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SERVICE LEARNING AS A STRATEGY TO PREPARE TEACHER CANDIDATES FOR CONTEMPORARY DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

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The article describes a service-learning program jointly developed, implemented, and evaluated by a large university and a culturally and linguistically diverse urban school district. Each semester, over 200 undergraduate students preparing to be teachers learn first-hand about contemporary classrooms by assisting at-risk students. Program evaluation found changes in the undergraduates' attitudes about the importance of social and individual difference on children's learning.

College students preparing to be elementary teachers often come to the university with a humanistic philosophy, sharing that they are going into teaching because they love children, they want to give back to the community, and they desire to help people learn and do better. The majority of the students entering the teaching program continue to be white females, most of whom come from lower-middle and middle class homes. Often, when they speak of the "children they love" they are referring to students who look like themselves, not like the school populations found in diverse urban classrooms. Teacher preparation programs face the continuing challenge of preparing teacher candidates who can be effective instructors in contemporary classrooms with poor and culturally and ethnically diverse children.

Service learning is one strategy gaining wide acceptance as a means to improve candidates' readiness for kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) classrooms (Hones, 1997; Meyer, 1997; Root, 1997; Supon, 1997; Wade & Anderson, 1996). Reports from service learning projects are usually very positive, suggesting that the college students gain awareness of their own culture and beliefs, greater understanding of K-12 children, classroom conditions, and family environments (Hayes & Cuban, 1996). Teacher candidates who engage in service learning gain knowledge in areas such as synthesizing ideas and gaining insights for problem solving (de Acosta, 1995; Goldsmith, 1995) and understanding intelligence as multiple and dynamic (Moon, 1998). Gains in skills have been found as well, with teacher candidates becoming more sensitive to changes in democratic contexts in schooling consistent with Noddings' care principles (Root, 1994), acquiring skills in teamwork, communication, and problem solving (Supon, 1997), developing intercultural competence (Hones, 1997; Meyer, 1997), and becoming more socially responsible (Astin, 1996).

In the current study, the teacher educa-

tion program at California State University, Long Beach, a large comprehensive university worked with representatives from the area's large urban school district, Long Beach Unified School District, to implement a service learning program. Both partners hoped to see the teacher candidates gain knowledge and skills as a result of the service learning experience, and ultimately, to bridge the gulf between the culture of the teachers-to-be and the majority of the children in the community's culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. This paper will describe the service learning program which was implemented. Particular focus will be placed upon tne evaluation of the program's effects on teacher candidates, including the pre-post testing and the findings. Results are discussed in light of the program goals and suggestions are made for future investigations.

Service Experiences for ReVitalizing Education (SERVE)

The SERVE Program idea originated in 1994 when leaders from the school district told the university leadership that, frankly, its new teachers seemed unprepared for the realities of teaching in Long Beach, California's urban classrooms. Nearly 80% of the students are from historically underrepresented groups, i.e., Latino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, African American. The public school leaders suggested the university could provide its teaching candidates with more and earlier field experiences in multicultural, urban classroom settings. Shortly after that, a group of California State University, Long Beach faculty, administrators, and staff

invited two administrators from Long Beach Unified School District, two managers in programs of the City of Long Beach, and an officer of the Long Beach Community Partnership to assist in the development of a program of service learning experiences. After six months of planning, a pilot program began with a handful of university student volunteers and one junior level writing class in which the faculty member had augmented the field experience component to require 40 hours school participation. The planning group continued to meet monthly for another year, discussing issues and problems as they arose in the pilot program, investigating funding sources for the program, and disseminating information about the program. The number of university students placed continued to be small until the academic program formally instituted a graduation requirement of 120 hours of service learning.

The SERVE Program trains, places, and supports college students as they engage in service-learning in public schools. These students work directly with "at risk" youth in classrooms supervised by individuals nominated by the school district as strong teachers who are committed to the belief that all students can learn at high levels.

The SERVE program is relatively low cost for all parties, considering the increased size and the level of assistance available to students. California State University, Long Beach provides an office, a computer, a clerical assistant, a 20 hour a week graduate intern, and three units a semester assigned time for a faculty coordinator. Long Beach Unified School District provides a part -time coordinator,

teacher for the undergraduates' training, and uses facilitators and/or administrators to coordinate at the individual schools throughout Long Beach. The district also pays the teachers hourly stipends when they attend the two hour orientation and evaluation meetings at the beginning and end of each semester. As the program has expanded, each participating school has a coordinator who attends the meetings and serves as liaison to the teachers.

SERVE training for the undergraduate students is provided by both school district "master teachers" and university faculty. The training includes strategies for giving praise, guided reading, reading prompts, asking effective questions, management techniques, active participation and a powerful simulation experience `teaching' them how it feels to be a learning impaired or excluded student.

Each undergraduate student in the teacher preparation program is required to perform a minimum of 40 hours of service each semester, for a total of 120 hours prior to graduation. In the Fall, 1998 semester, the SERVE program had 244 undergraduate students in local public schools working with culturally diverse and at risk students, either one-on-one or in small groups. This meant that SERVE undergraduate students provided approximately 9,760 hours of additional literacy support to students most in need, at least 244 students had direct assistance from their university undergraduate student, and 244 teachers had an extra adult presence in their classrooms.

SERVE Theory of Change
SERVE has a "theory of change" which

is the basis of the project. The long-term goal of SERVE is to contribute to the preparation of better public school teachers who:
* possess skills to respond to students' individual needs and differences (such as first language, gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, personality, and parental education).
* possess knowledge of the realities of public school classrooms and skills to adapt to these realities.

Clearly, these are complex issues and skills which a service learning experience alone cannot provide. The SERVE theory of change suggests that personal experience with individual children helps college students become aware of differences. This awareness prompts college students to take more and better advantage of opportunities to learn about differences which contributes to improved teacher preparation. Thus, the SERVE theory of change suggests that service learning provides a valuable and potentially powerful beginning experience.

Consistent with this theory, SERVE has as its *short-term* goals to:
* Expose future teachers to the realities of classrooms at an early stage of their preparation, so they can make a realistic commitment to the teaching profession;
* Develop in future teachers a sensitivity and understanding of the social, cultural and individual factors which impinge upon the educational development of school children; and
* Support the educational mission of the elementary schools by providing an additional adult in the classroom.

The evaluation of SERVE reported here was designed to test one component of the theory of change. The evaluation question was: Did college student participants change their awareness of the importance of individual differences in the educational development of young children? We also assessed whether participants increased the importance they attached to service learning values such as "taking responsibility for the next generation".

Methods

Students completed a questionnaire at the start of their semester of involvement in the SERVE program and again at the end of the semester. Pre-test and post-test questionnaire items asked about attitudes toward service learning and children's educational development. Service learning attitude items asked about the "importance of caring adult role models," "assuming responsibility for helping the next generation," "responsibility to work for the welfare of all." One other item asked about whether "classrooms now are pretty much the same as they were when I was in school." The complete list of questions from the survey is listed in Table 1.

Child development items asked about the importance of race or ethnicity, first language, gender, socioeconomic status, parental education and personality. An example item about attitudes toward educational development is: "The race or ethnicity of a child influences greatly the experience he or she has in elementary school". Respondents were asked to indicate agreement on a five-point scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The post-test questionnaire asked two open-ended questions, one related to child development and one related to service learning.

Narrative data were also collected during the end-of-term discussion sessions. The undergraduate students who had completed placements in classrooms in Long Beach that semester were given an opportunity to speak informally with one another, and more formally in the whole group. The sessions were the semester's culminating event and afforded an opportunity for the university students to tell the stories of their experiences. The instructor recorded comments made by university students reflecting their perceptions of what they accomplished and had gained from the service learning experience.

Study Participants

Study participants, with pre and post-test information, were 187 university students who were placed in Long Beach schools in the SERVE program in Fall 1997 and Spring 1998 semesters. (Surveys of undergraduate students placed in other school districts were not included in the data analysis for the current study.) Their average age was 23 years and 90 percent were women. Fifty-three percent had no prior volunteer experience in the schools.

Procedures

The pre-test was administered at one of the first orientation meetings of SERVE college students at an early point during the respective semester of participation. Questionnaires were distributed with uncomplicated directions to read and follow instructions for responding to each of the items. Post-test questionnaires were

administered at the end-of-semester debriefing meeting again with uncomplicated directions to read and follow instructions.

Results

Six items were designed to assess undergraduate students' perceptions of the importance of social and individual factors in the educational development of children included: race or ethnicity, first language, gender, socioeconomic status, parental education and personality. All of these items changed in the expected direction, with respondents increasing their agreement that these are important to children's educational development. A composite scale created from these six items (averaging pre-test items for each subject and post-test items for each subject) was statistically significant (t=3.32, one-tailed, p<.001) from pre-test to post-test. Five of the individual items (excepting only the personality item) reached statistical significance (p<.05, one-tailed, t values ranging from 2.62 to 1.86).

No significant changes were observed in these items: "importance of caring adult role models," "assuming responsibility for helping the next generation," and "responsibility to work for the welfare of all." These three items were all very strongly endorsed at pre-test with average response around 4.5 on a 5 point scale. The item "classrooms now are pretty much the same as they were when I was in school" was not strongly endorsed at pre-test or at post-test but did not change significantly.

The comments of the undergraduate students recorded in the post-test sessions have been very positive. Invariably, uni-versity students have been eager to share, expressing enthusiasm at the experiences in the schools. Their stories are often humorous, sometimes reflective, sometimes sad. Examples of the undergraduates' comments are in Table 2.

The chief alternative explanation for these results is the possibility that students perceived and responded to demand characteristics of the testing situation. However, the pattern of findings suggests that this alternative is unlikely. Questionnaire items covered two domains: service learning and child development. If demand characteristics were at work, both domains might be influenced. SERVE is very explicit about being a service learning project. The fact that changes were observed in only the child development items and not in the service learning domain provides some discriminate validity in support of the interpretation that the observed changes are not due to demand characteristics of the testing situation.

These findings suggest students who participate in SERVE gain awareness about the importance of individual and social characteristics which influence educational development of children. Thus, SERVE appears to be successful in attaining one of its central goals.

The district teachers are also interviewed about the training, experience, and individual SERVE students work. The supervising teachers made comments such as: "I wish I had had this experience prior to my student teaching", "My college intern was excellent!", "My intern was so patient", "My intern really helped with the writing process" and so on. All of the teachers became attached to their undergraduate

students, wanted to continue having the university students, and became more closely attached to teacher preparation at the University. Many of the undergraduate students were subsequently hired as college aides and a SERVE-type training program is being developed for the district aides.

Discussion

This report provides three kinds of evaluative evidence regarding the success of the SERVE project: (1) evidence about the stability and growth of the SERVE program activities; (2) narrative comments from undergraduate students regarding their SERVE experiences; and (3) pre-test, post-test results assessing one of the SERVE goals pertaining to undergraduate students' awareness of the importance of individual student characteristics.

SERVE has steadily grown over a number of years with enthusiastic participation of public school teachers. There are several characteristics of SERVE which are related to this programmatic success. A great deal of time was spent in collaborative planning and pilot testing of SERVE before the program was scaled up in size. This planning helped ensure that the program would not run into unexpected logistical pitfalls prompting one or both educational institutions to abandon the project. This planning also prompted both institutions to assume responsibility for the project. Each committed a staff position to project coordination thereby institutionalizing the project. All agreed on the importance of the program and took steps to avoid making it dependent upon the interest of an individual or two. The relationship between the university and the

public schools involves a great deal of communication. This pattern of communication helps to fine-tune the program and resolve potential problems.

A key to the enthusiasm for the University is also the low cost of the project. A traditional dual-supervision model of service learning could not be sustained in a poorly funded public institution such as CSULB at the scale achieved by SERVE. The innovative way in which the University has reached out to public school teachers and incorporated them into SERVE as adjunct faculty is key to the success of SERVE and greatly leverages the use of the limited resources.

SERVE has a "theory of change" suggesting that college students in training to be teachers can gain insight from a service learning experience into the importance of individual and social factors in child development. By gaining insight into the importance of these factors, they will be more likely to attend to learning about individual and social differences. By learning more, they will be better prepared to adapt to the individual needs of the students when they become teachers.

Evaluation results tested only a part of this theory of change, impacts upon participants' perception of the importance of social and individual differences. Results were consistent with the SERVE theory of change. It is interesting that no changes were observed in the items dealing with service learning values. This lack of change may be due to a ceiling effect for those highly-rated items or it might be that immediate impacts of service learning are upon attitudes about the most personal aspects of the experience, the children. Impacts

upon abstract values might come later as experiences accumulate and participants have a chance to reflect upon their experiences.

The narrative comments of the undergraduate students supported the program's progress toward the goal of assisting the undergraduates in the teacher preparation program to learn more about the teaching profession and the realities of classrooms. The students speak frequently of the gaining insights into the "real world". Service learning helps undergraduate students focus on why they are going to school and what their long-term goals are. They come to realize they can stick with it for four or five years. "I was so stressed at taking all of these classes, it was going to take me forever to finish, then I looked at their faces when they got something I had taught. Now I know that I will keep taking classes and that I have a reason, a goal." They speak about their preprofessional courses having more relevance, more connections to teaching. "I was hearing about this in my college class (writing process), but now I see it, how it can work and how important it is to the children."

The undergraduate students report they are conscious of being role models for the public school students. One powerful comment made by a student was, "I am a minority, it was really important for the kids to see me as a non-gang member, and a college student. Many of them said that they had no idea that they could actually go to college and not join a gang! I know that I can make a difference, even though I am only one person."

Since implementing the SERVE program, undergraduate students have opportunities to relate their college courses to their experiences in the field as early as second semester freshmen. Faculty as well as school district personnel report noticeable changes in the readiness of the university's new teachers to enter contemporary classrooms. As Kaplan and Edelfelt (1996) have stated, preservice teachers now and in the 21st century need a variety of formal and informal intercultural experiences; they need to examine their own life experiences, including their privileges and oppression.

SERVE has been part of a major collaboration in Long Beach between its large comprehensive university and its large public school system (Cohn & Cohn, 1998). As a result of their efforts, additional new teachers in Long Beach enter elementary schools better prepared to teach the community's diverse group of K-12 learners.

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Table 1

SERVE Student Survey Items

1. The race or ethnicity of a child influences greatly the experience he or she has in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
2. The first language spoken by a child influences greatly the experience he or she has in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
3. The gender of a child influences greatly the experience he or she has in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
4. A child's socioeconomic class greatly influences the experience he or she has in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
5. The education of a child's parents influences greatly the experience he or she has in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
6. A child's individual personality influences greatly the experience he or she has in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
7. It is crucial for an elementary age child to have a caring adult role model, a mentor, in his or her life.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
8. It is essential that people my age consciously assume responsibility for helping the next generation of children succeed.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
9. Each citizen in a democracy has a responsibility to work for the welfare of all members of the society, particularly those who are least well off.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
10. Elementary school classrooms now are pretty much the same as they were when I was in elementary school.
Circle one: Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Not Sure Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree

Table 2
Quotes From Undergraduate Students About Their Service Learning Experience

*   "How is a teacher supposed to know what to do with so many different needs in one class? The kids are at different levels, they don't all come to school clean or fed. How do I juggle all of this"?
*   "I had always thought that their home life and cultural background shouldn't make a difference if they were all treated the same, but wow, the value a culture placed on education and the support the parents give really makes a difference on how the children learn. I know they can learn but it might take longer, and I need to try different ways."
*   "I was hearing about this in my college class (writing process) but now I see it, how it can work and how important it is to the children."
*   "I can't believe how I could make them feel so special just by giving them a little praise."
*   "I always left with the neatest feeling."
*   "I couldn't believe it! They saw me pull up and came running across the playground! I guess I can make a difference."
*   "I am a minority, it was really important for the kids to see me as a non-gang member, and a college student. Many of them said that they had no idea that they could actually go to college and not join a gang! I know I can make a difference, even though I am only one person."
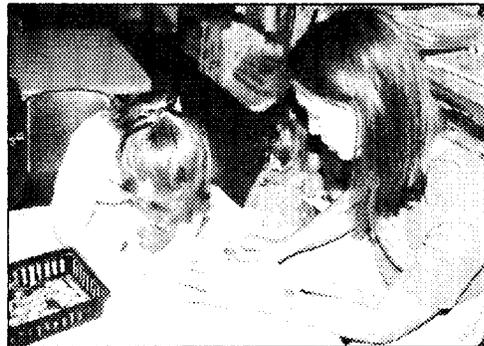
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