Community Service: Including a social justice component in a teacher education program

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Quality in Teacher Education:
Considering Different Perspectives and Agendas

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Themes addressed: The curriculum of teacher education; social justice

Abstract
Based on Dewey's notion of experiential learning (1938), community service has long been recognised as a vehicle that builds awareness and appreciation of diversity, addresses social justice issues, provides a context for developing partnerships with different community groups, and contributes to personal feelings of worth and fulfilment. As such, it is seen as an increasingly effective form of pedagogy within teacher education programs. This paper provides a brief overview of the literature relating to community service programs in a range of contexts, with a particular focus on their implementation in pre-service teacher education programs. The paper then describes the process undertaken to include a community service component in a newly developed four-year teacher education program at the University of Wollongong with the aim of increasing community awareness, social responsibility and social cohesion. The key components of the program are described and remaining challenges discussed.

Keywords: Initial Teacher Education Programs, Community Service, Service Learning; Social Responsibility

Note: In the North American literature, community service that is incorporated into education programs at any level is referred to as "service learning", and the two terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

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Introduction
The relationship between community service and emotional health and well-being, feelings of connectedness, and long-term health and happiness has now been firmly established (Panksepp, 1998; Seligman, 2001). Studies over the past decade also support a connection between community service and high levels of performance and effectiveness across a range of occupations (Goleman, 1998; Cherniss, 2002).

Researchers and writers such as Goleman and Seligman strongly believe that instruction in social and emotional learning should be as much of an integral part of the school curriculum as traditional academic instruction. Service learning, a community service component built into an educational program, has now been

incorporated into many school and college programs, and is building an enviable reputation as a pedagogical tool that has positive effects across a range of domains.

The impact of community service programs in schools and colleges

Positive outcomes have been consistently associated with community service programs in a range of educational settings. Before exploring the specific results of research in teacher preparation programs, we will examine the effects of such service learning in other educational settings under the three broad headings of (a) academic gains, (b) social and emotional gains, and (c) increases in citizenship and community responsibility.

Academic gains
Conrad & Hedin (1991) found that service-learning components in secondary school programs resulted in academic gains, a finding supported by the research of Cohen and Kinsay (1994), and Billig (2000). A significant additional finding of Billig's was that outcomes were stronger if they were particularly targeted by the program design. Similar academic outcomes were found in the very large studies conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999) with 2000 students, and Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee (2000, both cited in Malone et al, 2001) with 22,000 students. The consistent finding of gains in the important higher order thinking skills makes the academic outcomes of service learning particularly powerful.

Social and emotional gains
Personal gains in increased self-esteem, self-efficacy and lower levels of isolation and alienation were reported by Conrad and Hedin (1991) and Eyler & Giles (1999). The latter researchers also found that interpersonal skills were positively influenced, that stereotyping decreased and racial tolerance increased. Billig (2000) in her summary of a decade of research on service learning in K-12 students also found significant positive outcomes in personal and social development.

Citizenship and community responsibility
The development of empathy, appreciation of diversity, increased racial tolerance, and violence prevention have been associated with community service programs in secondary schools (cited in Lefkowitz & Tamarkin, 1997). Sax & Astin (1997) found increases in commitment to school. Astin et al (2000, cited in Malone et al, 2001), in their very extensive study, reported increased racial understanding, leadership abilities and plans to participate in service activities after graduation. Billig (2000) also found that students who completed a community service component had significantly more sophisticated career aspirations than those who had not.

While it was difficult to locate any reports of community service programs that did not result in positive outcomes, Eyler & Giles concluded that the quality of the service learning experience had a significant impact on the outcomes, and that not all programs were uniformly successful in achieving a wide range of positive results.

Anderson (1999) identified the following principles of effective service learning programs:
1. aligning outcomes for service learning with curricular goals;
2. ensuring service learning programs are theoretically grounded in disciplinary knowledge;
3. including all stakeholders in the design, implementation and assessment of the program;
4. ensuring that all stakeholders should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities;
5. facilitating frequent and varied opportunities for service providers to engage in reflection; and,
6. for preservice teacher education candidates, ernsuring that the pedagogy of service learning is explicitly taught to increase the likelihood that it will be used in the practice of these future educators.

With these elements in mind, we will examine the outcomes of service learning components in teacher preparation programs.

The impact of community service programs in teacher preparation programs

There is now a convincing body of research that prospective teachers who engage in service learning as part of their teacher preparation programs develop skills that will help them both as teachers and as people. We will now provide a fuller discussion of some of the specific outcomes of research into service learning in teacher preparation courses to provide a context for the introduction of such a component in the new four-year degree at the University of Wollongong.

Application of theoretical knowledge.
While practice teaching provides opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge, community service programs provide additional contexts in which this can happen. This has been supported by research conducted by Alexandrowicz (2001) who stated:
> "…the integration of community service learning and the development and application of the case study methods are proving a powerful approach to assess the teacher candidates' understanding and ability to apply university course content "

If the community service is conducted in a school context, the additional benefits of additional exposure to and opportunities to reflect on classroom management practices and a wider range of instructional strategies are added (Strage, 2002).

Improved problem-solving and critical thinking
Consistent with results of service-learning programs in primary, secondary and other tertiary programs, increased academic outcomes for preservice teachers involved in similar programs were reported (Root & Batchelder, 1994, cited in Root, 1997; Vadenboncoeur ett al, 1996). This provides a strong argument against those

academics who use the argument that such programs waste valuable teaching time, and that they are inconsistent with the broad goals of a university education.

Improved communication skills
Interacting with a range of people, many from unfamiliar backgrounds, which is necessary in many service learning programs built new communication strategies. With improved communication comes greater understanding, greater trust, and an increased willingness to persevere through difficulties (Sullivan, 1991; Vickers, Harris & McCarthy, 2004).

Increased self-esteem
The reflective journal entries of students in Strage's (2002) study of a service-learning program in an extremely disadvantaged community revealed that students came to see themselves in a new light. They became more resourceful when faced with difficulties, and the resolution of problems enhanced the picture they had of themselves.

> "I have to say that it felt great to know that the children trusted me. I think the whole experience was a great way for me to realise that I could multitask when it came to the student's' needs,"

As Strage reported:

> "The students came to discover dimensions in themselves that they did not realise they had. They came to identify and appreciate talents and strengths they could draw on, as they pushed themselves to be the very best teacher they could be."

Further studies by Green, Dalton & Wilson (1994) and Wade (1995) supported the view that service-learning programs resulted in increased self-esteem.

Sensitivity to diversity and changes in attitudes, beliefs and perceptions.
A number of studies revealed that interacting with someone who is different in areas of culture, gender, primary language, socio-economic status, learning capabilities and religion resulted in positive attitude and behaviour change. Preservice teachers were more confident and willing to teach and interact with a very diverse population of students, and developed more appropriate language, attitudes and behaviour after service learning experiences (Aguilera, 1995; Flores & Yee-Sakamoto, 2003; Hedrick, McGee & Mittag, 2000; Siegal, 1994).

Research by Malone, Jones and Stallings (2001) found that pre-service teacher education students were "transformed " in significant ways by a tutoring experience that was integrated into their teacher education course. They found particular benefits when the tutors were matched with tutees who were significantly different in terms of ethnicity, culture and socio-economic status. Strage's (2002) research also found that students developed new understandings about their erroneous preconceptions and stereotypes. While initially believing that they were open-minded

and fair, many journal entries reflected their growing awareness that they often made unwarranted assumptions and responded in stereotypical ways.

Stronger commitment to teaching as a profession and an ethic of service, and increased willingness to take on leadership roles
This outcome was reported in a number of studies (Filippo et al, 1993, cited in Malone et al, 1997; Strage, 2002). Strage noted that the introduction of community service programs helped address a continuing problem facing her school district in Silicon Valley, California. More than half of the newly graduated teachers were leaving the profession within the first year. The reason most often reported for this was the difference between their expectations about life and work in the classroom and the realities they encountered. Schools lacked the materials the teachers expected, and they had no idea where to turn for alternatives; assumptions they made about parent support proved to be incorrect; students were often not able to work and learn to their potential because of problems inherent in their home lives. A community service program built into their teacher education course gave these teachers early field experiences and strategies for success in just these types of environments. It was built on a variation of the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child". It acknowledged that retaining successful teachers in their valley required contributions of many stakeholders - not just the formal teacher preparation programs but the businesses and resources that made up the broad community.

Anderson (1998) and Vadenboncoeur et al (1996) also reported increases in the students' perceptions of themselves as future leaders, and as having the ability to make an impact.

Strengthened caring and advocacy skills
Service learning programs in disadvantaged communities resulted in teacher education students coming to a new appreciation of the strength and resiliency of children, but also of their vulnerability. They began to see an increasing advocacy component in their future teaching role (Anderson & Guest, 1993; Root and Batchelder, 1994; Strage, 2002; Swick, 1999).

The evidence for the effectiveness of community service programs across so many different domains provided the motivation for the inclusion of such a component in the new teacher education program, which is now briefly discussed.

Community service in the teacher education program at the University of Wollongong

The development of a new four-year Bachelor of Primary Education degree provided the impetus and opportunity to include community service as a compulsory component of the new degree. A committee of three academics was the instigator of this component, and canvassed faculty opinion on the idea. All but two of over forty academics were broadly supportive of the idea of a community service module within the new degree. Thus with broad but not unanimous support, guidelines were developed regarding implementation.

Key aspects of the community service program

Significant number of hours
The aim was to make the number of hours significant in order for it not to be seen as a token requirement by students, and to increase the likelihood of real engagement in the process. A total of 70 hours was agreed on, and these hours were to be completed in the third year of the program. If students were already involved in voluntary community service, they could continue in that role, but needed to accrue the required hours within the third year of their program rather than being able to have past service signed off as having met the requirement.

The committee felt that the community service component would provide an opportunity for all students to interact with a more diverse section of the population, thus non-educational contexts were to be the focus of this component. Community-based organisation such as disability services, youth and children's services, community centres, aged care facilities, drug and homeless programs, and arts, environmental and animal welfare organisations are some of the available options. Other options still being canvassed are volunteer emergency services, rural fire services, and even overseas volunteer opportunities organised by external bodies, depending on the skills of the students.

Students operate in cohorts
There is evidence that students who move through their teacher preparation programs in cohorts build stronger networks, take a greater interest in each others' attainments, and maintain a sense of community that extends beyond the formal teacher preparation program itself (Holmes, 1995, cited in Strage, 2002). It is planned to place students wherever possible in small cohorts for their community placements so they can provide support, feedback and advice for each other.

Students reflect on their experiences
Reflective journals and web-based discussion sites will be used to encourage students to integrate formal academic knowledge with their community experiences, and to establish connections between campus-based learning and site-based learning. The development of portfolios in community service reflections has been used successfully and these will be trialled in the more structured format recommended by Wade and Yarborough (1996).

Administrative support
It was clear that coordinating and supporting the placements of approximately 180 students would require a level of administrative support similar to that required by practice teaching placements. An administrative allocation was made to support the development of a community service data base, and the creation of supporting materials such as log books and community service feedback forms.

Aspects still to be developed

Community service component to be embedded in the pedagogy of a subject
The literature makes it quite clear that a strong link to an academic subject is integral to the success of service learning programs. This is not yet a key component of the University of Wollongong program. While broad support of the idea was established, very few academics felt that their particular subject was an appropriate place in which it could be housed. This could reflect poorly disseminated information about the value of the program and the research evidence that most subjects can meet its outcomes through service learning. The committee has considerable work to do to convince subject coordinators to take on this commitment.

Collaboration with community stakeholders
Service learning experiences should provide authentic service to the community and valuable learning opportunities for the students. Because the community service component does not begin until 2009, little more than interest in the community service elements has been agreed upon by local agencies and businesses at this stage. Strage (2002) highlighted the importance of gaining the close cooperation of all stakeholders and involving community partners in all stages of planning, with clear articulation of goals and implementation plans. This stage of the planning process must be implemented in the year prior to the first enrolment of students (2008) to ensure that community partners are invested in the program.

Site visits by academic staff
The committee believed that site visits by academic staff would add greatly to the integrity of the service component, but workload concerns meant that this notion did not receive support. Realistically, current staffing levels are not sufficient to cover visits to 180 students. The appointment of a coordinator of the program - and it would have to be a full-time appointment - seems to be the only way this hurdle could be overcome. In addition, the departure (with no replacement) of the administrative staff member who had responsibility for the database management means that the entire program is now at risk.

Systemic support
Not only do individual faculty members have to be persuaded that community service is a way to meet academic outcomes across a range of subject areas, bureaucrats associated with educational institutions must engage with, and indeed be convinced by, the evidence in order for the required financial support to be forthcoming. If community service programs are not valued at the highest level, they will not be funded.

Conclusion

This paper has presented convincing evidence to support the inclusion of community service components in teacher education programs - indeed the evidence is almost overwhelming that positive outcomes are achievable across academic, social and emotional domains and can contribute to a potential teacher's development in a

myriad of ways. Such programs do, however, require careful planning, close collaboration with community partners, and above all, the support of those who allocate funding. The committee has much to do to gain the required support for the program to go ahead. A concerted effort will be made to inform academic staff of the benefits and versatility of service learning in an effort to engender some enthusiasm for a program that has much potential for positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

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