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Learning through Service: The Contribution of Service-Learning to First Year Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract
This project explores how service learning (SL) helps pre-service teachers change their perceptions toward working with diverse populations and how they link SL to social justice. Twenty-eight first year early childhood education (ECE) pre-service teachers enrolled in a multi-cultural education course were asked to complete a SL project in which they worked with day care centers that serve low income families. After the projects were completed, students responded to guiding questions which focused on the impact of the experience. Results indicated that pre-service teachers valued the SL experience and gained new insight regarding teaching students of diverse backgrounds. However, some students focused more on surface level learning and had some difficulty connecting SL with social justice.

Purpose
SL experiences provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to better understand the real-world experiences of individuals of all walks of life in their immediate communities, especially in the culturally diverse and low-income community. Research on service learning has shown positive impact on student learning outcomes (e.g. Baldwin et al., 2007; Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Mainly, SL has an impact on pre-service teachers’ dispositions toward teaching in diverse settings, cultural awareness, social issues, and social responsibility. However, it is unclear what factors are related to more effective programs (Celio et al., 2011). This study attempted to determine student outcomes of SL experiences in general and specific to social justice.

Methodology
Data for this study were collected from 28 ECE pre-service teacher participants. They were all White and of middle class except two were Black. Majority of them were females but the group included two males. Participants were enrolled in a multi-cultural education course and were asked to complete a SL project in which they worked with day care centers that serve low income families. After the projects were completed, students were asked to write a guided reflection paper. The guiding questions focused on the impact of the experience on pre-service teachers, both in general and as future educators. Questions regarding SL and social justice were also included.

Findings and Discussion
Students’ guided reflection papers were analyzed based on each of the research questions. In regards to the first research question, the impact of SL on pre-service teachers, 37% of the responses were project specific, indicating students learned specific skills related to the project and 44% of responses involved social attitudes, such as an understanding of lower income schools and those less fortunate. The second research question asked about the effects of SL on pre-service students as future educators. Students’ responses varied greatly on this topic, however, over 50% of the students included some mention of specific professional skills that were learned, such as learning how to organize classroom space or time management skills. The third research question focused on students’ attitudes toward teaching diverse student populations. Responses regarding this topic also varied significantly. One encouraging finding in this area was that 32% of respondents mentioned a stronger desire to work in a low income or more diverse setting. The last research question focused on the ability to link service learning and social justice. Students had difficulty in this area, with 24% of the students not responding to the guiding questions focused on this topic, more so than any other area discussed. However, 33% of the students discussed how their project met their particular school’s needs and in doing so, supported social justice. Overall, it was clear that students learned from the SL experience, however, the learning regarding diverse populations and social justice was not as deep as was hoped for. Participants did not reach the level of liberating education as proposed by Chambers.

Research Questions
1. How does SL impact pre-service students?
2. How does SL help pre-service students as future educators?
3. How does SL change students’ attitudes towards teaching diverse student populations?
4. How do students link SL to Social Justice?

Conceptual Framework
The goal of SL is to enable students to become engaged citizens and critical thinkers. The outcomes can be educational, vocational, and social according to Chambers (2009). Chambers argues that students who are engaged in service learning are more likely to choose service orientated professions. He also states that SL helps reduce racial stereotyping and cultural understanding. Chambers proposes four underlying theories of SL: experiential education, social learning, student development, and liberatory education. Not all SL leads to social justice. Depending upon the type of SL experience, individuals may experience different outcomes of SL. The goal of the SL this study was to help students experience a liberatory education as the projects were embedded in a multicultural education course. It was hoped that the learning experience would be meaningful and critical and would have a great impact on the community as well as on pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward teaching.

Implications
To better prepare first year pre-service teachers, effective guidance regarding SL projects is needed. They need to learn and/or be provided with more information regarding the community. In addition, pre-service teachers need more foundational information to develop a better understanding of diversity and social justice. Ongoing discussion is needed throughout the course of the SL project and the specific school’s needs must be addressed. Nevertheless, perhaps the goal of SL for first year pre-service teachers should center on experiential education, social learning, and student development rather than liberatory education. Getting pre-service teachers out into the community and having them work with people who are different from them may be more helpful and more of a realistic goal.

References