hunger and the translation to the local community and directly to students in their classes. Specifically, the questions were as follows:

- What have you learned about yourself as a result of participating in this experience?
- Have you come to think differently about teaching as a result of this experience?
- What do you think might be the impact of this experience for you in the future?
- How did the service-learning activity affect your views of children in poverty?

Findings

First, the analysis indicated students' understanding of the relevance of field activities to their career (Gardiner et al., 2000). Terms and phrases indicating that these service-learning activities showed relevance to their future career were "these will be my students", "teachers can make a difference", and "feeling like I was helping". Also, data indicated evidence of pre-service teachers' awareness of a social issue with key terms and phrases such as "world hunger" and "global concerns". Finally, participants demonstrated an enjoyment and feelings of community during the activities, indicated by key terms and phrases such as "teammates", "fun to work together", and "challenging each other to make it [not eating for] 48 hours". These key terms and phrases were statistically analyzed as discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The analysis of the reflections resulted in three emerging themes. These emerging themes demonstrated the three categories gleaned from the participant reflections throughout the semester. These categories deal with the university students' perception of their involvement in a service-learning activity and learning about the social issue of hunger. Each of these will be followed by a discussion from the various reflections during the course of the semester as they pertain to individual participant perceptions within each category.

As participants raised local awareness by campaigning and gathering canned food for the food pantry, they were asked to reflect on the benefits of the service learning. They were asked to reflect on the actual hours working in the food pantry itself, and finally, the students who chose to participate in the 48-hour fast entitled "Be Hungry" reflected on that experience.

Understanding relevance to career

(Keywords: appreciate teaching, feeling like a teacher)

Within these three emerging themes the pre-service teacher participants demonstrated understanding of how their involvement in the service learning project and involvement with the social issue of hunger was relevant to their career. Responses demonstrated steadfastness in the choice for a teaching career, teaching as a means of identifying and being in a position to help at-risk students, teaching their future students about the issue of hunger in the world as a means of creating a feeling of gratitude for circumstances in which they live, and teaching as a career that precedes social change. Gardiner et al. (2000) suggests that participation in service-learning activities can sometimes further participants' understanding of working with others, thus leading to success in careers. One participant reveals that this experience will help her to be a more successful teacher. She states:

Working at the food pantry really opened my eyes to the fact that there are many families here in the university proximity that need help feeding their families. The education I received on world hunger and the alarming statistics of just how many people on this planet go to bed hungry every night somehow went from being a place on a map to someone in my own world when I realized that the food pantry was not only here, but handing out so much food to families in need that it was almost empty. Knowing that many of the kids in the classroom I observe in are recipients of the food from the pantry, well, that just brings it right in my lap.

Awareness of Social Issue

(Keywords: world hunger, universal, global issue)

Because the service-learning project was decided upon through a series of problem-based learning activities and was selected by the pre-service teacher participants, the service-learning activity of collecting food and working at the food bank was determined. What the instructor and pre-service teacher participants brought into this particular project was furthering the local need of food collection to include education about the prevalence of world hunger. The addition of the optional fasting exercise served to reinforce the concept of the social issue of hunger and provide an experiential learning opportunity related to the issue. Of the 312 pre-service teachers participants in the study, 286 pre-service teacher participants reflected about the awareness of the social issue and 100% (123 out of 123) of the fasting participants commented on awareness of the social issue of hunger. Figure 1 compares the percentage of pre-service teachers who had an awareness of social issues depending upon whether or not they experienced fasting.

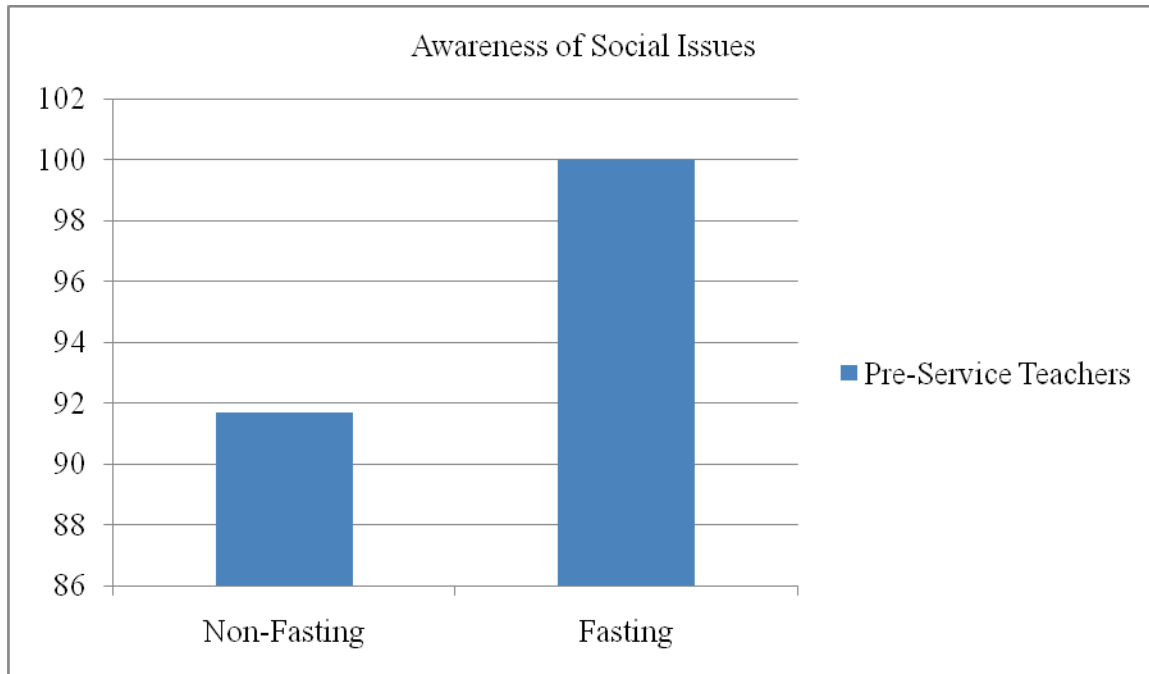


Figure 1. Preservice teachers' awareness of social issues based on their fasting status.

One student best described the range of emotions she felt while becoming aware of the social issue by stating:

We watched a documentary about world hunger during class one day, and I found myself thinking about it all day long. Everywhere I looked there was food available to me. Not only food, but people who were wasting food like crazy. I went through a whole range of emotions that day: I was sad and crying, looking at the distended bellies of the children; I was mad that there are so many overweight Americans; I was compelled to take the challenge to fast for 48 hours and try to feel what hunger felt like; and finally, I was just moved to action, and organized the food drive for my sorority.

Enjoyment and feelings of community

(Keywords: Bonding, together, enjoy, and fun)

After the first semester of continually hearing students mention their enjoyment and how much the pre-service teacher participants were bonding together as a result of this particular field

experience, it was decided that a measure of this enjoyment and feelings of community theme would be included in this study. 260 of the 312 students commented on the subject of enjoyment related to the service learning project experience or feelings of bonding with their classmates.

One pre-service teacher participant relates her experiences in this way:

I convinced my boyfriend, my mom, and all my roommates to fast with me and subjected them to the documentary about the prevalence of hunger around the world. My roommates ended up participating in the food drive for our social organization with me and we collected 700 pounds of canned goods in one night. We were ecstatic. This whole experience was just awesome. I made it 20 hours fasting before I felt like I was going to be sick, but that much was enough to let me know that it's not pleasant being hungry!

Conclusion

As social issues such as hunger continue to plague the world, it is increasingly imperative that higher education develop citizens committed to social justice and transformative change (Maybach, 1996; Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007). Scholars call for more than academic knowledge to address social problems that face society; for college graduates to “situate themselves as citizens with attendant responsibilities to identify and deal with social problems”; and for students to draw upon the skills, expertise, and commitment “to use [their] energies and abilities in service to a collective society” (Hamrick, 1998, p. 450). As educators we believe it is our responsibility to create classrooms that become places where pre-service teachers gain self-awareness of social issues, knowledge of social responsibility, and confidence in their ability to serve their community.

The findings in the present study suggest that the pre-service teacher participants' experiences with service learning had a discernable impact on their beliefs, both personal and professional, and contribute to the literature regarding the benefits of embedding service learning in early field experiences for pre-service teacher candidates. Pre-service teacher candidates demonstrated a high degree of correlation between experience in service-learning and commitment to career choice. The pre-service teacher candidates also demonstrated an awareness of social issues through these experiences. Finally, quantitative evidence suggests that the students' perceived personal gain from the service-learning activity resulted in an enjoyable experience and produced feelings of community.

Implications for Future Studies

The research reported here represents only a single study; therefore, before our findings can be used in practical settings, other studies are needed to build on our results in different populations. Our findings, however, do provide valuable information regarding the range of benefits for professors of pre-service teachers who are considering implementing service learning projects that focus on increasing students' social awareness. Benefits such as relevance to career, awareness of social issue, expression of enjoyment and feelings of community. Future studies in this project will include more structured reflections throughout the semester which focus on critical thinking and participants' relating the service project to their own personal value system.

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