Service Learning: Building Commitment to Becoming Teachers

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to the effectiveness of an early field experience program for undergraduate university students, called classroom tutors in this project (CTs). A second aim was to begin to develop a model for service learning specific to the needs of a bilingual school and university. Working in teams increased collegial support and resulted in increased confidence of CTs to both share their classroom experiences and to engage for effectively with elementary students. Reflections focused on verbal and written discourse, improving CTs tutoring practices and elementary student learning. Elementary student verbal responses and written work were important evidence to CTs that their teaching was making a difference to student learning. In addition, evidence of students' trust in CTs became a very important motivational element in their expressed desires to pursue a teaching career.

Background

Teacher educators nationwide face the challenge of recruiting and graduating teacher candidates in greater numbers to meet the shortage of highly qualified teachers while still providing a quality program. In response to this challenge, Ocean View School District and California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) joined together to implement a service learning partnership project, Willing Workers in Classrooms (WWC). Teachers need to be prepared to teach a diverse student population with particular attention to students with special needs and English Learners. With this in mind, WWC was designed to: (a) implement an early field experience for undergraduate Liberal Studies majors, CTs, in a bilingual elementary school that was responsive to the cultural, linguistic, and individual variations among elementary school students; (b) strengthen the school-university partnership; and (c) develop a service learning model sensitive to the needs of school and university partners.

Purpose

This study aims to measure the effects on CTs after their participation in WWC. Specifically, the following questions guided the research:

1. How did CT views of classrooms and teachers develop after participation in WWC?

2. What did participants identify as key areas of importance in their classroom experiences?
3. What was the focus of CT reflections and discussion?

Theoretical Framework

Effective Professional Development Models.   There is now agreement on certain aspects of what leads to effective professional development for preservice and inservice teachers. For preservice teachers, an integrated approach which provides time to experiment, gain experience and build confidence has been found to be optimal (Guskey & Sparks, 1991). The trajectory prospective teachers experience in their undergraduate education can be conceived of as a continuum of development. As current beliefs about teaching and learning are challenged, they develop new belief systems as they take into consideration and either accept or reject new theories of teaching and learning they are introduced to in their teacher preparation program (Clark & Hollingsworth, 1994). Once teachers enter the profession, the learning continues as they develop and fine-tune their practice. A synthesis of findings from research by Berliner (1986), Clandenin and Connelly (1991), DeLange, (1991), Fraser (1990), and McLaughlin (1990) can be summarized as including the following elements of effective professional development: (a) prior beliefs and attitudes are important elements in the change process; (b) worthwhile and enduring change is a slow process that requires commitment; (c) collegial support in the form of regular meetings and discussions; (d) experience and reflection are necessary for effective change; (e) perceptions of successful and improved student learning; and (f) school administrators must support professional development goals. We feel that this inservice model can be effectively applied for preservice teachers and undergraduates planning to become preservice teachers.

Considering these findings, WWC emphasized working with CTs in the area of reflection and collegial support. Journal writing and group discussion in seminars immediately following tutoring experiences were implemented to achieve this goal. The practical teaching experience and reflection by way of tutoring, along with readings and assignments that were incorporated into a 3-unit undergraduate course, Introduction to Education. This course was designed as a service learning course to provide extra instructional guidance to elementary school children who need it most, while also meeting the newly mandated California State requirements of providing early field experiences in teacher preparation programs.

Service Learning Design.   While some may equate service learning with volunteerism, service learning expands the definition of community service. The core elements of service-learning are (a) service activities that help meet community needs that the community finds important, and (b) structured educational components that challenge participants to think critically about and learn from their experiences (Boss, 1994; Wade, 1997). Service activities rise to learning opportunities, and what participants learn further informs their service (Carver, 1997). Thus, service learning embraces two CTs - serving to learn and learning to serve (Levesque & Prosser, 1996). Student involvement in service activities can increase motivation, reinforce learning the theoretical approaches to teaching and curriculum, and enhance understanding of real-world complexity (Kolb, 1984;

Markus, Howard & King, 1993). Service learning bridges the gap between theory and practice (Billig, 2000).

Considering the service learning design, WWC aimed at providing a community-based learning experience coupled with theoretical considerations for CTs that helped them gain a deeper understanding of course objectives and met elementary students' needs in the school for extra instructional time (Morton & Troppe, 1996). WWC provided the following three requirements for a quality service-learning experience:

1. Orientation and training to service learning;
2. A meaningful and well-structured field experience;
3. Opportunities for critical reflection following the service experience.

Context of the Study

The study took place at two elementary schools involving a total of 400 elementary school children, 40 university students and 20 classroom teachers. WWC teams were formed including the classroom (mentor) teacher (MT), two university undergraduate classroom tutors (CTs), and a university supervisor (Authors). These teams were formed to focus on specific CT concerns about classroom interactions with elementary students and curriculum issues. Teams provided instruction in classrooms one morning each week from 7.45 to 11 am over a 13 week period. Immediately following the classroom experience, all CTs and the university supervisor met in the professional development room on the school site to discuss their experiences. In addition, various topics were discussed that impinged on curriculum (e.g., California Academic Content Standards) as well as hearing from specialists who worked at the school such as the speech therapist and GATE coordinator. Each WWC team had an opportunity to present important experiences they had had in class that day as well as other important issues about education.

Research Design (Methodology)

Data sources.   Participants kept reflective journals throughout the study. Weekly entries were made electronically through a journal portal tool on Blackboard, a web-based course management system. Before participation in the project, CTs filled out a biographical information sheet and drew a sketch of an image of themselves teaching in an elementary classroom with a brief explanatory paragraph on the back. At the conclusion of the project, participants were asked to revisit this drawing and paragraph and asked to write a second paragraph describing how they would change the drawing and their explanation of themselves teaching. Post data sources also included CT self-assessment of their participation, Mentor Teacher evaluations of the CTs and the CTs feedback about the strengths and areas needing improvement of the WWC project. Other data sources included CT electronic portfolios and philosophy of education statements. Supervisors' observations of classroom activities involving CTs and elementary students were recorded in fieldnotes as well as some digital photos.

Analysis.   Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) techniques were used to negotiate meaning and develop explanatory models. Journal entries and evaluation instruments were collated and analyzed for emergent themes about both what participants

were learning and reactions to their observations. These themes were compared with project objectives to ascertain discrepancies between intentions and outcomes and in light of research questions.

Findings (Results and Discussion)

CT reactions to their classroom experience in WWC:

> This experience allowed me to see myself in the future; before, being a teacher was all in my head. I took the classes required to get my degree, but now I can actually see myself as a teacher. (student name)

> In my first grade class we had one student who could read vocabulary words up to an 8th grade level and another who couldn't even read any of the pre-primer words. (student name)

> Best of all was that the students looked forward to working with me and also I enjoyed their company and helping them in their activities. (student name)

> This experience has taught me so much, I had no idea on how much time and planning is spent in preparing lessons. (student name)

"Helped me see all that goes into teaching and working in the classroom" and "allowed me to interact with students in the classroom", or words to this effect, were the top two themes running consistently through reflection journals. It was clear that CTs felt that they were getting a good idea of what teaching involved in a real-world classroom setting. There was frequent mention of this being a 'real' idea of teaching compared to the more theoretical ideas they had from course work and brief visits to classrooms previously. It was also evident that CTs developed a sense of responsibility during their classroom experiences. As the project progressed, CTs demonstrated a keen focus on assisting student learning in the classroom. Seminar discussions were guided by the following CT generated questions: what works well in the classroom, what could work better; and what would they like to know more about their students and how classrooms work.

   Mentor Teacher reactions to WWC.   "Our students really benefit from the extra help the CSUCI CTs are giving", and "great chance to check out the classroom before committing to a teaching career" were the two most common observations from mentor teachers (MTs). These MT views of WWC are consistent with CT views in that both saw that the elementary students were the focus of the project. It adds a dimension of career decision that is an important outcome. Referring back to the introduction to this proposal, this has important implications for that challenge of preparing more teachers in a high quality program to meet the current teacher shortage.

Talk - verbal discourse.   Both journal reflections and seminar discussions were often focused on the nature of classroom discourse - how students and teachers talk and work together. Of particular interest to CTs was how students responded to their questioning strategies. This led to discussing such issues as: which students were answering questions; were there differences in frequency and quality of responses from boys and girls; in Spanish or English; were their answers describing the activities they had been doing in sufficient detail (vivid adjectives, etc.); could CTs assess how well students were understanding concepts and learning to read, write and communicate in standard English. Thinking about these issues raised in discussion were the main substance of what they brought back to their classroom experience as ideas for improving their instructional strategies.

Students' written work and projects. Discussion about student writing focused on the following questions; what kinds of writing were students doing in class; what was the range of quality of this writing; were there examples of good description, explanation, presentation of data, and support of explanations with data; were CTs responding (verbally or in writing) to students' writing - how much, how often, and what was the nature of the responses; did students have an opportunity to read and respond to other students' writing; were students using computer technology to do their own research (resource materials/ internet search). As with verbal discourse, discussing these issues about students' written work had the potential to improve CT instructional strategies. In addition, written work provides more permanent evidence for allowing assessment of student learning and could be considered in more detail over time. CTs were proud to present examples of their students' work as evidence that their teaching was having positive results.

Example of action research agenda from discussion.   Seminar discussions led to the following suggestions for how a CT might encourage students to practice their English verbal and written skills: the CT doesn't need to have all the answers; both the CT and students should practice avoiding asking yes/no questions; the CT should avoid asking "why' questions - too big to answer easily; the CT needs to try to remember not to answer all questions; allow time for thinking.

Educational Importance

Factors that were strongly affected throughout the program were the attitude and beliefs of the CTs, particularly confidence and self-esteem. Therefore, the program supported the findings of Clarke and Hollingsworth (1994) that change in teaching practice is preceded by changes in attitudes and beliefs. As well, the program supported the findings of Berliner (1986) that beliefs and attitudes change when student outcomes are seen to improve, and the findings of Guskey and Sparks (1991) that training and sharing are crucial for effective inservice success.

Participants were clearly influenced by whether their practice made a difference to student learning in their classrooms (Billig, 2000). The time element is an important consideration - it was optimal for CTs to be able to perceive an improvement in student outcomes during instruction. Especially motivating were instances of students interacting

directly with the CT in the context of classroom activities perceived by the CT to be an improvement on the kind of interaction formerly elicited in such situations.

Due to this study, strategies have been developed to improve WWC for the next year of the project that can lead to a sustainable service learning approach to the early field experience course. These strategies include: (a) continuing CTs working in pairs in the classroom; (b) lengthening meeting time immediately after the experience to reflect, discuss, and collaborate; (c) holding regular meetings with the principal, teachers and university supervisor to discuss and modify the project in progress; and (d) encouraging parental involvement in the project.

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