

## **Domestic and international service learning experiences: A comparative study of pre-service teacher outcomes**

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This paper examines pre-service teacher outcomes associated with service learning in domestic and international settings. Participants included upper-division, undergraduate-level pre-service teachers who participated in service learning experiences in either local, domestic settings (Orange County, CA) or international settings (Shanghai and Changshu, China). Outcomes initially considered included academic achievement, civic engagement, career goal clarification, and the development of cultural competencies. Pre/post-experience surveys and course reflections were analysed to identify within and between group differences in participant reports. Findings indicated positive outcomes across contexts in respect to academic achievement and opportunities for career goal clarification. The international service learning context appeared to facilitate enhanced outcomes in relation to development of professional skills and strategies as well as personal development. The international service learning context was also generally rated by participants as more 'impactful' than the domestic service learning context.

Experiential learning is supported by constructivist theoretical principles recommending that students have an active role in learning where authentic tasks are introduced. In teacher preparation, experiential learning is frequently situated in classroom or community-based contexts where participants have opportunities to interact with children, adolescents, and/or families with support from experienced teachers and university faculty and staff. In research investigations of outcomes associated with experiential learning, undergraduate students report that these field-based experiences are beneficial to their professional development (Denton, 1986) and contribute to their understandings of multicultural and urban settings (Boyle-Baise, 2005). Empirical studies indicate that service learning, a specific form of experiential learning where there is alignment between participant academic and professional development goals and community needs, has the potential to impact academic achievement, career goal clarification, civic engagement, and the development of cultural competencies (e.g. Batchelder & Root, 1994; Bliesner & Artale, 2001; Ference & Bell, 2004; Fitch, 2004; Kiely, 2004; Gomez, Strage, Knutson Miller, & Garcia Nevarez (in press); Knutson Miller & Yen, 2005; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002; Osborne, Hammerich & Hensley, 1998; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000; Stanton, 1991; Strage, 2000; Weisskirch, 2003).

International service learning experiences may offer unique opportunities for enhancing academic achievement and professional development as participants address aligned community needs (Annette, 2003; Grusky, 2000; Knutson Miller & Gonzalez, 2009; Roberts, 2003). Potential outcomes include heightened personal and professional flexibility (Baker, 2000; Roberts, 2003) as well as enhanced appreciation of cultural diversity, awareness of global issues, and development of general cultural competencies (Alfaro, 2008; Annette, 2003; Cushner, 2007; Hartman & Rola, 2000; Kiely, 2004; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Roberts, 2007; Thompson, 2002; Van Hoff & Verbeeten, 2005). It has

been argued that international service learning experiences are potentially transformative in nature or offer opportunities for deep personal and/or professional growth (Grusky, 2000; Kiely, 2005; Roberts, 2003).

Empirical study is needed to continue to build and support the theoretical rationale for service learning experiences in pre-service teacher preparation (Annette, 2003; Boyle-Baise & O'Grady, 2001; Kraft, 2002, Roberts, 2003; Wade, Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005) and align these experiences with specific learning and professional development goals (Boyle-Baise, 2005; LaMaster, 2001; Maxie, 2001; Root, Callahan, & Sepanski, 2002). This comparative study examines the impact of service learning in diverse contexts on the professional development of pre-service teachers. Outcomes including academic achievement, civic engagement, career goal clarification, and the development of cultural competencies are considered. The potential impact of international service learning experiences is of particular interest as Heyl and McCarthy (2005) argue that institutions of higher education must prepare teachers who have international experience and are able to incorporate a global perspective into their teaching.

## **Method**

Participants in this investigation included (a) undergraduate-level, pre-service teachers participating in service learning activities in multicultural Southern California communities (N = 87; 6 males, 81 females; 13 Asian American/Pacific Islander, 42 Caucasian, 22 Latino/Hispanic, 10 other or ethnicity not reported) and (b) those participating in service learning activities in Shanghai and Changshu, China (N = 35; 4 males, 31 females; 7 Asian American/Pacific Islander, 24 Caucasian, 4 Latino/Hispanic). All participants were concurrently enrolled in a required 3-unit upper division practicum course at a California State University campus taught by the same instructor. Further, service activities in both domestic and international settings included the facilitation of language development and literacy skills of elementary school-aged children. Field based activities in both settings included direct interaction with children under the supervision of a cooperating teacher. The primary distinction between sections of this course was the location of the service learning experience (domestic vs. international settings).

All participants completed pre-post experience surveys that included Likert-type items. These items were used to assess academic, civic, career, and culturally-related perspectives before and at the conclusion of the course and its associated field experience. Analyses included paired sample t-tests to examine pre/post service learning within group differences and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine between group differences. In addition, all participants submitted a series of structured reflections linking course themes and service learning experiences. Reflections were analysed through comparative content analysis to identify group similarities and differences. Categorical codes were developed in conjunction with critical review of reflection content.

## Results

Quantitative analysis of pre/post service learning surveys indicated alignment of participants' expected and achieved outcomes in several respects. For example, participants across settings anticipated (pre) and reported (post) that their service learning experiences would contribute toward their understandings of (domestic M pre = 3.54, domestic M post = 3.61; international M pre = 3.61, international M post = 3.69) and abilities to apply course material (domestic M pre = 3.67, domestic M post = 3.60; international M pre = 3.59, international M post = 3.69). Participants across conditions were also committed to making a difference in children's lives through their work both pre and post service learning (domestic M pre = 3.89, domestic M post = 3.83; international M pre = 3.87, international M post = 3.94). International service learning participants, in particular, anticipated and reported that the experience would impact their development of professional skills and strategies (M pre = 3.71, M post = 3.74) and assist them in the identification of personal strengths and weaknesses (international M pre = 3.71, international M post = 3.80).

Statistically significant differences between expected and achieved service learning outcomes were also found (see Table 1). Participants in both groups reported service learning experiences enhanced their understandings of challenges and resources within the placement site/community to a greater than anticipated degree (domestic  $t = -2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ; international  $t = -5.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, participants reported their service learning experiences had a greater than anticipated impact on preparation for their future careers ( $t = -2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $t = -2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

ANOVA results revealed statistically significant group differences in respect to civic engagement or engaged professionalism. Specifically, gains in understanding challenges and resources within the placement site/community reported by international service learning participants were higher than those reported by domestic service learning participants ( $F = 14.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ). International service learning participants also reported greater benefits of their service activities to the placement site/community ( $F = 8.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, international service learning participants reported greater anticipated ( $F = 27.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and actual ( $F = 38.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) awareness of global needs as a result of their experiences than those in domestic settings.

Group differences in career development and cultural-related dispositions were also found. International service learning participants reported their experiences had a greater impact on their professional skill development (e.g. instructional and behavior modification strategies) than domestic service learning participants ( $F = 7.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). International participants also indicated things learned through their field experiences were more relevant to their professional development and career goals ( $F = 6.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, international service learning participants reported they looked forward to and enjoyed opportunities to work with linguistically ( $F = 25.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $F = 25.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and culturally diverse ( $F = 5.58$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $F = 9.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ) individuals more than participants in domestic settings.

Qualitative outcomes generally mirrored quantitative findings in this investigation. In reflections linking course themes to service experiences, participants in both domestic and international settings strongly emphasised career-related outcomes. When asked to discuss outcomes associated with service experiences, all participants across settings incorporated general themes related to career development in their reflections. For example, participants noted learning about "being a professional", "effective communication with teachers and students", and application of course themes (e.g., ethical principles, child abuse reporting mandates, specific state/national policies) to service learning experiences. Many participants more specifically discussed opportunities for career goal clarification/refinement (54.2% of domestic service learning participants, 54.3% of international service learning participants). These comments typically addressed preferences in relation to settings in which they hoped to work with children, grade level, student population, etc. As one participant noted, "I've learned more about my grade level preferences. I was sure I wanted to teach kindergarten, but this semester I worked in 3rd grade and love it!"

Although the majority of participants in both groups noted service learning experiences enhanced their knowledge of teaching skills and strategies, the percentage of international participants directly reporting this impact was higher than that of domestic participants (77.1% vs. 57.6%). For example, one international service learning participant reported, "I learned how to plan under pressure." Another noted, "I learned how to use positive reinforcement to encourage the students to participate." Furthermore, group differences were also revealed in respect to specific professional strategies used to facilitate communication and understanding in participant interactions with children. Both international (94.29%) and domestic (93.10%) service learning participants reported the use of verbal strategies (in English) to facilitate communication and understanding. International service learning participants were somewhat more likely than domestic service learning participants to use verbal strategies in the learner's native language if other than English (14.29% vs. 3.45%). Group differences were also revealed in that international service learning participants used more diverse strategies to facilitate communication and understanding. For example, 80% vs. 4.60% noted use of translation assistance, 80% vs. 14.94% noted use of visual strategies, and 40% vs. 29.89% noted use of nonverbal cues to facilitate communication with and understanding of children on site (international vs. domestic service learning participants, respectively).

Another between-group difference was revealed in respect to the impact of service learning experiences on personal development. In fact, 54.3% of international service learning participants noted their service learning experiences had a significant impact on their personal growth and development as well as career-related preparation. For example, one international service learning participant stated, "Surprisingly, I have learned a lot about myself since the beginning of this course and associated field experiences!" A second wrote, "I have learned so much about myself. The most important thing I've learned though is that I'm very flexible and can adapt really well to new situations." Another noted, "I have learned that I am very brave!" while her colleague indicated "I found strength and creativity that I didn't know I had." In contrast, personal development was only noted by 3.4% of domestic service learning participants. For example, one domestic service learning participant stated, "I have learned a lot

about how I deal with things inside and outside of the classroom." Although personal development was not initially indicated in statements of study purposes, it was clearly relevant to pre-service teachers participating in international service learning experiences.

Finally, group differences were apparent in overall participant evaluations of their service learning experiences. Although the vast majority of submitted reflections indicated overall positive evaluation (97.6% of domestic and 94.3% of international service learning participants), there was a significant group difference in affective tone. More specifically, 71.4% of international service learning participants noted their experiences were extremely positive or impactful. For example, international service learning participants commented: "This was the best university course I've taken"; "This program can no way compare to other programs I have participated in; the whole experience totally exceeded my expectations"; and "The program and experience were amazing." This type of language was only used by 1.2% of domestic service learning participants. Typical comments made by domestic service learning participants were as follows: "I liked this class"; "I enjoyed this course and program"; and "I feel more prepared to enter the classroom."

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this analysis of participant perspectives was to examine the "value-added" nature of service learning in diverse contexts. Outcomes including academic achievement, civic engagement, career goal clarification, and the development of cultural competencies were explored here. Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed interesting similarities and differences associated with pre-service teacher participation in domestic and international service learning experiences.

Both international and domestic service learning participants reported these experiences enhanced their understandings of course learning goals including the ability to apply course material to practice. Therefore, one might conclude that, in general, field-based experiences linking service and course learning goals have a positive impact on pre-service teacher academic achievement. It is recommended that future investigations include triangulation with student perception data to other indicators of academic achievement to more thoroughly assess group similarities and differences. It can be noted that the vast majority of participants across contexts earned a grade of B (complete) or better in the practicum course.

Second, although participants across conditions reported enhanced understanding of challenges and resources within the placement site/community, group differences were also revealed in respect to civic outcomes or dispositions associated with engaged professionalism. International service learning participants reported the actual benefit of their service to the placement site/community was greater than anticipated; the reported benefit was higher than that indicated by domestic participants. International service learning participants also reported higher gains in understanding challenges and resources within the placement site/community and awareness of global needs as a result of their experiences than domestic service learning participants. While participants

in both groups anticipated their service efforts would "make a difference" to students in the local community, those involved in international service learning experiences reported actual impact was even greater than they anticipated. The greater gains reported by international service learning participants in understanding of challenges and resources in the placement community were anticipated as they had less initial familiarity with their placement contexts than those completing service learning experiences in domestic, relatively local, settings. Of particular interest is that data trends reported here indicate international service learning experiences have the potential to contribute to an awareness of global needs that Heyl and McCarthy (2005) argue are needed for K-12 teachers capable of integrating an international, global dimension into classroom instruction and curriculum.

Undergraduate-level pre-service teachers in both domestic and international settings reported being more well-prepared for future careers as a result of their experiences. In this case, it may be concluded that another general benefit of field-based experiences, including service learning, is that they create opportunities for career exploration and preparation and contribute to an awareness of the skills needed to be successful in future professional roles. Results revealed statistically significant group differences in respect to the strength of these outcomes. For example, international service learning participants reported their experiences had a greater impact on skill development and that lessons learned were more relevant to their professional development and career goals than domestic service learning participants. Participants in both groups reported service learning had a positive impact on career-related outcomes including opportunities to clarify and refine career interests. Higher percentages of international service learning participants discussed the impact of their respective experiences on development of specific teaching skills and strategies. Again, while both groups reported positive gains in relation to career exploration and skill awareness, those reported by international service learning participants were higher.

International service learning participants also reported looking forward to and enjoyment of opportunities to work with linguistically and culturally diverse children more than domestic participants. It should be noted that participants in both domestic and international contexts interacted with children in classrooms who spoke languages and came from cultural contexts distinct from those experienced by the pre-service teachers. Further investigation is needed to determine if group differences in initial positive dispositions may have impacted participant decisions to complete an international service learning experience. Although generalisation is limited, international service learning participants reported greater growth in attitudes and dispositions that may be foundational to further professional multicultural competencies. These findings are consistent with international participant pre/post cross-cultural interest gains summarised by Cushner (2007). In addition, international service learning participants reported the use of more diverse strategies to facilitate communication with and understanding for the children with whom they interacted. While this may be related to perceived opportunity to communicate with children in culturally relative ways due to instructional context, again, reinforcement for the use of multi-modal communication strategies may be enhanced in the international context with potential for transfer to domestic and/or future professional settings.

In summary, both domestic and international service learning participants reported these experiences enhanced their abilities to apply course content. Further, all participants reported service learning provided preparation for their future careers and enhanced their understandings of challenges and resources within their respective placement sites/communities. As Annette (2003), Grusky (2000), Heyl and McCarthy (2005), and Roberts (2003) suggest, the international field-based experience appeared to facilitate professional development outcomes that were more powerful in nature than those reported by domestic service learning participants. International participants reported greater benefits of their service activities to the placement site/community. They also reported higher gains in terms of understanding challenges and resources within the placement site/community and awareness of global needs as a result of their experiences. In addition, international service learning participants reported higher skill development gains and greater relevancy of the experience to their professional goals. International service learning participants also reported greater enjoyment in working with linguistically and culturally diverse individuals than domestic service learning participants. Finally, international service learning participants reported their experiences facilitated personal growth and development and generally rated them as extremely positive and/or impactful.

As generalisation of these findings is limited given relatively small sample sizes and context specifications, future directions for research are proposed here. First, additional data must be gathered and analysed to continue to examine the value-added nature of service learning in diverse contexts. Future research studies should also incorporate observational and performance-based measures to enrich, support, and/or test findings reported here. Further exploration of context and participant outcomes is needed to continue to assess the impact of service learning on the academic achievement and professional development of pre-service teachers. Longitudinal study is also required to examine the impact of these experiences on later professional practice. The data reported here suggest field-based experiences provide significant professional development opportunities. International service learning experiences, in particular, appear to provide unique and potentially powerful contexts for the professional development of pre-service teachers with an enhanced global understanding and a strong foundation upon which to build further multicultural competencies. As one international one service learning participant noted, "This course has been unlike anything I have ever completed. It was a lot of physically draining, mentally exhausting work—but at the same time I looked forward to waking up every morning to see the children. This program was a rich and wonderful cultural experience. I grew to appreciate the Chinese culture and develop an interest in learning the language. This experience changed my life."

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