

Service Learning and the Preparation of Bilingual/ESL teachers

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Service Learning

- Service learning can be defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2013 in Bettencourt, 2015, p.474).
- Students who engage in service learning opportunities and activities are able to enhance the academic learning that takes place in the classroom (Ben-Peretz, 1995; Carver, 1997 in Ruppert, 2013).

Service Learning and Teacher Preparation

- Most studies suggest that service learning opportunities are crucial to helping teacher candidates become aware of their own beliefs and values, especially during the interactions with students from diverse cultural contexts (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Hale, 2008; Smylie, Bay, & Tozer, 1999).

Emergent Bilingual Students

- Emergent bilinguals can be defined as “students who speak another language at home and are also learning English and, in so doing, are becoming bilingual” (Garcia, 2009, p.vii).
- The number of emergent bilingual students is increasing in schools (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Escamilla, 2007; Goldenberg, 2008). Moreover, these students are falling behind academically (Abedi & Gándara, 2006).

Service Learning and Diverse Learners

- Teacher preparation programs may enhance student preparation by designing service-learning opportunities involving cultural exchanges between teacher candidates and members of our richly diverse communities (Gross & Maloney, 2012).

Methods

- A study was conducted with 30 teacher candidates enrolled in one section of a foundations of bilingual and ESL course in two different semesters. All participants were female.
- Bilingual and ESL teacher candidates enrolled in the course were required to complete 15 hours of field experience which they fulfilled through a service learning project.

Participants

- In their pre-reflective essays, some participants expressed the reasons why they wanted to become bilingual or ESL teachers. Their reasons fell into three themes:
- 1) Some participants want to make a difference in children's lives.
- 2) Other participants identified their ethnicity or language abilities as reasons for becoming bilingual teachers.
- 3) The last group of participants knew they wanted to become teachers since they were children.

Methods

- Teacher candidates were assigned a bilingual classroom where they provided support to an emergent bilingual student or couple of students.
- Participants were asked to write three reflective essays: one before the service learning experience, one during the service-learning experience, and one after the service-learning experience (Bussert-Webb, 2009).

Results

- In the pre-reflective essay participants were asked to define service learning. Most participants looked up a definition and found information that stressed service to the community and civic responsibility.
- About one third of the participants had previous experiences with service learning in courses that required them to use what they learned in the course to provide assistance at schools or other institutions.
- A few confused service learning with conducting classroom observations. This was evident in the examples they provided as previous service learning experiences.

"On my second semester at college, I was asked to do observations for my Introduction to Teaching class... It was a great experience and I was very excited about it."

Results

- As they were involved in their service learning project, participants expressed in their process reflective essay that they felt they were acquiring a better understanding of what teaching is like, of students' struggles, and of how students learn. Moreover, they felt that they were making a difference for the children and were enjoying helping them. They hoped to learn new strategies to continue helping the students and see them make progress.

Results

- Participants felt the learning was reciprocal. That is, they felt that they were not only helping the children, but the children were helping them learn as well. Participants felt that the service learning project helped them understand better how schools work. They also felt the experience they gained would be helpful in their first year of teaching.

"As a future teacher I could tell you that this experience has giving me a little taste of the journey that I pursuit [sic]. It has also helped me push myself into learning and absorbing all the information I can, not only to pass my exams but to use it in my future classroom."

Results

- Teacher candidates valued emergent bilingual students linguistic background and believed in their potential to learn.

"I have learned that a student's dominant language, if it is other than English, does not reflect their capabilities or status. Being dominant in a language other than English should not determine the amount of effort and focus given from the teacher. As teachers, we should understand the difficulties that a child may go through due to the language barrier, but at the same time having high expectations so that the child does not face any injustices when it comes to their education."

Results

- Participants wrote a final reflective essay after completing their service learning hours. In this essay participants reflected about a variety of ideas regarding the students they helped and regarding themselves.
- The perception that participants had of emergent bilingual students did not change by the end of their service learning project. Participants continued to say that the emergent bilingual students with whom they worked were smart, respectful, and full of potential.

Results

- Participants felt that the service learning project helped them better understand the struggles that emergent bilingual students encounter in school.

"The experience I had working with an ELL was incredibly helpful and interesting. It helped me see more closely how is it that ELLs struggle but at the same time how they want to succeed. Knowing about the difficulties they go through is something that I will keep in mind and use for my future teaching for my ELL students."

Conclusions

- The results of this study revealed the value of service learning projects in the preparation of pre-service bilingual / ESL teachers. Working directly with emergent bilingual students allowed participants to understand the struggles and needs of these students and the school environments where they are placed.
- In addition, the service learning experience helped participants internalize concepts and strategies covered in the course as they processed the information in their attempts to select the most appropriate strategies to support emergent bilingual students in authentic contexts.

Conclusions

- *"It is such a rewarding experience knowing that you make a difference in a student's life... I have learned so much by doing this type of Service Learning for this course which is something I will never forget."*

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