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Service Learning in Overseas Nations: U.S. Student Teachers Give, Grow, and Gain Outside the Classroom

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Service learning and overseas student teaching are receiving increased attention in education literature. For example, Kielsmeier (1993) touts service learning as an emerging *educational improvement strategy* (p. 5) in the U.S. school reform movement. Learning activities, by *combining classroom work with service/social action projects, . . . can help produce dramatic improvements in student attitudes, motivation, and achievement* (Nathan & Kielsmeier, 1991, p. 739).

Although much of the literature on service learning addresses its use in U.S. elementary and secondary classrooms, Checkoway (1996) describes the value of incorporating service learning into the curriculum at the tertiary level. Through the life experiences provided by community-based projects, *the university students acquired substantive knowledge and practical skills . . . not readily available in the classroom* (p. 604). Students gained this knowledge and skills often as a direct result of working in communities with individuals whose backgrounds differed greatly from theirs. DeJong and Groomes (1996) used relevant, community-based service learning to prepare preservice teachers for work in schools with children deemed at risk because of impoverished conditions at home.

Mahan and Stachowski (1994) describe overseas student teaching as a *viable means of developing a broader world perspective in preservice teachers* (p. 15). Such experiences immerse novice educators in cultures outside the United States through classroom teaching practice, host family living, interactions with diverse foreign citizens, and community involvement. Some (Baker, 1985; Korsgaard, 1996; Stachowski, 1994; West, 1985) believe overseas student teaching programs have the potential to meet a variety of goals and objectives: increasing the global perspectives of future educators and providing opportunities for personal and professional growth; preparing novice teachers for the cultural mix in their stateside classrooms (Krogh, 1990); and enabling them to promote restructuring of traditional schools and practices (Williams & Kelleher, 1987).

A marriage of service learning and overseas student teaching may yield new and exciting ideas in teacher education. Requiring U.S. student teachers abroad to perform community-based service learning projects encourages them to move beyond the safety net of the host school and host family and develop connections with individuals, organizations, and circumstances that may otherwise have received little consideration. Coupled with its hallmark of reflection, service learning can provide U.S. students firsthand knowledge of host community problems, conditions, and needs, and insight into attitudes, beliefs, and values of its citizens. Such knowledge and insight will enhance the overseas experience by broadening participants' perspectives on life in the host nation and developing a greater appreciation of the common concerns shared by people. Student teachers who give, grow, and gain outside of the classroom through service

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learning projects may make service learning a part of the curriculum in their own future classrooms.

In this article, we examine data from service learning projects planned and performed by U.S. student teachers in England, Wales, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. Their reflections and subsequent insights suggest that the service learning requirement added a significant dimension to their overseas experience that classroom teaching alone could not have achieved. Based on these data, we discuss implications for including service learning in student teaching. Before examining these data, we briefly describe the Overseas Student Teaching Project from which we derived these data.

Overseas Student Teaching

Indiana University–Bloomington has offered the Overseas Student Teaching Project for the past 20 years. An optional supplement to conventional student teaching, this popular project has prepared and placed over 750 student teachers for teaching and community involvement assignments in schools of England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. India has recently been added as a new placement option. Persons receiving certification in elementary and secondary education, as well as those receiving all-grades certification in music, special education, and physical education, have participated. Overseas placements are made in cooperation with the Foundation for International Education (see Korsgaard, 1996).

During the academic year prior to student teaching, project participants undergo extensive preparation (including seminars, readings, abstracts and papers, workshops) about the educational practices and cultural values, beliefs, and lifestyles of the placement sites for which they have applied. These requirements familiarize student teachers with the schools and cultures in which they will operate and serve. The intensive preparatory work discourages applicants whose primary motivation may be to play tourist.

During the student teaching semester, Overseas Project participants must first teach instate for a minimum of 10 weeks to receive state certification; they then spend at least 8 weeks in their host nations, where they live with families in the community and teach in national schools. While at their sites, project participants must engage fully in all teacher-related functions of the school; form friendships with community people and become involved in their activities; interview community people from diverse walks of life; and submit reflective reports identifying local attitudes, cultural values, world and host nation issues, and personal and professional insights. Mahan and Stachowski (1990) have described the important learnings and their sources that student teachers acquire in overseas placements.

The Service Learning Requirement

Sixty participants of the Overseas Student Teaching Project in recent semesters performed a total of 120 service learning activities in their host nation communities. The required assignment included the following:

- The student teachers should arrange and complete their service learning activities off the school grounds.
- They should plan and complete the activities with supporting host nation community citizens and/or agencies that are part of the placement community.
- They should engage in a minimum of 4 hours of work activity.
- They should adhere to the 3 Rs of *realistic*, *reflective*, and *reciprocal* in that their chosen activities should represent realistic tasks that serve the community. The activities should include a strong reflective component whereby the participants extend the learning derived from the experience; activities should be based on the premise of reciprocal exchange between equals.

Participants wrote reports documenting the activity from conception to conclusion. One section of the report described the nature of the activity; a second section included reflections on the process and outcomes of the activity. These descriptions and reflections are the focus of the following section.

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Table 1
Service Learning Activities

Assisting the Elderly
- Working in nursing homes
- Delivering meals to homebound individuals

Assisting Farmers
- Mending fences
- Feeding horses
- Milking cows
- Picking fruit
- Lambing
- Moving and cleaning machinery

Assisting With Church and Social Functions
- Helping with choir rehearsals
- Decorating churches for special services and events
- Running food booths at a swim carnival
- Coaching local Gaelic football team
- Working with first aid service at a rugby match

Helping Individuals in Their Homes
- Shopping for groceries
- Providing companionship
- Cleaning homes

Assisting With Education-Related Activities
- Teaching an adult computer class
- Tutoring
- Providing adult literacy instruction

Assisting the Physically and Mentally Handicapped
- Providing swimming lessons
- Volunteering at a disco
- Teaching public speaking skill classes

Working in Youth and Community Centers
- Serving as Brownie and Cub Scout Troop leaders
- Planning and supervising sporting events
- Leading craft activities

Working With Charities or in Facilities Serving the Less Fortunate
- Planning a fund-raising table quiz
- Raising funds for the Irish Cancer Society
- Going door-to-door for the Red Cross
- Renovating a homeless shelter
- Working at a women's shelter
- Serving meals at a soup kitchen

Assisting With Community Beautification Projects
- Cleaning up river banks, beaches, and parks
- Planting trees

Other
- Showing Tasmanian devils to tourists at a national wildlife park
- Working as a "security guard" at Governor's home in Tasmania during Annual Open House Day

The Service Learning Activities

The 60 Overseas Project participants engaged in an exciting variety of service learning activities, indicated in Table 1. Because many of the participants were unfamiliar with the service learning opportunities available in their host communities, they looked to their host schools and families for suggestions regarding possible service learning activities.

Student teachers' descriptions of the events surrounding the actual performance of their activities were candid and sensitive. For those who chose a nursing home as a site for their service learning project, volunteering involved more than making simple conversation with the residents. In the words of an elementary student teacher in New Zealand: My *duties were as follows: dressing residents, sponge bathing residents, washing dentures, making beds, serving the residents meals and tea, cutting fingernails, mopping floors, vacuuming, helping with laundry, and taking people to and fro. My day was quite busy.*

Although such duties may have been more than some student teachers bargained for, they recognized that genuine service learning went beyond being a nameless volunteer. A special education student teacher in Australia, who delivered meals to homebound elderly individuals, wrote: *At times during the day I felt like I was one of their granddaughters, as they shared their advice, complaints, and anything else they could think of.*

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Other special education student teachers worked with the physically and mentally handicapped. One student teacher in Ireland, who volunteered at a disco for individuals with disabilities and their families, explained, *I began by helping a 16-year-old girl named Amanda who was in a wheelchair and could move around by herself, but not very well. I helped her to dance by spinning her around and taking her arms and moving them back and forth. She was thoroughly enjoying herself and knew most of the songs.*

Motivated by the desire to understand Irish society's attitude toward handicapped individuals, another special education student teacher maintained, *There is no other way I could have learned so much about the services provided to people with special needs in Ireland. To me, knowledge about the treatment of all people is a crucial element of understanding a nation's culture.*

Many student teachers focused their service learning projects on the elderly and the handicapped; others explored the seemingly mundane tasks of daily living in their host communities. Farming projects, for example, offered some unexpected challenges. One elementary student teacher in Wales commented, *When lunch was over came the most exciting part of the day. We went back to the lambing shed and we had to gather the sheep from one of the fields to the lambing pen. What we were going to do was to feel each sheep to see which sheep were close to lamb and who still had a while. I actually had to feel underneath the sheep to do this. At first I felt really funny about doing this, but after a while I got the hang of it and was able to tell which sheep were ready to lamb.*

Looking silly was just all part of a day's work for a secondary student teacher in Ireland: *I spent a weekend working on the L — 's farm. I fed horses, collected and milked cows, etc. I smelled, looked, and felt like a cow by the end of this experience.*

Student teachers' descriptions of their farm chores reflect pride in learning how to complete tasks on their own. One elementary student teacher in Ireland remarked, *I helped Timmy with various farm chores. I spent most of the time on the farm learning how to milk a cow and how to move them from one field to another. I helped him move a pregnant cow into his trailer. I fed the cows. I moved the cows from one place to another all by myself.*

Many student teachers worked with the young people of their host nation by volunteering at youth and community centers, assisting with Brownie and Cub Scout meetings, and organizing sporting events. Others assisted with church and social functions, community beautification projects, and education-related activities. Projects involving charitable organizations and other facilities serving the less fortunate including soup kitchens and shelters provided student teachers valuable opportunities to interact with host nation citizens. Other student teachers worked one-on-one with individuals in their homes, providing companionship and assistance with the daily tasks of life.

Although these experiences undoubtedly affected the professional and personal lives of the student teachers, only upon reflection did student teachers themselves determine what they gained through their participation in service learning projects.

Student Teachers' Reflections Upon Service Learning

Reflection is an integral part of the service learning experience. Silcox (1993) described it *as the process of looking back on the implications of actions taken—both good and bad—determining what has been gained, lost, or achieved, and connecting these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts* (p. 102). Student teachers' write-ups of their service learning activities included both descriptions of their activities and evaluation of the success of the activities in terms of personal learning, services rendered to others, the reciprocity of the relationship, and things they might have done differently

The overwhelming majority of the student teachers admitted that their service learning projects proved to be eye-opening experiences. They noted the following benefits of their service learning projects:

- greater understanding and appreciation for the nature of other people's lives
- greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses

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- sense of belonging within their host communities
- positive attitude toward volunteering in the future
- opportunity to learn things that cannot be learned in a classroom
- a commitment to make service learning a part of the curriculum in their future classrooms

Participation in service learning projects challenged many student teachers' beliefs and attitudes about others. One secondary student teacher in Ireland who taught an adult computer class revealed, *I was impressed that these farmers who live in some of the most isolated areas of Ireland and some of the least technologically advanced areas were interested enough in computers to take time out of their already busy schedules to learn how to use them. I learned not to jump to conclusions or make decisions based on appearances alone. Every time I have formed an opinion based on the way things appear here, I have been surprised by the way things actually are.*

Another secondary student teacher used the experience of working on an Irish farm to better understand the predicament of farmers back home: *Working on the farm made me think of all the farmers in Indiana and their struggles against the big agriculture manufacturers. I have a new understanding for a farmer's way of life because for the first time I saw firsthand all the hard work that it takes to keep a farm running successfully.*

A secondary student teacher in England, reflecting upon her work at a social services office, wrote, *This activity has helped to remind me that just because a person is old, or just because a person is sick, just because they may have some mental challenges or difficulties doesn't mean that they cannot make a positive contribution to life. I feel this activity has heightened my awareness and appreciation of the important contributions of ALL living people. You can't just discard or disrespect someone because they aren't perfect.*

The following remarks of a secondary student teacher in England make it clear that the elderly can be an extraordinary source of historical information: *Mabel has told me some stories about what life was like in C— in the earlier part of the century. I could not have learned about these personal experiences from a history book but only from a person who has personally lived through them. I know for me I sometimes do not appreciate the elderly. I often get impatient when my grandmother forgets things, but after talking with Wil and Mabel, I realize that if given the time they can tell me things that I do not know about. Wil and Mabel are like a living tour through the history of England.*

For some student teachers, particularly those in agricultural communities, the service learning projects provided valuable insight into the lives of their students. One elementary student teacher in Wales noted, *Many of the students at C— live on farms and when lambing season comes, many of the students have to help. At this time many students are unable to finish homework and sometimes come to school very tired. I think it was a good experience for me to witness and participate so I could get a better idea of what the students go through.*

Student teachers appreciated the chance to interact with parents and children in the social setting of the service learning project. An elementary student teacher in New Zealand marveled at all she learned while assisting with a sporting competition for boys and girls: *I had the opportunity to meet some new people in the community and relate with many parents from A — School, work with children in a social atmosphere, and observe parents interacting with their children. In my role as a student teacher, I would have been unable to achieve all of these goals. In just four-and-a-half hours I experienced more than I could in a week on the school grounds.*

While learning much about others through participation in service learning projects, the student teachers also gained a greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. One elementary student teacher who spent an afternoon showing baby Tasmanian devils to tourists at a wildlife park in Tasmania declared, *I am no longer afraid to go places myself. I now have more self-confidence and feel like I can go anywhere by myself and be just fine. I feel more comfortable with myself as well. I also shared thoughts and exchanged feelings with people from a culture other than my own, outside of America.* Others recognized the value of operating outside of one's comfort zone as means for self-improvement. An elementary student teacher in England noted, *I feel that it is important to separate yourself from your family and your career to give service to others. This is because*

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it is something outside of the safe realm of your everyday world. Also, what you give is nothing compared to what you receive.

Some student teachers were humbled by what they discovered about themselves during the course of their service learning projects. After a full day laboring on a farm in England, this elementary student teacher confessed, *I am now painfully aware of a side of my own personality. I felt like what I have to do, the amount of work, is nearly nothing compared to what some people have to do everyday. I felt, almost small, it's hard to describe. I think of all the times I've complained about all the stuff I have to do, when there are people out there working twice as hard as me.*

Many student teachers remarked in their write-ups that community people looked favorably upon their involvement in service learning activities, recognizing their commitment to their overseas host communities and purposes for being overseas; such observations by host nation citizens contrast with what they typically see in terms of tourists who generally only take when travelling abroad. Student teachers felt a sense of belonging they could not have achieved through their teaching efforts alone. For example, one elementary student teacher in Ireland happily reported, *By being involved with the confirmation ceremony, I feel so much more comfortable in church. When I first attended church in G —, I felt like such an outsider. After helping with the choir and, therefore, being able to recognize familiar faces within the church, I have felt much more comfortable.*

After helping to decorate a church on St. Patrick's Day, another elementary student teacher in Ireland mentioned, *The people saw me not just as some American student teacher here to do her job and then leave, but as an individual truly interested in learning and becoming involved in the true Irish culture. Though what I did did not save lives, it did bring a smile to the citizens, and more importantly told them I respected their culture, their values, and their beliefs.*

Others expressed feeling like *one of the group* instead of the *American student teacher* as they participated in their projects. They were pleased to know more people in their communities, to be able to walk down the street and say hello to them, and to *ask them to have a cup of tea or coffee and talk about the day.*

Finally, a secondary student teacher in Ireland explained that through his service learning project he was able to shed his outsider status: *I was privileged to work within a community not as some daring do-gooder, but as a member of that community. This allowed me to experience rather than just watch how the people of Ireland live, work, and enjoy their lives.*

These experiences and subsequent learnings, taken together, have changed many student teachers' attitudes about volunteering and led them to commit to volunteering in the future. In the words of a secondary student teacher in Australia, *I realize that being a volunteer isn't something you do just when you have the spare time, but rather something you make a commitment to because it is a cause worth supporting and dedicating time to on a regular basis.* An elementary student teacher in New Zealand insisted, *There are so many organizations and agencies in the United States that need enormous amounts of help, and I've been playing the game that everyone does: 'I am too busy. But I would if I could.' I feel that when I return home, I will be more apt to throw myself into community service. I reckon it is the most beautiful way to meet people while uniting on a common issue to help a certain cause for pure and unselfish reasons.*

Another secondary student teacher in England was reminded of the real meaning of Thanksgiving when she assisted an elderly woman with her Christmas shopping: *The evening was successful for a variety of reasons. The most important was that it occurred on Thanksgiving Day. On this day, I found myself longing to be at home with family, and this time of helping another person made me feel as though I was participating in the essence of the day in a way that the traditional activities fail to encompass.*

Such positive responses to service learning activities have prompted many student teachers to incorporate service learning into the curriculum of their future classrooms. One elementary student teacher in Australia envisioned, *Another community project that I would like to participate in would be to help collect items and money for the poor. Children need to realize that not everyone has a nice and comfortable place to live. I want them to understand that some people need a*

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little bit of help when it comes to daily living. Too many people, I think, forget about the people that live in the streets and take for granted what they themselves have.

Implications for Overseas Program Development

The student teachers' write-ups of their service learning activities and insights suggest that the inclusion of a required service learning assignment in overseas student teaching programs adds a dimension to the experience that goes well beyond the usual components of school, home stay, and travel. Student teachers may engage in activities they might never have tried otherwise, meet groups of people they might have overlooked or even avoided, and make new discoveries about their communities and about themselves that might have gone unrevealed.

We recommend that university and college providers of overseas student teaching programs include a service learning requirement in the overseas experience. Such an assignment ensures that the student teachers strive to contribute to their placement communities through hands-on service; in turn, they gain a greater understanding of the community and insight into those aspects of community life not readily visible in the classroom or host family settings alone. Certainly, thoroughly defined expectations for the assignment should be identified and discussed before the student teachers go overseas, including acceptable kinds of service learning activities, the minimum time commitment, and the format for the final write-up. Undergirding the assignment should be a clear definition of what service learning is, focusing on the 3 R's of *realistic*, *reflective*, and *reciprocal*.

Depending on student teachers' previous experience and success with reflective writing, program providers may need to coach their students in the reflective component, as the reflection is what makes a volunteer effort truly service learning. Parker (1996) noted, reflection *helps students understand themselves and others better and encourages them to interpret their behavior with greater insight* (p. 1).

Conclusion

Required service learning assignments completed during overseas student teaching placements take student teachers out of their host nation classrooms and host nation families, and into the communities in which they and their pupils work and live. Service learning projects can enhance any student teaching experience, stateside or overseas. For preservice educators, encouraging, indeed, requiring the establishment of a vital link to the community may lead to a career characterized by service learning activities that involve both the classroom teachers and their pupils. In this way, service learning becomes a critical means for fostering democratic communities founded upon strong communal ties, collective action, and reflection. Perhaps the essence of community-based service learning is best expressed in the words of a secondary student teacher who was placed in the Scottish Highlands: *Part of living in a community is constantly trying to help that community grow and prosper.*

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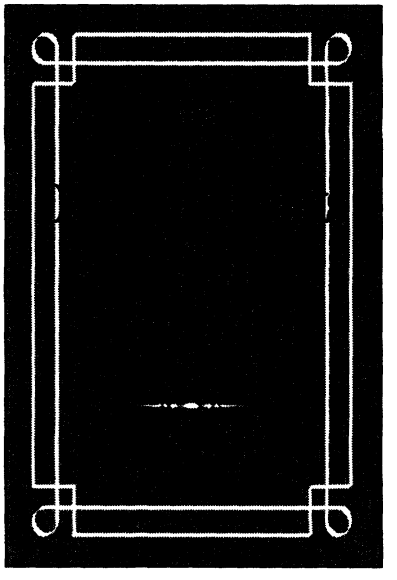
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