

A transformative experience: A short-term cross-cultural service-learning immersion to Kenya

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Initial teacher education programs are continuously looking for ways to grow and evolve to meet the changing needs of pre-service teachers (PSTs) who will face a diverse student population when they begin their careers. This study examines a short-term, cross-cultural, service-learning immersion undertaken by 21 undergraduate PSTs to an internally displaced people's (IDP) camp in Kenya for three weeks. The PSTs worked in the local school, a home for orphaned children, and in the IDP. The impact of the trip and the subsequent affiliation with the school and the community has had a significant effect in shaping the perceptions of the participating PSTs. This article explores the impact of the service-learning experience from the perspective of the evolving personal growth and professional competencies of the PSTs and the importance of implementing such programs with PSTs to enhance learning and improve perceptions about the importance of education.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, service-learning has become an increasingly important element in higher education, particularly in the United States and of late in Australia (Boland, 2010). In particular, service-learning has been found to increase participants' sense of personal efficacy, awareness of the world, awareness of personal values and increase their levels of engagement (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Lee, 2000). There is a profusion of evidence suggesting that students who complete service as part of their undergraduate course, experience positive effects on personal leadership and communication skills (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Wade & Yarborough, 1996); higher levels of cognitive development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Osborne, Hammerich & Hensley, 1998); and stimulate their "moral imagination" (Strain, 2005, p.71). The potential positive impacts of service-learning for undergraduate students are evident in the literature, specifically for pre-service teachers (PSTs). This current paper postulates that a short-term, cross-cultural, service-learning immersion can have transformative effects on personal growth and the perceptions of PSTs towards their future careers.

The study focused on the experience of an inaugural service-learning immersion to a small, displaced community in Kenya and the impact of that experience on the PSTs. The authors report on the effect of the immersion experience on the PSTs using observations of the PSTs in-country and PSTs' reflective journals. This paper adds to the current qualitative and empirical literature with regard to the holistic and professional development of PSTs who undertake service-learning as part of their undergraduate studies in education.

Background

The University of Notre Dame Australia (Notre Dame) is one of only two private universities in Australia and the only private Catholic university in the country. Notre Dame has a long-standing history, in its pre-service teacher education courses, of implementing service-learning to allow students to gain hands-on experience in their communities and further afield. In 2010, a guest speaker was invited to address a group of approximately 300 undergraduate primary education students about her experience in starting a non-government organisation (NGO) that built a school for the children of internally displaced peoples in Kenya. The address stressed the importance of education as a vehicle to end the cycle of poverty. Although not initially envisaged as a vehicle to drive service-learning, the address was inspiring and ignited interest and curiosity in the students to get involved with the NGO. This involvement happened initially through fundraising events and later as a service-learning immersion experience.

The community visited was displaced by violence following the 2007 elections in Kenya. Over 200,000 people became refugees in their own country following the elections and ensuing

violence. This specific community had no local school until the NGO, So They Can, opened a school in the area. As part of the development of the school, the academics and students from Notre Dame were invited, not only to visit the school, but also to help teach the children and share their resources and ideas with the local teachers. The immersion was envisaged primarily as a service to the displaced community, but also to enhance the perspective of the PSTs with regard to the importance of education. Unlike many international programs offered to students, no academic credit towards their course was available for participation in the immersion. Although the university gave its in-principle support for the immersion, it was a three-week extra-curricular activity and the students gave up their own time during university holidays and paid their own way. In addition to working in the school, staff and students volunteered their time at a home for orphaned children, also opened and run by the NGO, and spent time with other children living in the internally displaced people's (IDP) camp who did not attend the school.

Literature review

As a concept, service-learning can be viewed through multiple lenses including but not limited to experiential, progressive, social and multicultural education, social justice, action, community and undergraduate research and critical theory (Butin, 2006). Through an educational lens, the Centre for Service and Leadership defines service-learning as a teaching method, "which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility" (Casey, 2009, p.1). Seifer (1998) says it is a "structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection" (p.274). Lavery (2009) defines it more simply by referring to service-learning as "a teaching method where classroom learning is deepened and extended through service to others" (p.28). A definition that suits the context of this study is "an educational methodology that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation for community work, and deliberate reflection" (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring & Kerrigan, 2001, p. v). Service-learning was utilised as a pedagogical tool, which combined learning in a cross-cultural community context with academic learning to help students develop knowledge, skills and cognitive capacities to deal effectively with the complex social issues and problems they were to encounter.

According to Hurd (2008), courses that incorporate service-learning generally provide greater learning benefits than those that do not. The benefits include a deeper understanding of course material, a better understanding of the complex problems people face, and an ability to apply course material to new situations and real world problems. Further to Hurd's contentions, international service-learning has been shown to "... enhance intellectual growth, personal development and global mindedness" (Walters, Garii & Walters 2009, p.4). In this particular immersion experience the teacher educators used service-learning to foster ownership of, sensitivity to, and participation in community-building activities that were able to transform approaches to learning (Swick, 2001). With respect to students, service-learning has long been linked to academic success (Astin et al., 2000); personal efficacy and identity (Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001); cognition (Batchelder & Root, 1994); moral development (Cram, 1998); and, leadership (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler et al., 2001; Lavery, 2008, 2009). Additionally, proponents of service-learning would support the notion that it enriches individuals' sense of community and belongingness (Lisman, 1998) and further enhances a respect for and tolerance of diversity; thus allowing the students to develop a greater awareness of societal issues whilst developing a greater moral and ethical sense (Coles 1993). Roose (2001) contends that international placements allow new teachers the opportunity to recognise the importance of culture, its connection to community and the relationships between language, culture and practice. Enhancing these notions is the idea that international service-learning experiences can be transformative in nature (Kiely, 2005).

The literature demonstrates that despite its many manifestations, service-learning has the potential to influence students in multiple ways. Moreover, when that service is linked to their

future profession, its impact is further enhanced: “Participating individuals acquire a new understanding about life, culture, self and others” and, “teaching abroad makes more significant and long lasting changes in teachers’ classroom practices” (Walters et al., 2009 p.152). The specific goals of any service-learning experience, however, are dictated by the service provided and the nature of those providing it and participating in it. In general terms Butin (2003) poses the following questions with regard to better understanding the nature of a particular service-learning experience: “Is service-learning a pedagogical strategy for better comprehension of course content? A philosophical stance committed to the betterment of the local or global community? An institutionalised mechanism fostering students’ growth and self-awareness concerning issues of diversity, volunteerism and civic responsibility (2003, 1675)?

Butin’s (2003) questions form the basis of an assessment of the current program. Through the framework provided by the questions, the complexity of the international service-learning immersion was explored to better understand the impact of the immersion experience on the PSTs. The questions that formed the basis of the study were:

- What effect does the experience of a short-term, cross-cultural, service-learning immersion to an internally displaced people's camp in Kenya have on undergraduate pre-service teachers?
- How does this service-learning immersion experience address the questions of service-learning as articulated by Butin (2003)?

At Notre Dame, Sydney an international cross-cultural approach was undertaken to immerse students in an experience that would challenge their preconceptions and presumptions about their future professional world and observe the impact of the experience on the participants. This immersion was envisaged as a pedagogical tool outside the constructs of the students’ course of study. Unlike many service-learning programs it was external to their course, but still run by university staff for the purpose of enhancing students’ learning. The intent in not directly linking it to specific learning objectives in a specific course or unit, is that it allowed students the freedom to let the experience dictate the learning, rather than the other way around. The only requirement of the immersion was critical reflection in the form of a written journal, aimed at fostering PSTs’ awareness of self and their response to issues of diversity, identity, and social and civic responsibility.

Methodology

A qualitative ethnographic case-oriented understanding (Schutt, 2009) approach was used to explore the impact of the immersion experience on the PSTs during and after the immersion. Although not a true ethnography, the approach had significant aspects of the methodology. Specifically, the researchers used the time in-country to immerse with the PSTs to better understand the impact of the experience from their perspective and interpret that impact in light of Butin’s (2003) questions with regard to the purpose of service-learning. The case was defined by those PSTs who participated in the immersion experience; however, the researchers cannot be separated from the experience as they lived and worked alongside the PSTs. This significantly affects the data, in that it cannot be considered objective; rather, it is interpreted in light of the shared experience. The students ranged from 19 to 27 years of age and all except two were undergraduate PSTs: one was a current teacher who graduated the previous year and the other was an undergraduate nursing student. Only data on the PSTs is presented. All of those partaking in the immersion agreed to take part in the research aligned to the experience. The students provided consent to be observed and recorded throughout the immersion. In addition to observations and selected recordings, pre- and post-trip meetings were filmed for the purposes of the research. A number of students were interviewed for a film that was made about the immersion and others gave interviews for various media publications about their experience, which also added to the data. Lastly, the PSTs shared their journal reflections with the researchers, which helped to corroborate researchers’ field notes made throughout the immersion.

A combination of data collection and analysis methods was employed to understand the immersion experience: ethnographic observations (Atkinson, 1988) were supplemented by a review of student journals, recordings and interviews the PSTs participated in. The data was analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis to ascertain the nature of the immersion and the impact of the experience from each participant's perspective. The individual data was collated to identify emerging themes and trends. Once the emerging themes were apparent the researcher observations were categorised into those themes and interpreted in light of the overall immersion experience and the impact on the PSTs.

The limitations of utilising a methodology such as the one employed are varied. The power dimension between the teacher as researcher and the PST participants is an obvious drawback; however, the ethnographic aspect of embedding with the PSTs and making constant and consistent observations, negates some of the effect of PSTs feeling disempowered by the process. PSTs got used to having the researchers around and were focused on their experience rather than the research. Embedding with the PSTs also presented a significant limitation in the researchers' ability to be objective in their observations and conclusions. While we believe embedding with the PSTs provided more authentic data, it cannot be denied that bias exists in the findings; the bias is inherent in the study as we shared many of the same experiences as the PSTs. We do however believe that the findings presented are an accurate portrayal of the PSTs' experience as interpreted by the researchers. In fact, we believe that the internal validity of the study, or the reliability of the results presented, are strengthened by the researchers' own experience of the immersion: the researchers' were not exempt from the impact of the immersion experience, and in self-reflection among the three researchers, all confirmed that it had a transformative effect on their perceptions, similar to those of the PSTs.

The validity and generalisability of the study are not argued here. Rather we note the limitations of the current research and seek to convey the findings of this experience to articulate the possibilities of similar programs to have transformative effects on pre-service teachers, and other pre-service vocational studies.

This article presents a summary of those themes about the nature of this service-learning immersion and the perceived impact of the immersion on the PSTs. Where possible, direct student quotes are used to support the conclusions of the researchers. Findings presented are reflective of the case, not the individual students. Butin's (2003) questions are used to frame this service-learning experience against other international service-learning programs, with regard to its purpose and its perceived impact in light of that purpose. The findings provide contextualised insight into the intangible and unquantifiable facets of short-term, cross-cultural service-learning immersions for PSTs, specifically in poverty-stricken developing areas.

Results

One of the motivations for taking PSTs on this service-learning immersion to Kenya was to provide a context in which they could develop confidence in their own abilities and their own practice. As a result of the immersion PSTs developed a greater self-awareness of their aptitudes and an ability to acknowledge and understand their students' strengths and limitations, which made it easier to make significant connections with the community. International experiences have the capacity to build intercultural competence and a global perspective (Sutherland, 2011), which are essential 21st century skills and part of the graduate attributes at Notre Dame. One PST commented that the opportunity to go to Kenya, "... has changed us and we each agree that what has changed is almost impossible to describe; however, the effects of this change are visible for all to see and they have all been to make us better teachers and better people." Another PST noted: "I know that it has been the single most life changing experience ... and that I will be going back [to Kenya] each and every time I have the fortune to be able to. Exactly why this is the case is hard to describe." These statements illustrate both the tangible and intangible aspects of the impact the immersion had on the PSTs and exemplifies the reflection of the PSTs with regard to that impact.

There were two features of the immersion that seemed to have a significant effect on the PSTs during their time in country. One of these was the pairing of PSTs in the classroom. While not common in Australian professional experience placements, the pairing of PSTs provided extra support, given that there was no supervising teacher in the classroom, and also allowed the classroom teaching to be an observational tool for learning. It also helped develop PSTs' capacity to recognise and deal with frustrations that naturally emerged, thus leading to a feeling of satisfaction and confidence. One PST commented: "[I was] physically and mentally drained at the close of each day... however, this has not impacted on my desire to be a teacher; rather it enhanced it." Another PST noted that, "the experience and professional development that I take away with me due to the Kenya experience will forever change the way I teach and approach teaching."

The second significant feature of the immersion that had a noteworthy effect on the PSTs was the daily reflection sessions, which were undertaken after a full school day and a few hours at the children's home. The reflection sessions seemed to help the PSTs cope with the difficult circumstances and helped them focus on their own learning. One PST's journal entry expressed the extent of their reflection: "[the experience] heightened my understanding of life and others, has challenged my comfort zone and expanded my ideas with regard to the importance of teaching and education." The opportunity for PSTs to meet, debrief and reflect at the end of each day became an instrumental part of the immersion. These informal meetings provided students with time to relax, discuss the challenges they faced, and how to respond to those challenges. This afforded the PSTs insight into themselves as individuals and allowed them to cultivate their ability to function more effectively in an unfamiliar cultural setting. Despite this being a short-term, service-learning immersion, the PSTs forged strong connections with the students and teachers at the school and their host families.

The pairing of PSTs and the daily reflection sessions also brought to light other issues such as the need to be responsive to the students' needs and required the PSTs to change their teaching methods and plans accordingly. As a consequence, this led to more responsive and organic teaching methods and more relevant content. One PST expressed this quite clearly: "Professionally, I have gained the knowledge that nothing can ever be truly planned. I think that I learned that I am adaptable and can think quickly on my feet. I think this lesson is invaluable." Despite a focus on the work of teaching and as teachers, the PSTs were gaining valuable life experiences. For PSTs who had limited classroom teaching experience, the immersion was always going to be a challenging undertaking that could affect their confidence. There was a fine line between challenging the PSTs and ensuring that their confidence remained intact. One PST commented, "this trip has allowed me to be content at heart and be happy with everything I have. The outward effects of this change are that I have become a lot calmer and more content with a focus to always bring my best to my professional experiences."

The literature increasingly recognises that teachers' professional knowledge is not only constructed through the in-class components of formal training, but also by broader learning experiences (Sutherland, 2011). The immersion in Kenya cultivated qualities such as: self-reliance, autonomy and conflict management. This idea was reflected by the PSTs, as suggested in this student's journal:

Professionally, I don't find the idea of working with ESL [English as a second language] students nearly as daunting and I feel I have a greater understanding of how to teach them, make things easier for them, explain things or show things to them as part of the lesson. I think I am more empathetic, caring and understanding.

Another noted, "... despite the evident challenges, before the trip I had doubts about becoming a teacher for the rest of my life, but since Kenya I now know I have made the right choice."

Having been placed in a confronting environment, the PSTs developed the capacity to turn a difficult situation into a positive life and profession-affirming event: "I was provided with many opportunities to develop various teaching skills and an appreciation of the fact that I can make a

real difference in the world of education.” Another PST was able to encapsulate in a few words what most others seemed to feel: “to experience another way of life, to live with the families and experience part of their day to day life changed my perspective on my own life.” For PSTs, having these challenging experiences and overcoming them translated into far greater confidence within the context of their formal education and helped the PSTs develop into professionals. One PST’s comment encapsulated this idea:

The greatest learning that I got from the trip was confidence and belief in my own abilities. Since returning to Australia, people around me have noticed that something has changed. I have also noticed the changes in myself. I have grown personally and professionally. Africa changed me. Kenya changed me!

Discussion

Although just a brief synopsis of the qualitative data collected, what has been presented illustrates that the Kenya immersion allowed PSTs the opportunity to see the importance of education in action and to realise that education is a privilege in much of the world. They experienced the hardships in living in the community: no running water, no indoor plumbing, barely enough to eat, and 70-80% unemployment rates. However, they also experienced the immense gratitude from the community, which helped to cement a new understanding with regard to the power of hope that education brings to a community in need. For PSTs, the experience of engaging with a ‘cultural other’ allowed them to better understand, respect and engage with the cultural plurality of diverse societies which reflect the classrooms in which they will ultimately work.

In addressing the questions posed by Butin (2003) surrounding service-learning, it has become clear that this particular immersion was an “institutionalised mechanism fostering students’ growth and self-awareness concerning issues of diversity, volunteerism and civic responsibility?” (2003, p. 1675). To this dimension of service-learning, we would add that it also affirmed students’ career choices as future teachers. The experience in Kenya immersed students in a culture they were largely unfamiliar with; it challenged any pre-conceived notions they may have had prior to arriving - notions about the country, the people, the environment that they would be working in, and their own ideas as to how they would feel and respond. In particular, one of the issues that continually came up in reflection sessions, especially in the first week, was the students’ broadening global perspective, heightened by the experiences they were being exposed to. One significant event came on the third day during a tour of the internally displaced people’s (IDP) camp. Many families in the IDP community lived in tents provided by the United Nations in 2007, tents designed to last for six months. Many of those tents were in tatters, all had dirt floors, and few had any furniture. Few in the community spoke any English at all, and those that did, spoke it as their third language. These circumstances helped to frame the immersion as a life experience as opposed to a professional one.

The focus each day was on intensive classroom practice; emotionally demanding time spent with children displaced from their homes; with orphans who previously lived on a rubbish dump; the provision of activities for children who did not have the opportunity to attend school; and, helping a community that lived in extremely challenging circumstances. What the PSTs experienced, and what we as researchers observed, was what Lantolf and Poehner (2004) called the dynamic view of teaching and learning, which currently informs socio-constructivist models of learning prevalent in almost all initial teacher education programs in Australia (Farkota, 2005). This view of teaching and learning helps students to associate their theoretical knowledge and their practical experiences and in turn promotes, “a critical, reflexive and analytical orientation to learning” (Sutherland, 2011, p.152). As embedded in a service experience, learning was aided by the daily reflection sessions, which were reassuring and self-affirming for the PSTs. Observations by the researchers during the reflective sessions were confirmed by student journal entries and illustrated intensive reflective thinking triggered by the range of emotions experienced as a result of the immersion. Eyler and Giles (1999) claim that for many people, an emotional reaction leads to more thinking, and at times, more focused thinking. For undergraduate PSTs, these intense

daily experiences allowed them to develop an appreciation for their lives, their culture, and in some cases a newfound respect for other cultures.

It is well known that teachers are the single biggest influence on student achievement variance (Hattie, 2003; Rowe, 2003). By cultivating PSTs' education to foster the qualities of equity and diversity within a global context, they can better realise and reflect on the importance of their work. Whilst arguments can be made that the length of time spent on this immersion would not warrant significant lasting effects, Hoffman-Hicks (2000) suggests that the length of the program is not necessarily the most significant variable; rather, it is the degree of intention and determination by the learners, not the actual length of time spent in the country that is most important.

In the immersion context, personal growth and self-awareness seemingly outweighed the professional and formal learning linked to the PSTs' university course. However, the lack of classroom supervision from the local school staff forced the PSTs to develop essential skills to engage students, who neither understood their approach, nor the language they spoke. Evidence from researchers and practitioners suggest that teachers should live and/or study in diverse and unfamiliar environments as a means of enhancing their social, cultural and emotional capacities to maximise the learning potential of their students (Walters et al., 2009). Students enrolled in undergraduate education courses at Notre Dame are required to build pedagogical knowledge with regard to the impact of diversity and culture on student learning and to also build their capacity to effectively meet the needs of all students they encounter in the classroom. Sydney abounds with cultural and socio-economic diversity, and experiences such as the Kenya immersion can only enhance students' capacities as educators in these areas.

Returning to the driving question regarding the impact of a short-term, cross-cultural service-learning immersion, the findings suggest that there was significant development of PSTs' emotional, personal and reflective proficiencies and not insignificant effects on professional competencies. The researchers feel that the impacts noted were intensified by the difficult conditions under which the immersion took place. The researchers agree that they had never before seen such a significant change in PST competency in such a short a time frame. It is not expected that other initial teacher education programs could replicate this immersion with similar results, but rather that as teacher educators we continue to look for ways to extend our students to maximise their potential to be better teachers.

Teacher educators can use service-learning to foster ownership of, sensitivity to, and participation in community-building activities. These activities can transform students' understanding of global issues such as the importance of education. By the end of the immersion, the PSTs better realised the far-reaching effects of education to offer hope and enhance the well-being of people with regard to health, education, environment and job-building. Awareness of the positive effects of education is essential to the PSTs' success as future teachers. It became evident that high-quality, short-term immersion programs can have a significant impact on PSTs' personal growth and also their professional competencies. What is not clear, however, is whether those effects will last. Longitudinal research on the impact of these types of endeavors is required to better understand the significance and duration of the impact. Additionally, while we have good understanding of the impact on PSTs, further research is needed regarding the impact on the community, the school and the students being 'served'.

As teacher educators, we should continually look for ways to enhance, broaden and deepen student experience. What we have articulated here balances hope and excitement in our work with the many challenges inherent in these types of experiences.

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