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Service-Learning to Develop Responsiveness Among Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits, challenges, and limitations of a service-learning project designed to promote responsiveness among PK-12 preservice teachers (N=41). The service-learning included working with children (5- to 12-year-olds) at before- and after-school programs, interviewing site staff, and developing lesson plans for the children at each site. Data sources for this study included students' reflections and group lesson plans. Qualitative analysis showed that what constituted benefits for some students, such as connecting with children and learning classroom management, were reported as challenges for others. Additionally, students' ideas about responsiveness in education were focused on children's needs, interests, and school resources, yet rarely included children's strengths. Findings show the varied experiences undergraduate students have when engaged in service-learning and suggest that future teachers would benefit from greater scaffolding to foster the development of strengths-based perspectives. Implications for teacher preparation programs and service-learning in higher education are discussed.

Keywords

service-learning, strengths-based perspectives, preservice teachers, higher education

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Cover Page Footnote

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Service-Learning to Develop Responsiveness Among Preservice Teachers

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The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits, challenges, and limitations of a service-learning project designed to promote responsiveness among PK-12 preservice teachers (N=41). The service-learning included working with children (5- to 12-year-olds) at before- and after-school programs, interviewing site staff, and developing lesson plans for the children at each site. Data sources for this study included students' reflections and group lesson plans. Qualitative analysis showed that what constituted benefits for some students, such as connecting with children and learning classroom management, were reported as challenges for others. Additionally, students' ideas about responsiveness in education were focused on children's needs, interests, and school resources, yet rarely included children's strengths. Findings show the varied experiences undergraduate students have when engaged in service-learning and suggest that future teachers would benefit from greater scaffolding to foster the development of strengths-based perspectives. Implications for teacher preparation programs and service-learning in higher education are discussed.

The need for culturally responsive teachers who bring strengths-based perspectives to schools and classrooms is a persistent issue in education. Racial and ethnic diversity among K-12 students in the United States has increased considerably over the last 20 years, and students of color make up over half of the school-age population (de Brey et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018). The number of immigrant youth in the U.S. also continues to grow, and 33% of U.S. children live in households where a language other than English is spoken (Child Trends, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2015). The United States is also characterized by dramatic economic inequality, as the highest 20% claim more than half of the income earnings, and 41% of youth live in low-income households (Koball & Jiang, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2020). Unfortunately, research shows that teachers, both preservice (i.e., undergraduate education majors training to become teachers) and in-service (i.e., professional educators teaching in the field), report feeling unprepared to work with racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse students (Castro, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015; Gay, 2002; Public Agenda and National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2008). Further, many teachers hold negative beliefs about the academic ability, motivation, and behavior of students who are ethnically diverse or from low-income backgrounds (Bleicher, 2011; Gilbert & Yerrick, 2001; Keefer, 2017; Terrill & Mark, 2000). Therefore, teacher preparation programs must think critically about the experiences they use to prepare preservice teachers to be responsive to the children in their future classrooms.

Clinical experiences in real classroom settings are ubiquitous in teacher preparation programs. However, scholars argue that classroom experiences may be insufficient to prepare future teachers to be culturally responsive, particularly if their placement lacks student diversity (Ellerbrock et al., 2016). Further, preservice teachers may not observe culturally responsive teaching practices or a strengths-based approach from their cooperating teacher, and they may lack the opportunity to engage in reflection about their classroom experience (Ellerbrock et al., 2016). To address these issues, more recently, teacher preparation has included community-based service-learning experiences so that preservice teachers have the opportunity to interact with others who have backgrounds different from themselves, observe cultural responsiveness, and reflect on these experiences (Hild-

enbrand & Schultz, 2015). Research in a variety of service-oriented fields (e.g., education, social work, health sciences) has documented positive effects of service-learning in higher education including increased professional experience, awareness of inequality, and a greater sense of social responsibility and social justice after participating in service (Curl & Benner, 2017; Lund & Lee, 2015; McMenamin et al., 2014; Stewart & Wubbena, 2014; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). Further, in a review of 55 studies examining service-learning in higher education, Holsapple (2012) found that students commonly reported an increased awareness of their own biases and a reduction in stereotypes about others after completing the service. Thus, one potential strategy to develop a more socially just teaching force is to incorporate service-learning experiences into preservice teacher education courses (Coffey, 2010; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015). The purpose of the current study was to examine the outcomes of a service-learning experience designed to foster responsiveness among PK-12 preservice teachers enrolled in a *Child Development in Education* course. The service-learning included working with children at before- and after-school programs, interviewing site staff, writing lesson plans for each site (tailored for the children enrolled), and engaging in critical reflection about the service experience. In addition to examining benefits and challenges of the service experience, the current study explored students' ideas about responsiveness in education and their use of strengths-based perspectives. Findings have implications for the use of service-learning in teacher preparation programs as well as other service-oriented fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW Culturally Responsive Teaching & Strengths-Based Perspectives

Culturally responsive teaching is defined as "using the characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). When teachers are culturally responsive, students experience greater school engagement, academic achievement, and self-efficacy (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2010). A key aspect of cultural responsiveness is bringing strengths-based perspectives to the classroom (Gay, 2010, p. 31). "A foundational assumption of strengths-based education is that potential exists in all students"

and this approach focuses on “the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as human strengths” (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 1-2). Gay (2013) emphasizes the importance of recognizing “funds of knowledge” within marginalized communities and maintains that “culturally responsive teaching requires replacing pathological and deficient perceptions of students and communities of color with more positive ones” (p. 54). Research shows numerous benefits of focusing on students’ strengths in the classroom including greater engagement and enjoyment in school, higher academic achievement and motivation, and improved emotional well-being, and these results have been documented from preschool-aged children to college-aged youth (Galloway et al., 2020; Proyer, et al., 2013; Seligman et al., 2009; Shoshani & Slone, 2017; 2013; Stebleton et al., 2012). Thus, understanding the types of educational experiences that foster responsiveness and strengths-based perspectives for preservice teachers is a critical pursuit.

Service-Learning for Preservice Teachers

One potential strategy to establish a more responsive and socially just teaching force is to incorporate community-based service-learning experiences with diverse groups of children into teacher education courses (Coffey, 2010; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015; Warren, 2018). According to Jacoby (1996), “service learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (p. 5). Further, service-learning includes connections to curriculum, learning goals, and an opportunity for reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Research has shown that service-learning experiences benefit preservice teachers in a multitude of ways (Coffey, 2010; Feinstein, 2005). For example, Tinkler and Tinkler (2013) implemented a semester-long tutoring experience associated with a social foundations of education course and found that preservice teachers reported greater connections to diverse members of society, recognition of social injustice, and a desire to promote social change after the civic engagement experience. Similarly, Lund and Lee (2015) found that after engaging in community service with immigrant children and families, preservice teachers reported greater awareness and appreciation of students’ strengths and an “understanding of the teacher’s pivotal role in creating more equitable learning experiences for all children” (p. 24). Feinstein (2005) examined preservice teachers’ perceptions of a service-learning experience (i.e., volunteering at after-school programs) while enrolled in an adolescent development course. Preservice teacher-reported benefits included an illustration of course content and a greater awareness of contextual factors impacting students (Feinstein, 2005).

Researchers have also explored the use of service-learning experiences with teaching methods courses. For example, Paquette and Laverick (2017) examined a service-learning experience associated with a literacy methods course and found that after engaging in literacy tutoring with elementary and middle school students, preservice teachers reported improved communication skills, greater confidence in the field, and a clearer understanding of the importance of their role as future educators. Researchers also examined a service-learning experience associated with a science methods course and found that preservice teachers reported gains in experience from interacting with children and greater enthusiasm for science teaching (Wilson et al.,

2015). Meaney et al. (2008) examined preservice teachers enrolled in a physical education (P.E.) course and found that a service-learning experience (i.e., teaching P.E. to children from low-income backgrounds) led to less biased views of diverse children.

Despite these promising findings, other studies have shown either limited or negative effects of service-learning. For example, Dunn-Kenney (2010) examined early childhood teacher candidates who worked with families in an impoverished community and found more mixed results. The service experience led some preservice teachers to confront and challenge their own cultural and social biases about children and families living in poverty, yet reinforced biases for others, as some preservice teachers focused on perceived deficits of children and families (Dunn-Kenney, 2010). Boyle-Baise (1998) also found mixed results of a service-learning experience associated with a multicultural education course; while preservice teachers gained exposure to difference, some continued to show deficit thinking in their perceptions of diverse community members. Similarly, Lin and Bates (2015) examined preservice teachers, enrolled in a multicultural education course, who worked with local child care centers and found that preservice teachers developed an appreciation for children from diverse backgrounds yet struggled to relate their service experience to broader social issues. Given these mixed results, research is needed to understand community-based service-learning experiences better, particularly in efforts to design service experiences that support the development of responsive teachers who will bring a strengths-based approach to the classroom.

The Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to build on the extant literature examining service-learning in teacher education courses to better understand the strengths and limitations of these experiences. Specifically, the current study examined a community-based service-learning experience embedded in a *Child Development in Education* course for PK-12 preservice teachers. The students worked with children (5- to 12-year-olds) at before- and after-school programs, interviewed site supervisors or staff, developed lesson plans for each site, and reflected on these experiences. In addition to exploring the perceived benefits and challenges of service-learning, the current study also conducted a more nuanced examination of PK-12 preservice teachers’ notions of responsiveness after the service experience and the degree to which they incorporated strengths-based perspectives into their lesson planning and perceptions of children.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework for the current study is informed by service-learning pedagogies and principles of community engagement. The Carnegie Foundation (2020) defines community engagement in higher education as, “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (p. 1). The Carnegie Foundation (2020) emphasizes the “reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals” in these collaborative partnerships (p. 1). The service-learning experience in the current study was guided by these tenets, as it was mutually agreed upon and determined in collaboration with members of the community organization. The Carnegie Foundation (2020) maintains that community engagement also serves to “enhance curriculum, teaching, and

learning” (p. 1). Service-learning was added to the child development course to facilitate responsiveness among PK-12 preservice teachers and to enrich their learning. Finally, the relationships built with community partners should be “asset-based (where the strengths, skills, and knowledges of those in the community are validated and legitimized)” (Carnegie Foundation, 2020, p. 1). The service-learning was designed with this goal in mind, as students gathered information from site staff to inform lesson plans and were prompted to consider children’s strengths in their lesson plans and reflection.

At a broader level, this study is informed by Dewey’s (1987; 1938) notions of experiential learning. Dewey (1897; 1938) maintained that learning is inherently a social process and believed that knowledge is the result of real-life experiences, rather than a discrete set of facts or skills. Community-based service-learning provides an opportunity for preservice teachers to learn responsiveness from an authentic experience. However, Dewey (1938) cautioned that learning “depends on the quality of the experience which is had” (p. 27). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to explore the quality of the service experience by examining PK-12 preservice teachers’ perceptions of benefits and challenges, their ideas about responsiveness, and their use of strengths-based perspectives.

METHODS

Participants & Context of the Study

Participants included a convenience sample of PK-12 preservice teachers ($N=41$; 88% female) from a large public university in the Midwestern United States. Participants were traditional-age undergraduate students enrolled in a *Child Development in Education* course required for all education majors. The community service experience was required for all students enrolled. Data were collected in fall 2018 ($n=20$) and fall 2019 ($n=21$).

The *Child Development in Education* course is designed to help PK-12 preservice teachers build an understanding of child and adolescent development from birth to adolescence. The course addresses physical development (e.g., brain development, growth, motor skills), cognitive development (e.g., Piaget, Vygotsky, Information Processing), emotional development (e.g., attachment, temperament, emotions, motivation), and social development (e.g., prosocial behavior, peers, friendships, play). The course also addresses contextual factors such as family structures and processes, the media, and strengths-based approaches in education. The course is a prerequisite for all methods and clinical courses, and it is typically taken during students’ sophomore year, so students had not yet taken content-based methods courses.

The Service-Learning Experience

To increase civic engagement across campus, the University’s center for professional development offers a Civic Engagement Course Redesign each summer. The program includes workshops addressing issues related to service-learning and meetings with potential community partners. The service-learning examined in the current study was designed through this program.

The service-learning project was conducted with a national community-based organization, and members of the community organization were consulted in the design. The nature of the service and logistics were mutually determined and agreed upon, based on the needs of the organization. The resulting service-learning experience included multiple components. All

students enrolled in the course were required to volunteer for 10 hours at the organization’s before- and after-school programs during the semester. The service experience lasted 10 weeks (i.e., one hour each week or two hours every other week), and eight different placement locations were used. In addition to the service hours, students worked with classmates at their placement to interview the site supervisor or staff. The interview included questions about their goals for the children enrolled, ages and exceptionalities of children in the program, children’s strengths and interests, program strengths and challenges, and available materials. Using this information, as well as informal observations, the students then worked with classmates at their site to develop two activity plans for the children enrolled in the program. In addition to standard elements (e.g., objectives, materials, introduction, etc.), the activity plan included a description of how the activities were responsive to children in the program. Specifically, students described how they incorporated or considered children’s strengths, interests, and/or needs in the activities. Students also wrote an individual reflection paper at the end of the semester describing benefits and challenges of the volunteer experience, new learning that occurred, and ideas about being responsive to local schools, classrooms, and students.

Procedures

The University Institutional Review Board reviewed study procedures and determined that the study qualified as exempt (IRB-2018-412). After the IRB exempt determination, all students enrolled in the course were invited to participate in the study. To reduce coercion, a faculty colleague visited the class to obtain consent. Students were asked if they gave permission for their reflections and activity plans to be analyzed for the study. Consent forms were stored in a sealed envelope until course grades were finalized. All but three students enrolled consented to having their documents examined. Students’ individual reflections and group activity plans served as the data sources for this study.

Data Analysis

Coding of preservice teachers’ reflections was an iterative and inductive process using methods described by Merriam (2009) and Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997) to identify meaning and patterns in students’ responses. A consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach was used which included dividing reflections into topic areas or themes, analyzing data across cases, and using consensus coding (Hill et al., 1997). Research team members independently read students’ reflections and identified three conceptual themes: 1) benefits of the service-learning; 2) challenges of the service-learning; and 3) ideas about responsiveness. Next, research team members examined segments within each conceptual theme and developed more specific coding schemes. Two research team members then coded all reflection segments; disagreement was discussed and resolved by consensus.

Group activity plans served as an additional data source to explore students’ notions of responsiveness. Patton (1987) explains that examining multiple sources of data allows for triangulation, which serves to strengthen research design and analysis. The activity plans included an explanation of how the group considered children’s strengths, interests and/or needs when designing the activity. Each activity plan was examined by two team members, and descriptions of responsiveness were coded

as noting children's strengths, interests, and/or needs. Disagreement was resolved by consensus.

RESULTS

Benefits

The first conceptual theme to emerge from students' reflections was perceived benefits of service-learning. Coding of the reflections yielded five benefits: 1) experience with children, 2) classroom management, 3) relationships with children, 4) general fulfillment, and 5) illustration of course content. All student names are pseudonyms.

Experience with Children

Gaining experience with children was the most robust category mentioned ($n=39$). Almost all students (95%) reported that interacting with children and learning about children's interests, personalities, and behavior outside of the classroom was a benefit of the service-learning experience. Sometimes gains in experience were generally described (e.g., "I gained a lot of experience just working with the students hands-on." *Shelly*), though some students specifically mentioned getting to interact with ethnically and economically diverse children. For example, Rebecca noted, "My hometown is not diverse, so I enjoyed getting to know students of different backgrounds." Students also reported gaining experience with children who have special needs, as Neil commented, "I learned just how much of a spectrum Autism can be...no one kid was the same." Other students connected their work with children to their future career and development as educators. For example, Kat noted, "This is the closest I have gotten to being a teacher so far," while Charlie reflected, "This experience gave me great insight into what teaching was going to be like."

Classroom Management

Learning about classroom management emerged as another benefit ($n=29$, 71%). Some students described management in terms of class organization, highlighting "the importance of having activities that are engaging for students" (*Haley*) and learning "how to get children to pay attention to activities" (*Beth*). Jessica discussed the need for consistency and learning about the importance of establishing "rules in the beginning" and allowing students to "help establish those rules because it keeps them accountable." Others focused more on management related to children's behavior, as students reported learning and practicing strategies to "handle conflicts" and "behavioral issues" when needed. For example, Isabelle reflected, "Being patient and talking to a child is more effective than yelling or punishing them...Letting a student calm down and then later speaking to them about the situation is very important."

Relationships with Children

Thirteen students (32%) described building relationships with children, as they formed "connections" and "friendships" with the children enrolled in the programs. Paula reflected, "The biggest benefit to me was the bond I made with some of the students" while Meg wrote, "I loved meeting the kids and getting to know them." Similarly, Lisa shared, "Every time I walked in, I was greeted with huge smiles and lots of hugs. I didn't expect to develop the connection I did with the kids."

General Fulfillment

Seven students (17%) expressed general fulfillment resulting from working with children. They described the experience as "reward-

ing," "fulfilling," "enriching," and felt they were "making an impact" on the children's lives. For example, Nicole wrote, "When I volunteer, I feel like I am doing good in the world, so it helps me feel like I have a purpose."

Illustration of Course Content

Finally, six students (15%) described how working with children helped to illustrate concepts from the child development course because they could apply what they learned to authentic educational settings. For example, Kayla reported, "It was a great experience to have alongside this class because we really got to put information we were learning to real life." Similarly, Abigail noted, "It was nice to know explanations for certain behaviors as well as have resources on how to properly address topics."

Challenges

The second theme to emerge from students' reflections was perceived challenges related to the service experience. Coding of the reflections yielded five categories: 1) children's behavior, 2) role uncertainty, 3) organizational issues, 4) relationships with children, and 5) relationships with staff.

Children's Behavior

Challenges related to children's behavior was the most frequently mentioned category ($n=28$, 68%), and this included difficulties with emotional regulation and social interactions. For example, Daphne commented, "There were younger students who had trouble regulating emotions" while Kat observed, "A lot of the kids were very, very spirited, [and] this led to some challenges." Students also wrote about difficulties "making sure all the kids got along," particularly when there was arguing among the children. However, some students also learned valuable lessons from these challenges, including how to support children's social and emotional development. For example, Neil wrote "I had to help students through their emotions...This was a challenging experience, yet, I learned a lot from these opportunities." Beth shared a story about a child throwing Legos across a table and commented, "Although this situation was challenging, this helped open my eyes to the fact that this will occur in a classroom and it is something I will have to work through as a future educator."

Role Uncertainty

Thirteen students (32%) discussed uncertainty regarding their own authority with children and a lack of clarity regarding their role in the program. Students worried at times that they were "overstepping" since they were "just volunteers" (*Kayla*). As Owen noted, "As a volunteer you are limited in what you can do." Others expressed difficulty determining how much or how often to "engage with children's play and social interaction" (*Abigail*) and generally struggled to know their place within the program.

Organizational Issues

Nine students (22%) described challenges related to organizational issues of the before- and after-school programs. One issue was the large number of children enrolled and having "few supervisors and volunteers" to interact with the children. Michelle commented, "The most challenging part was the sheer number of kids. It was often very chaotic in the room and did not seem as though there were enough teachers." Students also described insufficient classroom supplies ("They also have limited materials and are not given much of a budget." *Haley*) and a general lack of

structure in the program (“There was just no structure or foundation to anything in this classroom.” *Jessica*).

Relationships with Children

Eight students (20%) described difficulty building relationships with children in the program. Some felt that forming connections was difficult because of limited time at the site. For example, Nicole commented that the children would “forget me or be confused about my appearance,” while Olivia noted that the children “saw me very rarely.” Other students connected challenges building relationships to difficulty with management and guidance, as Georgia wrote, “It was difficult to build the bond I needed for them to respect me.”

Relationships with Staff

Eight students (20%) described difficulty interacting with site staff. Sometimes the difficulty centered on general interactions and building positive relationships, as Ella noted, “The staff were not so approachable at times, so I felt weird asking them questions about the program.” Some students disagreed with the ways that staff interacted with children or approached behavioral issues and felt uncomfortable in these situations. For example, Georgia commented, “It was difficult to see [the staff] treat the students in a way I didn’t agree with” while Felicity reflected, “The most challenging part of this experience was working with adults or other interns that did not necessarily act in ways that I would act in certain situations.”

Responsiveness: Individual Reflections

The third conceptual theme to emerge from students’ reflections was their perceptions of responsiveness. Students were asked to describe their ideas regarding being responsive to local schools, classrooms, and students as well as being responsive to children’s interests, strengths, and needs. Analysis and coding of the reflections yielded five categories: 1) children’s needs, 2) school resources, 3) children’s interests, 4) children’s backgrounds, and 5) children’s strengths.

Children’s Needs

The most common category mentioned when students described “responsiveness” in their reflections was being responsive to children’s needs ($n=24$, 59%). Some students discussed being alert to children’s basic physical needs which includes nutrition, sleep, and the need to run around and be active. Students also connected basic needs to classroom performance. For example, Rebecca noted, “If a child needs food, the school and teacher should provide that child with food to ensure success in the classroom.” Students also discussed meeting children’s emotional needs and the importance of good communication and supportive relationships. They highlighted the importance of “being empathetic” (*Kayla*), “building one-on-one relationships” (*Felicity*), “showing a student that you care” (*Jane*), and “listening to them” (*Daphne*). Other students discussed being responsive to children’s educational and learning needs and highlighted the importance of using varied instructional methods (“If you only teach one way, some of the students may not even be learning.” *Charlie*), and providing learning support and accommodations when needed.

School Resources

Students also discussed being responsive to school and classroom needs and highlighted the importance of material resources ($n=17$, 41%). Some discussed the importance of funding more gener-

ally and having sufficient resources, as Quentin noted, “Schools are always needing great teachers and supplies,” and Shelly commented, “I believe having resources for the students is very important.” Other students wrote specifically about the limited resources available in the before- and after school programs, and they found that the “lack of materials” made it difficult to “keep the kids engaged.” In other words, they connected their community service experience to a greater awareness of limited resources in schools and communities, and they saw the challenges associated with that. Faye reflected:

After volunteering, I realized the importance of meeting not only student needs, but classroom needs as well...I found it difficult to find activities to do with the kids because there was such a lack of materials available for us to use.

Children’s Interests

Twelve students (29%) mentioned being attentive to children’s interests. They described how the service experience helped them see how incorporating children’s interests increases motivation and engagement in class. For example, Owen wrote, “This experience has showed me that if you are aware of your students’ interests, you can use them to make the classroom experience significantly better.” Similarly, Lisa noted, “If we are able to make school fun and interesting for children, they are more likely to enjoy going to school and want to go each day. I do believe my community service has reinforced these beliefs.” Students also mentioned that incorporating children’s interests will “enhance their education and knowledge” (*Jane*) and “lead to a greater level of learning” (*Haley*).

Children’s Backgrounds

Ten students (24%) noted the importance of being responsive to children’s backgrounds, which included home lives, families, language, community, and daily experiences. For example, Meg wrote, “It’s incredibly important to engage with the community to understand what reality your students are living in.” Zooney noted that learning about children’s backgrounds and families would “help with planning activities and help the teacher and student relationship.” Similarly, Abigail discussed the importance of building a “bridge between school and parents,” while Jessica highlighted the importance of “reaching out to families and really incorporating them into your classroom.”

Children’s Strengths

Five students (12%) mentioned the importance of recognizing children’s strengths to help students “be successful,” “more engaged,” and “reach their goals” in the classroom. Students also discussed children’s strengths in relation to needs. For example, Betsy wrote, “I think it is important to look at what your students’ strengths are and be able to give them activities that will highlight their strengths, but also help build the different weaknesses that they have.” Similarly, Nicole noted, “Focusing on student strengths promotes confidence, [and] they can also recognize that there are weaknesses and areas for growth.”

Responsiveness: Group Activity Plans

Children’s Needs

Group activity plans showed a similar pattern in terms of describing responsiveness to children’s needs, interests, and strengths. Of the 18 groups, most mentioned children’s needs ($n=16$, 89%), meaning they described how their activity addressed a specific

issue needing improvement. Groups tended to focus on building children's social competence, particularly thorough activities that allowed children to practice working together. For example, *Group A* reported that "we wanted to create an activity where all students could participate and practice teamwork." Similarly, *Group G* noted that they thought "it would be beneficial for the students to take part in a team building activity to expand their social competence." Groups also described how they incorporated physical activity to accommodate children's need to be active. For example, *Group F* wrote, "This activity lets them get out all the energy they have been holding in all day sitting behind a desk."

Children's Interests

In addition to needs, most groups ($n=15$, 83%) mentioned consideration of children's interests in their activity plans. Some groups described children's interest and enjoyment of arts and crafts, as *Group Q* noted, "This activity would incorporate crafts which is something that the students enjoy since it allows them to be creative." Groups also described children's enjoyment of physical activity ("The students love going to the gym and being active." *Group F*), their love of games ("Their favorite game to play is always kickball." *Group C*), and their enjoyment of the outdoors ("They showed their interest in nature to us. They love being outside." *Group D*).

Children's Strengths

Six groups (33%) mentioned children's strengths when describing responsiveness in their activity plans. Groups tended to focus on the arts and creativity, as *Group H* mentioned children's "success with arts and crafts," and *Group A* wrote that their activity highlighted children's "talent through free art time." Additionally, one group mentioned that children "are social and strong in being friendly," (*Group L*) while another group noted age-related strengths, as older students could help younger students with a strategy game.

DISCUSSION

Benefits and Challenges

The PK-12 preservice teachers in the current study reported that gaining professional experience and building relationships with children were benefits of the community service experience, and these findings are consistent with previous research (Coffey, 2010; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015; Paquette & Laverick, 2017; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). Similarly, Paquette and Laverick (2017) found that after engaging in literacy tutoring with children, preservice teachers reported greater confidence in themselves as future educators. Providing service-learning experiences that include opportunities to interact with children and adolescents may be especially important for preservice teachers, as these experiences provide "a better understanding of how to interact and communicate with [their future students] in multiple contexts" (Coffey, 2010, p. 341). The value of gaining real world experience through service-learning and volunteering has also been observed in undergraduate preparation programs for other service-oriented professions including social work (Curl & Benner, 2017) and the healthcare field (McMenamin et al., 2014). Additionally, in the current study, undergraduate students reported that working with children in authentic settings helped to illustrate course content and enabled them to connect theory to real classroom practice, which also confirms previous findings (Coffey,

2010; Feinstein, 2005; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015). For example, Feinstein (2005) examined service-learning in an adolescent development course and found that working with adolescents at an after-school program made the course content more relevant for preservice teachers. These findings also reflect the Carnegie Foundation's (2020) assertion that community engagement in higher education enriches students' learning experiences.

However, what constituted benefits for some undergraduate students were reported as challenges for others. Specifically, building relationships with children and learning classroom management strategies were especially difficult for some students. These differing perceptions indicate that some students needed more support in this process and that classmates could serve as a "more knowledgeable other" for their peers (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, if some students are having difficulty building relationships with children, others who show strength in this area could share their strategies for developing these connections. If students are unsure about classroom management and guidance, they could work with classmates and the instructor to discuss issues they've observed and generate ideas for effective responses. Thus, service experiences in higher education would be enhanced by adding regular class discussions to address solutions to issues as they arise during the semester.

Additional challenges included role uncertainty, organizational issues, and difficulty connecting with site staff. These findings are consistent with prior research, as Lin and Bates (2010) reported that some preservice teachers engaged in service-learning were unsure about their role and responsibilities in the program, while Boyle-Baise (1998) found that some preservice teachers felt their community service site was "uninviting." Most of these issues could be addressed with clearer communication, but this should be scaffolded by the university instructor. Students did participate in an orientation for the service experience, led by the community organization, during one class session. Yet given possible differences in expectations and norms across sites, a conversation with site staff should have been held once placements were determined. Students were encouraged, but not required, to ask site staff how they could be helpful to the program. Adding an interview or conversation that is required at the beginning of the placement could provide clarity regarding one's role in the program, build a connection with site staff, and would better reflect notions of "reciprocity, mutual respect, [and] shared authority" (Carnegie Foundation, 2020, p. 1). Addressing organizational issues (e.g., large numbers of children, etc.) is more difficult, though the students could have been better prepared to witness these challenges. More discussion around these topics could also help students connect program issues to broader notions of social justice and equity while also encouraging them to be respectful of the organization and to recognize the strengths of the program and the children enrolled.

Conceptions of Responsiveness

Findings also showed that students' notions of responsiveness addressed some aspects of culturally responsive teaching, but not others. Specifically, highlighting children's interests and their backgrounds reflects an effort towards cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2002; 2010), as students considered ways to connect with children and understand their life experiences. However, they also emphasized children's needs and limited school resources, possibly reflecting deficit thinking, or "defining students by their weak-

nesses rather than their strengths” (Gorski, 2008, p. 33). Further, few students mentioned children’s strengths, even when explicitly prompted to do so, and these findings were consistent across data sources. Boyle-Baise (1998) reported similar findings after a service-learning experience, as preservice teachers continued to show deficit thinking in their perceptions of diverse children and stereotypical thinking by blaming children’s families for economic hardship. Dunn-Kenney (2010) also found that service-learning strengthened biases among some preservice teachers and hypothesized that students’ understanding of the term “service” could be problematic if it emphasizes “charity” and “helping those less fortunate,” as this perspective may limit students’ ability to recognize child or family strengths (p. 46). Thus, service-learning in higher education should include an examination of students’ conceptions of “service” and opportunities to unpack this term in order to recognize and challenge preexisting biases. Further, the instructor should emphasize cooperation and reciprocity between students and those whom they serve, as greater intergroup cooperation is associated with less biased attitudes among undergraduate students after completion of service (Conner & Erickson, 2017).

Deficit thinking among future teachers is especially problematic because lower teacher expectations and negative views of students are associated with lower academic achievement, lower self-concept, and lower levels of educational attainment among ethnically diverse and low-income youth (Benner & Mistry, 2007; Muller et al., 1999). Findings from the current study indicate that PK-12 preservice teachers require more direct scaffolding in order to add children’s strengths to their conceptions of responsiveness, and more opportunities to become cognizant of their own biases and stereotypes that may shape their perception of children. This type of self-assessment should be repeated throughout the service-learning experience to allow for continued critical reflection. Further, readings addressing related issues (e.g., funds of knowledge) should be revisited throughout the semester. Although strengths-based perspectives were addressed in a class session, findings indicate that more guidance and modeling by the university instructor is needed for students to connect these concepts to the children in program.

LIMITATIONS

Study findings should be considered in light of limitations. While multiple sources of data were examined, all data were gathered from students and therefore reflect only their perceptions and experiences. Future studies should collect data from multiple stakeholders including the community organization, site staff, and children enrolled in the program for a more comprehensive understanding. Another limitation of this study was the focus on students at one university, as findings could be unique to this context. While there are important lessons to be learned from this investigation that can be applied to teacher preparation programs and other service-oriented fields, additional studies should examine if similar processes occur in other contexts as well.

CONCLUSION

As community-based service-learning becomes common in teacher preparation, understanding the benefits and challenges of these experiences is important. Findings from the current study highlighted the varied experiences undergraduate students have

when engaged in service-learning. While some students gained professional experience, learned management strategies, and built relationships with children, others reported considerable challenges in these same areas. Limitations of the service-learning experience were also revealed, as students had difficulty incorporating strengths-based perspectives into their lesson planning and perceptions of children. Researchers should continue to critically examine the benefits and limitations of service-learning in higher education, and future research should explore students’ preexisting beliefs and components of the service-learning experience to better understand why biases are challenged for some yet reinforced for others. Given the increasing diversity among K-12 students in the U.S. (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015), it is imperative that teacher preparation programs foster the development of responsive teachers who bring strengths-based perspectives into their future classrooms. While service-learning offers one strategy to help develop these dispositions (Coffey, 2010; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015), findings indicate that preservice teachers require more direct scaffolding as well as peer- and instructor-support to fully benefit from the service-learning experience and to add children’s strengths to their conceptions of responsiveness in education.

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