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Empowerment in Student Teaching Through Community Service Learning

THE STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE is probably the most influential phase of preservice teachers' development within a teacher education program (Burstein, 1992; Griffin, 1989). In particular, the relationship between the cooperating teacher and student teacher plays a critical role in student teachers' success. Preservice teachers are generally instructed to "do as I do" by their cooperating teachers. Thus, student teachers often find little opportunity to try out strategies they have learned in their university methods courses unless the practices are already in place in cooperating teachers' classrooms. In addition, few researchers have attempted to discern how to enhance preservice teachers' abilities to set their own goals and develop their own ways of teaching during the student teaching experience.

This article focuses on community service learning projects as a means of promoting empowerment for student teachers. It draws on the experience of a university-sponsored program designed to enhance student teachers' empowerment through their work with community service learning projects in public elementary school classrooms. In this program, the student teachers had received training in service learning whereas most of the cooperating teachers had not had any such formal training. Thus, the potential for the power relationship between cooperating and student teachers was altered, providing each student teacher with the opportunity to be a leader in the student teaching setting.

This article explores the conditions that led to or inhibited student teachers' empowerment through their service learning experiences. Empowerment, a variously construed term, refers here to student teachers' development of autonomy and affirmation in teaching. Empowerment in student teaching is characterized by initiative, leadership, assertiveness, creativity, and recognition of one's success.

The article begins with a brief review of the literature on relevant aspects of student teaching, followed by a discussion of the rationales for including service learning in teacher education. It then describes the service learning program and presents study results that focus specifically on the theme of student teacher empowerment. The final sections discuss the conditions leading to student teacher empowerment and implications for implementing university-sponsored service learning programs in student teaching.

Research on Student Teaching

The cooperating teacher appears to be the most influential person in the development of the student teacher (Coulon, 1994; Gonzalez & Carter, 1996; Mitchell & Schwager, 1993; Morin, 1993). Cooperating teachers model and guide student teachers' growth (Koskela & Ganser, 1995) and
student teachers often adopt the style, beliefs, or practices of their cooperating teachers (Kauffman, 1992; Scholl, 1990). Most cooperating teachers model teaching practices with the view that student teachers must learn “my way” of teaching (Griffin, 1989). In turn, many student teachers appear to be highly sensitive to the power inequities involved in their relationships with their cooperating teachers. Various case studies have revealed a marked deference on the part of student teachers to the greater wisdom, practical knowledge, and status of the cooperating teacher.

Many studies have documented the importance of cooperating teachers’ feedback (Coulon, 1994; Enz & Cook, 1992; Johnston, 1994; Mitchell & Schwager, 1993). Morin (1993) noted that when student teachers try out different teaching styles, they often receive less feedback from their cooperating teachers. Johnston (1994) vividly portrayed the difficulties of one student teacher, Roger, who wanted to employ cooperative learning in his teaching but eventually had to choose between changing his approach or failing student teaching.

In studies of student teachers’ stages of development, a number of researchers have noted that student teachers begin their experience with a concern for self, followed by a concern with teaching, and finally a focus on student learning and behavior (Campbell & Wheatley, 1983; Fuller, 1969; Veenman, 1984). Piland and Anglin (1993) asserted that various stage theories support four stages of student teacher development: fear and uncertainty, socialization, autonomy, and affirmation. These latter two stages, autonomy and affirmation, are of particular interest to this study.

Autonomy is most often achieved during the head teaching weeks of student teaching. At this stage, student teachers want to be able to be the key decision makers regarding the planning and content of lessons as they take over responsibility for teaching and classroom management. While student teachers must take some initiative to become more autonomous, cooperating teachers also play a role in this effort. Cooperating teachers must, to some degree, relinquish sole ownership of the classroom, the students, and the curriculum for the student teacher to experience autonomy.

Student teachers arrive at the final stage, affirmation, when they meet personal goals and expectations set at the beginning of the student teaching experience and when positive evaluations by the cooperating teacher and university supervisor affirm the student teachers’ success in teaching. While these outside views support student teachers’ affirmation, this stage is only attained when the student teachers themselves affirm their success and capabilities in teaching. The affirmation stage is generally accompanied by increased confidence and assertiveness as well as overall positive estimation of one’s capabilities as a teacher and belief in one’s future likelihood of success in the teaching profession.

Rationales for Service Learning in Student Teaching

Clearly, many types of teaching strategies could be promoted by university sponsored programs to enhance student teachers’ empowerment. Why focus on community service learning? Several rationales have been offered for including service learning in preservice teacher education (Allam & Zerkin, 1993; Anderson & Guest, 1995; Root, 1994; Sullivan, 1991; Wade, 1997). Each of these rationales lends support for service learning as a potentially effective strategy for enhancing student teachers’ empowerment.

First, service learning provides student teachers with opportunities to practice reflection. Reflection is an essential component of service learning and student teachers engage in the process of reflection as they guide the children in their classrooms to do so as well. The student teachers in this study reflected on their practice during interviews and while completing a survey. Piland and Anglin (1993) have noted that the ability to reflect on one’s teaching can enhance preservice teachers’ stage development.

Second, because service learning is focused on helping others through activities often planned with student input, it fosters a student-centered, caring approach to teaching. Researchers have noted that concern for students and their learning is indicative of advanced stages of student teacher development. Initial concerns usually reside with oneself as a teacher and teaching behaviors (Campbell & Wheatley, 1983; Fuller, 1969; Veenman, 1984). Thus, one could hypothesize that involving student teachers in a student-centered strategy such
as service learning would help them advance through the early stages of development.

Third, service learning gives student teachers opportunities to extend their visions of the teaching role to encompass that of counselor, community liaison, scholar, curriculum developer, and moral leader. Service learning projects cannot be found in textbooks; teachers must use creativity and local resources to develop projects that meet a specific school or community need. The creative processes involved in developing a service learning project can contribute to the student teacher's affirmation.

A final rationale, mentioned previously, is that choice of a teaching strategy unfamiliar to cooperating teachers (as service learning was to most of the teachers in this study) offers greater potential for student teachers to be the "experts" and thus exhibit greater autonomy in their teaching. For all the reasons discussed here, service learning is an especially suitable teaching strategy to use when the goal is student teacher empowerment.

The University of Iowa Program

Service learning is an optional aspect of the student teaching experience at the University of Iowa. At the beginning of the semester, letters are sent to cooperating and student teachers inviting them to participate. Through a grant from the Corporation for National Service, each pair of participants is provided with project supply funds ($75), curriculum materials, and an honorarium for the cooperating teacher's planning time ($75). Both the cooperating and student teachers are invited to a 2-hour workshop that covers the basics of service learning along with the procedures for accessing funds and completing evaluation data. Each semester approximately 25 to 30 pairs participate in the program.

Prior to student teaching, almost all University of Iowa elementary preservice teachers are trained in service learning through their social studies methods course and a related practicum in which they assist public school teachers in carrying out a service learning project (see Wade, 1995). The preservice teachers also provide service to a child in need within the local community and complete reflection essays and a portfolio on all of their community experiences. In a few cases, cooperating teachers have attended a workshop on service learning or have worked with practicum students on a service learning project. With two of the ten pairs discussed in this article, practicum students and a student teacher worked together on the same project during the same semester.

Ten cooperating teachers and their student teachers were invited to participate in a research study focused on the service learning experience. Pairs were chosen in an effort to include those with diverse background and experiences. Thus, participants varied greatly in regard to age, gender, teaching location, and success with service learning. Each of the 20 participants was interviewed individually twice, once before the beginning of the service learning project and once at the end of the semester. Questions focused on who initiated the project, the roles of cooperating and student teachers as well as classroom students, how the project fit with teaching philosophies and the academic curriculum, rewards and difficulties experienced, and how the conduct of the project affected the relationship between the cooperating and student teacher. Cooperating and student teachers were asked the same questions.

Two classroom observations were conducted while the student teachers were leading parts of the service learning project. Both the surveys and the classroom observations contributed to triangulation of the data and a clearer picture of how the project evolved from the perspectives of those involved. Several issues relevant to student teachers' empowerment surfaced through a comparative analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). They are discussed below within the following thematic categories: who's in charge, rewards and difficulties, and effects on the cooperating and student teacher relationship.

Who's in Charge?

In six of the ten cases, the student teacher took the initiative to participate in the service learning program. While there were some initial concerns expressed (e.g., time, suitability of service learning for very young students), these six student teachers enthusiastically decided to try out service learning during their student teaching. At three of the other four sites, the cooperating teacher was the initiator; all three of these cooperating teachers...
teachers had previously completed service learning projects.

At the last site, both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher asserted that the project was initiated by the classroom students. This pair of teachers had worked together on a service learning practicum project the year before and had decided to continue their collaboration with service learning in student teaching. Projects focused on such activities as intergenerational partnerships with nursing homes, environmental restoration (e.g., seeding a prairie), fundraising for stuffed animals for the local police department to distribute, and helping students with disabilities during physical education class.

Not surprisingly, when student teachers initiated involvement in the program, they were more likely to be centrally involved in planning and implementation. A few of the pairs worked as equal team members, indicated by their answers to questions about who was responsible for planning and teaching, such as, “I’d say we both were.”

More often, however, the student teacher was the project “facilitator” or “organizer” and the cooperating teacher played a supportive role, making sure the project idea was feasible, helping with scheduling, or communicating with school staff or community members. One student teacher stated, “This was my main big project that I did pretty much, so I think she [the cooperating teacher] kinda realized and took a step back.” One of the cooperating teachers summed up her role in the following statement,

I’m available as a springboard for ideas, a possible resource, and helping to set up some of the technical timeframes, those kinds of things. But otherwise, she’s really been responsible for it all.

Another cooperating teacher asserted that she would be there to help with problems,

I feel like I’m a mentor. I feel like I can help problem solve. I kind of know maybe what stumbling blocks might happen and how we can circumvent them. But if we encounter something that we don’t know exactly what is going to happen, we can work it out together.

In three of the ten projects, the student teacher played a more passive role, rather than being the leader or even an equal team member. One of these projects took place in a classroom that also had two practicum students assisting. There was confusion in this project about who was in charge. The cooperating teacher saw project ownership as being shared between the student teacher and the practicum students, whereas the student teacher repeatedly stated that he was helping out the practicum students. When asked what goals he had set for the project, this student teacher replied, “I haven’t really set anything.”

In the remaining two projects, the cooperating teacher was clearly the leader. In a first grade classroom, the cooperating teacher saw an opportunity in the support provided by the service learning program for an existing intergenerational project. The student teacher described his role as “to just keep it going.” He regretted not being able to plan and set up the project. “I didn’t have to do much, really, at all for it.”

In a second grade classroom, the cooperating teacher had been thinking about doing a butterfly garden and also saw the opportunity for support through the service learning program. While the student teacher helped with a few lessons, she noted that she “didn’t have much to do with it.” A puzzling aspect of this project is that the student teacher had completed her service learning practicum in a classroom creating a butterfly garden. Neither the cooperating teacher nor the student teacher indicated why, based on this experience, the student teacher was not more involved.

Rewards and Challenges

Many of the teachers cited numerous rewards that resulted from the projects. They often identified beneficiaries as “everyone”—the students, themselves, the school, and the community. Consistent with prior research on the rewards of service learning, teachers most often mentioned benefits for their students (Wade & Eland, 1995). The benefits included academic (writing, reading, math, science, social studies, technology, music), social (communication, group work, cooperative learning, problem solving, empathy, etiquette), and personal (self-esteem, enjoyment, responsibility, maturity, caring, understanding of others, organization) outcomes. When asked what was most rewarding about the project, almost all of the teachers stated the student teachers’ enthusiasm, interest, enjoyment, or success. One notable exception was
the student teacher in the butterfly garden project who lamented, “I have no idea. To me, there wasn’t anything.”

The student teachers’ awareness of how the students in their classrooms benefited from the projects is relevant when considering student teachers’ stages of development. Recall that focus on the student teacher in the butterfly garden project was relevant when considering student teachers mentioned time as an issue. Time problems manifested as scheduling difficulties, time spent on the project, and time spent negotiating between the cooperating teacher and student teacher about the specifics of the project. One student teacher mentioned as difficulties getting senior citizens transported to the school and keeping the students “under control” during their visit. Thus, service learning was not seen as a simple strategy to implement. Success required creativity and overcoming some obstacles, particularly the challenge of time.

Effects on the Relationship

When asked how working on the project affected the cooperating and student teacher relationship, five of the pairs attributed positive effects on their relationship to the service learning project. A few student teachers noted that they and their cooperating teachers talked more about the service learning project and that it “enhanced our cooperation.” Another student teacher noted the benefits of having “something to work on that we were solving together.” In one of the projects initiated by the cooperating teacher, the student teacher asserted that helping with the project “kind of brought me closer to the teacher.” The cooperating teacher cited a number of benefits she observed in her student teacher from working on an intergenerational project.

I think that the service learning project was one of several things that made my student teacher able to show emotion and to relate to people and to maybe be outgoing a little bit more. . . . It makes me feel better about it as far as my relationship with the student teacher because I think I am sending him on his way with a new perspective.

Most of the projects came with challenges, and it is likely that these difficulties, when overcome, contributed to student teachers’ empowerment as well. Not surprisingly, both cooperating and student teachers mentioned time as an issue. Time problems manifested as scheduling difficulties, time spent on the project, and time spent negotiating between the cooperating teacher and student teacher about the specifics of the project. One student teacher mentioned as difficulties getting senior citizens transported to the school and keeping the students “under control” during their visit. Thus, service learning was not seen as a simple strategy to implement. Success required creativity and overcoming some obstacles, particularly the challenge of time.
sign language to younger students, one cooperating teacher asserted:

I'm very dependent on her because she signs more than I do, so she was an absolute blessing to the project... It helped to be able to share responsibility for that and we had a really nice rapport that way, being able to take parts of the class... I needed her a lot quicker than maybe I might have if she had only been approaching the regular classroom procedures... It advanced things at a quicker pace.

Another cooperating teacher was also enthusiastic about working with her student teacher.

It's neat to work with somebody else on [service learning]. It certainly heightened our relationship. I was really proud of [her] for going beyond the classroom and going out into the school and community... She and I both gained from working together as a team.

While none of the teachers felt that the service learning project had a negative impact on their relationship, some indicated that it had no effect or could not be singled out as having any more influence than anything else they shared. For example, one student teacher stated that the service learning project was "just another event that contributed to rapport between myself and [the cooperating teacher]."

Enhancing Student Teachers' Empowerment

The experiences of the teachers described in this article demonstrate that service learning can be a means for enhancing student teachers' empowerment. Student teachers who were leaders were more likely to experience the stages of authority and affirmation in relation to their service learning involvement. Some of the student teachers who were equal team members also experienced authority and affirmation, but only when they had significant responsibility in planning and conducting the projects. Projects in which the cooperating teacher took the lead were frustrating to student teachers.

While student teacher initiative and leadership in the projects appears to be a key factor in contributing to empowerment, one should not overlook the important role played by the cooperating teacher. This role varied from support and affirmation to problem solving to being a resource in the school and community. In successful projects, the cooperating teachers recognized their role as supporters or team members and were willing to take a back seat (at least some of the time) and let the student teacher be the leader. When this "role reversal" was accepted by both student and cooperating teacher, working together on the service learning project was often recognized as enhancing their relationship.

The most successful projects were those in which everyone benefited. Teachers did not generally see the project as successful if their students did not learn from and enjoy the experience. This awareness of student benefits is likely to assist student teachers in moving from a focus on self to concern for student behaviors and learning. Recognition of meeting an important school or community need was also an important part of the affirmation experienced by some of these student teachers.

Finally, student teachers in projects that were empowering recognized the value to themselves of planning and conducting a service learning project. Their statements indicate that they experienced both authority and affirmation in relation to their service learning work. When teachers recognize that everyone benefits, the cost of service learning in terms of time and other concerns or difficulties is outweighed by the positive outcomes. Indeed, teachers in this study who recognized multiple beneficiaries were likely to indicate that they would continue to do service learning in their future classrooms.

In summary, all of the following factors appear to have contributed to student teachers' empowerment in this study: student teacher initiative in starting the project, student teacher leadership of the project, creative development of the project using both school and community resources, recognition of benefits for students and student teacher, positive feedback from the cooperating teacher, and enhanced relationship between the cooperating and student teachers attributable to the service learning project.

Implications for Future Programs

The results of this study hold important implications for university sponsored programs that attempt to empower student teachers through service learning activities. The study provides a largely positive example of a program promoted by the university and received positively within the public
school setting. We need more collaborative service learning programs between public schools and higher education; both settings have useful strategies and ideas that can enrich learning for everyone involved. It is important, however, that this collaboration be of mutual interest to both parties, rather than a policy handed down from administrators or program planners.

The service learning program has been successful in attracting participants, in part, because it is optional and because incentives (funds and curriculum materials) are offered. It can be surmised that if service learning was a requirement in student teaching, there would be fewer quality projects, and some student teachers would feel resentful rather than empowered. While the University of Iowa elementary education program requires that all elementary education majors experience service learning in the methods course, I believe the element of choice regarding a student teaching project is central to fostering student teachers’ empowerment.

Based on the results of this study, we now state more clearly to both cooperating and student teachers that participation in the program should be largely at the initiation of the student teacher and that the student teacher should take the lead on the project. While this change may in time lead to slightly fewer participants, those who do participate are likely to experience more affirmation as a result. We have also eliminated the possibility of having both a student teacher and practicum students working on the same project during the same semester. Although collaboration with others is key in service learning projects, the adage “too many cooks spoil the broth” seems to apply here. The confusion that results with too many teachers can cause some to feel left out and disconnected from the project, as it did in two settings in this study.

Student teachers, however, should be encouraged to collaborate with others in the school and community as part of teaching and learning. Many of the student teachers in this study worked with other school staff, local businesses, and community agencies to implement their projects. Some cooperating teachers indicated how impressed they were with their student teachers’ interest and ability to collaborate in this way. The recognition student teachers received from community collaboration enhanced their self-affirmation as teachers and also contributed to expanded views of the role of teachers in the 1990s.

**Conclusion**

The voices in this article attest to the fact that student teachers can be empowered to set their own goals and find their own ways of teaching and that cooperating teachers can recognize the benefits of student teachers as leaders in their classrooms. While not all participants experienced authority and affirmation through service learning, those who took the lead and planned collaborative projects realized benefits for themselves and their students. In addition, all but one student teacher indicated that they plan to continue to implement service learning in their future teaching. These student teachers recognized service learning as an important and enjoyable strategy that enhances student learning while making valuable contributions to the community.

**References**


