

Pre-service primary and early childhood teachers' perceptions of a service-learning experience

Shane Lavery and Sandro Sandri

University of Notre Dame Australia

This study, which is a replication of three previous studies, explored the perceptions of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers who undertook a service-learning course as part of their Bachelor of Education degree at an Australian university. The practical component of the service-learning entailed 13 hours of community engagement where pre-service teachers were responsible for accessing their own placements. Data were collected in two stages. Stage 1 entailed pre-service teachers completing an anonymous 10 to 15-minute survey following completion of the service-learning placement. The survey contained both qualitative and quantitative questions. A total of 44 pre-service teachers from a cohort of 52 completed the survey. Stage 2 of the data collection consisted of examining pre-service teachers' service-learning reflective journals, with 37 pre-service teachers volunteering their journals. The results indicated that pre-service teachers believed their service-learning experiences had positively impacted on their personal and professional development. They commented on characteristics such as enhanced confidence, greater empathy and compassion, respect for others, the ability to work outside one's comfort zone, and the capacity to show initiative.

Introduction

Service-learning is a well-credentialed teaching methodology within the tertiary sector. By the late 1980s, universities in the United States were employing service-learning programs through integration of service with academic study (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). Subsequently, service-learning programs developed internationally in countries such as South Africa (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005), China (Gong & Hu, 2011), Canada (Chambers, 2009), New Zealand (Tatebe, 2013) and parts of Europe (Luna, 2012). Within the Australian tertiary sector, service-learning began to appear in the early 2000s (Caspersz, Oлару & Smith, 2012). This article outlines the experiences of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers who choose to complete either a first or second-year service-learning course within their Bachelor of Education degree. The article considers those ways pre-service teachers believed their service experiences had impacted on them both personally and professionally.

Service-learning

Definitions of service-learning do vary. However, at its core, service-learning can be seen as a learning approach whereby students exercise leadership roles in thoughtfully planned service experiences that meet real needs in the community (Cipolle, 2010). The service is used to assist students in the mastery of academic content (Billig, 2011). A sense of collaboration is promoted between students and the community where student learning occurs and community needs are met (Colorado State University, 2021). It is this mutual

benefit which separates service-learning from other forms of community engagement such as internships and volunteerism where the main beneficiaries are the students or the community respectively (Kenworthy-U'Ren, Petri & Taylor, 2006). An important element of service-learning is that wherever possible, those being served define what the service tasks entail (Jacoby, 1996).

There are five interdependent stages critical to successful implementation of a service-learning program: investigation, preparation, action, reflection and demonstration (Kaye, 2014). Investigation focuses on student interests and needs and considers the types of placement appropriate for the student. Preparation entails identifying a specific placement and preparing a plan of action. Action involves undertaking the service placement. Reflection forms the link between the service and the learning and is “the bridge between the community service activities and the academic content of the course” (Indiana University, 2021). Demonstration involves students exhibiting their learned expertise through such activities as class presentations, reflective journals and group discussion.

Within teacher education, service-learning courses have been used to develop skills and provide real-life experiences for pre-service teachers (Bates, Drits, Allen & McCandless, 2009). Examples include the use of service-learning to promote diversity and inclusion (Mergler, Carrington, Boman, Kimber & Bland, 2017) and social justice and special needs education (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Service-learning programs within teacher education usually seek to place pre-service teachers in real-life experiences in areas potentially outside their comfort zone (Colby, Bercaw, Clarke & Galiardi, 2009). Many of these studies have predominately used data from pre-service secondary teachers. Authors such as Cain (2018); Iver, Carrington, Mercer and Silva (2018) and Nickels (2018) have explored the value of service-learning through the lens of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers, highlighting very similar positive responses to those of pre-service secondary teachers. This study attempts to add to that body of literature and similarly adds a positive response by pre-service primary and early childhood teachers.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this research was to explore pre-service primary and early childhood teachers' experiences of undertaking a 13-week service-learning course. In the light of the purpose there were four research questions:

- What do pre-service teachers find beneficial in undertaking a service-learning course as part of their teaching degree?
- What do pre-service teachers find challenging in undertaking a service-learning course as part of their teaching degree?
- What relevance do pre-service teachers ascribe to participating in the service-learning course as preparation for their profession (primary, early childhood)?
- What social awareness did pre-service teachers experience during the service-learning course?

Significance

The research is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the results provide insight into ways a service-learning program can enhance the personal and professional formation of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers. Secondly, the research has the capacity to identify means to refine and improve the service-learning program.

Research design

The epistemological approach underpinning the research is constructivist in nature. The constructivist approach to research is based on understanding the world of human experience and is typically seen as an approach to qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This constructivist research will use interpretivism, in particular that of symbolic interactionism, as its theoretical perspective. Interpretive social science strives to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it (Hennink et al., 2012; Neuman, 2011). The chosen methodology is an instrumental case study since this methodology promotes a general understanding of a phenomenon using a particular case (Harling, 2012). Accordingly, this study explores the experiences and perceptions of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers undertaking service-learning immersions in an educational or community agency in suburban Perth, remote areas in Western Australia, or in an international setting.

Replication study

This study, which explores the experiences of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers undertaking a 13-week service-learning course, is a replication study of three previous studies undertaken by the authors and another member of the University Service-learning in Education Research Team. These studies began in 2015. The first study examined how undertaking a service-learning course had prepared pre-service secondary teachers for their 10-week practicum (Coffey & Lavery, 2015). The second study investigated to what degree service-learning experiences had assisted pre-service secondary teachers in the development of the national graduate professional standards (Lavery & Coffey, 2016). The third study explored the potential of a service-learning program to prepare secondary pre-service teachers for the classroom (Lavery, Coffey & Sandri, 2018). In most cases a replication study is not carried out identically to the original study. Specifically, some features are altered “in an attempt to stretch or move beyond the original findings” (Gay et al., 2012, p. 67). This present study employed the same quantitative survey questions as in the previous studies. However, the participants in this study were pre-service primary and early childhood teachers. The qualitative data collection techniques for each of these studies have varied and have included: a post immersion survey, post immersion focus group and a review of pre-service teacher placement journals. This study also included a review of pre-service teacher placement journals.

Participants

A total of 44 participants from a cohort of 52 students completed the survey, 38 pre-service primary teachers and 6 pre-service early childhood teachers. All were studying a Bachelor of Education degree. As part of the degree these participants were undertaking either a first or second-year course in the primary service-learning specialisation: 29 participants in first year and 15 participants in second year. The majority of students undertaking the first-year course had little or no formal teaching practicum experience while those students studying the second-year course had at least one formal teaching practicum experience. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years. The majority of participants were female. To protect participant anonymity, no further demographic information was collected.

Context

The two courses undertaken by the participants are the first and second courses of a four-course service-learning specialisation within the primary Bachelor of Education. Early childhood pre-service teachers can undertake these courses as electives within their degree. The first-year course is designed to promote social justice understanding by studying a variety of social justice contexts and to provide a forum to reflect upon individual experiential encounters during the community placement. The second-year course explores the concept of service-learning as a process of enhancing leadership, in particular, problem solving, teamwork and engagement in group decision-making.

Both courses promote a critical reflective understanding in the way service-learning and social justice intertwine and enhance each other. Each course has two components, one, a series of linking workshops, the other requires pre-service teachers to engage in 13 hours of community placement. The resultant experience provides students with an educational mix of social analysis igniting a matrix of diverse rich reflections. Examples of placements are displayed in Table 1 and include learning support centres, charity services, pastoral youth work, various agencies to assist the aged, disabled and homeless. The service-learning placements are initiated by students in consultation with the lecturer. In embarking upon their community service-learning placements students follow the appropriate certification and protocols of working with children (if appropriate) and are covered with wide comprehensive University insurance policies specifically referencing service-learning placements.

Method

Data collection

Data collection occurred in two stages. Stage 1 entailed pre-service teachers undertaking an anonymous 10 to 15-minute survey following completion of the service-learning experience. The survey afforded pre-service teachers the opportunity to respond to a set of structured questions (both qualitative and quantitative) which explored their experiences regarding the service-learning immersion. The response rate for the survey

Table 1: Respondents service-learning placements

Placement	No	Organisation-agency	Nature of the activities
Educational institution	17	Private and public main secondary and primary school/ schools with special support centres (intellectual and physical disabilities)	Assisting teachers, working directly with students in structured learning activities
Community youth engagement	7	Disability sport programs with sporting organisations, youth camps, church-based youth support; Riding for the disabled	Engaged in activities by organising/ assisting/ coaching individual/ groups of students with varying degrees of social and/or physical/ mental disabilities
Early childhood centres	3	Pre-school early childhood centres	Structured and informal play at Reggio Emilia centre, early childhood centres
Overseas immersion program	5	Cambodian immersion program organised by the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle	Assisted local teachers, worked directly with students. Significantly disadvantaged rural community
Immersion in a remote Western Australian Indigenous school/ community	4	Remote school and Community, program organised by the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle	Assisted local teachers, worked directly with students. Experienced the traditional indigenous culture of the peoples
Charities	3	St Vincent de Paul; Cancer Council; Mental health support for men; Down Syndrome Australia	Activities involved supporting through interacting with staff and clients
Agency	5	Red Cross Soup Patrol; Camps for Kids; Red Frogs - drug minimisation; Silver Chain; Zero to Hero Foundation.	Direct contact with children, teenagers, adults

was 86% (44 from a cohort of 52). The survey contained nine questions: one demographic question to gain information regarding the type of service-learning placement; six open-ended questions concerning the nature of the service-learning immersion; and two close-ended multiple-response questions focusing upon the pre-service teachers' personal and professional development (Appendix A).

Stage 2 of the data collection consisted of examining pre-service teachers' service-learning reflective journals. As part of the assessment for the course, pre-service teachers completed a series of guided journal entries which described their experiences (Appendix B). Pre-service teachers were invited to submit their journals and 67% (35 of 52) of the cohort responded. Journals were emailed to researchers following completion of the course, and each reflective journal was de-identified prior to examination. The purpose of this second set of data was to gather additional responses focusing upon the nature of the pre-service teachers' experiences while undertaking the service-learning placement.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed by using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be described as “a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297) and involves a number of steps or phases. These steps include: familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Specifically, both researchers reviewed the journals and the qualitative data from the survey questions and independently identified emergent themes. The final themes were settled following several iterative sweeps of the data and consensus between the two researchers. The two quantitative multiple response questions were analysed using frequency column graphs while the demographic multiple-choice question was presented as a table.

Quantitative results

The quantitative data from the survey revealed that both the personal and professional development of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers had been significantly impacted by exposure and immersed engagement at various service-learning placements. From the 44 respondents, 17 were involved in direct contact with students at primary and secondary schools. A further nine respondents were involved in educational establishments during overseas or in remote indigenous immersion placements. Another 10 pre-service teachers engaged with young people at church camps or at various community activities supporting youth. The remaining eight respondents elected to complete their service-learning experiences at various agencies such as the Red Cross Soup Patrol, St Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army Opportunity Shops.

Figure 1 provides an overview of ways undertaking a service-learning program had impacted on pre-service primary and early childhood teachers' professional development. Prominent key indicators were: enhanced confidence (n=39), greater empathy and compassion (n=36), working out of one's comfort zone (n=35), and showing initiative (n=34). A mapping of the above four attributes against the earlier pre-service secondary teacher data indicated an almost identical pattern of perceived skills impacted as a result of undertaking a service-learning program.

Other professional attributes ranked by primary and early childhood pre-service teachers included developing skills working with adolescents (n=29), developing leadership skills (n=27), professional practice (n=26), and appreciation of the world outside the classroom (n=26). These results suggest that service-learning programs can impact positively on pre-service primary and early childhood teachers' professional development. No participant selected the category entitled 'no impact'.

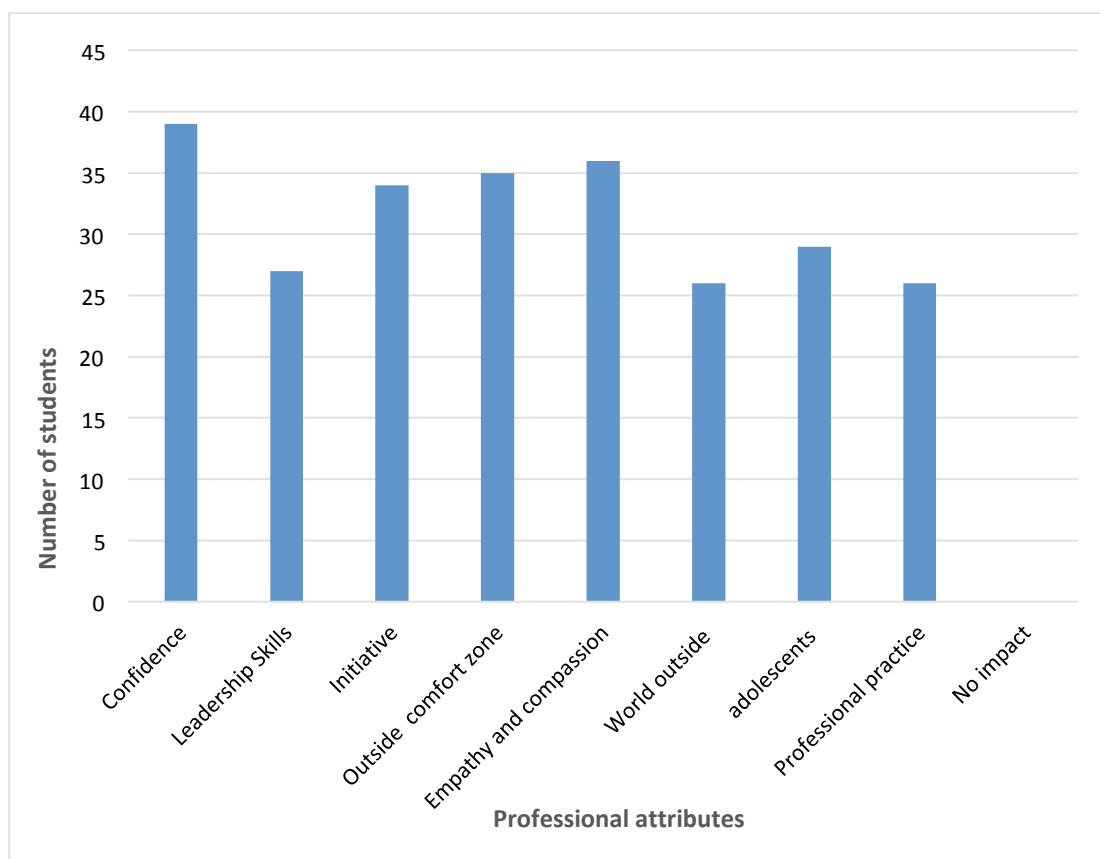


Figure 1: Professional skills developed through service-learning

Figure 2 provides an overview of ways undertaking a service-learning program had impacted on pre-service primary and early childhood teachers' personal development. Three key personal attributes were identified, developing communication skills ($n=42$), respect for others ($n=40$), and enhanced confidence ($n=39$), with over 89% of respondents ranking all three of these in their selection. Pre-service teachers recognised the importance of effective communication, the need to demonstrate respect to all, and the value of enhanced personal confidence. Closely grouped were a further six personal attributes which respondents believed had been impacted by their participation in a service-learning program. In order of ranking these were, working outside of one's comfort zone ($n=37$), developing decision-making skills ($n=37$), developing leadership skills ($n=36$), showing initiative ($n=35$), greater empathy and compassion ($n=35$), and developing problem-solving skills ($n=34$). No participant indicated the category 'no impact'. Overall, pre-service primary teachers in the study recognised that the service-learning experience was valuable in helping to develop personal skills.

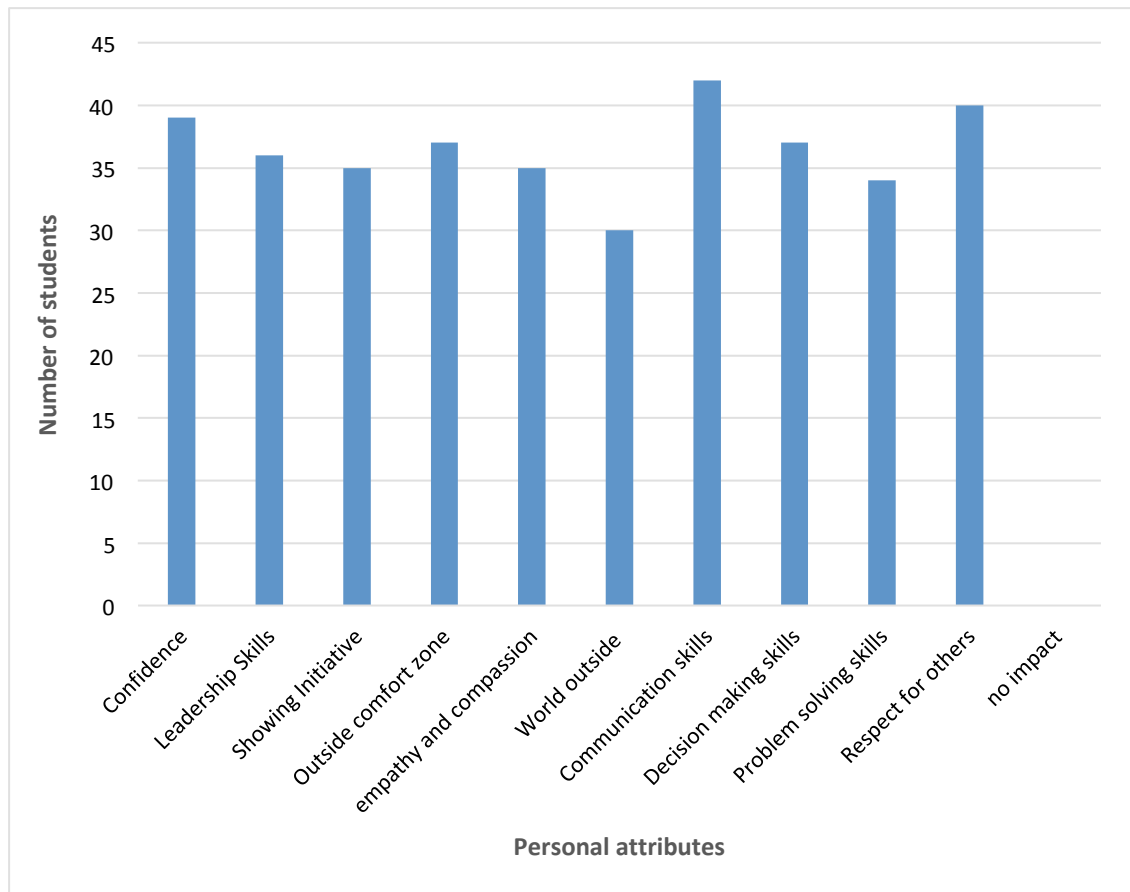


Figure 2: Personal skills developed through service-learning

Qualitative results

The structure of the qualitative survey questions and journal were designed as a guided reflection for the pre-service primary and early childhood students. The qualitative data were scrutinised adhering to the order of the qualitative questions in the survey.

Why have you elected to do this service-learning course?

The data reflected four broad themes: impact upon personal values, including a sense of helping others; gaining of valuable skills for teaching; positiveness of the experience; and pragmatic reasons of taking the course. Firstly, pre-service teachers commented on the many opportunities to gain confidence and enhance their personal values. For example, one pre-service teacher noted that service-learning “instilled the passion for generosity, not only for myself but also for my students”. A second commented that service-learning “is an important aspect of life” and added that “I am ... passionate of the benefits of service-learning for students”. A third pre-service teacher remarked on how service-

learning “promoted my confidence and reduced my apathy towards issues that affect my community”. Other comments included “I selected this course so that I could give something back to the community”, “I have a passion for service and helping those in need”. One pre-service teacher presented a rationale for involving school children in service-learning activities: “I believe service-learning in particular, needs to be implemented in the school classroom and curriculum to fully prepare students to face the harsh realities of the world ... as a society we need to prepare them because they are the next generation”.

A second strong motivating factor for undertaking the course was the belief that service-learning enhanced pre-service-teachers’ teaching skillset. Responses focused on developing “patience”, “consistency”, and “persistence in developing valuable relationships”, qualities that pre-service teachers considered “beneficial for the teaching career”. Pre-service teachers identified service-learning as an approach to understand and appreciate the teaching environment. One pre-service teacher commented that the purpose of committing to service-learning was “to be a Servant Leader as a teacher and encourage/support my students to be responsible, reflective, empathetic leaders amongst their cohort and eventually society”.

Various respondents reported that their in-field experiences explicitly assisted in the development of their teaching skills. Comments included: “valuable skills for a teacher and teacher assistant”, “I would love to learn how to include real-world issues into my classroom – to help prepare the next generation of students”, “to gain further knowledge on my profession through volunteering”, “this course further developed my knowledge of service-learning ... implementing it into future classroom(s)”. A reflection from one pre-service teacher’s journal reinforced the awareness of their vocation: “It made me resonate with myself on why I wanted to be a teacher in the first place ... I learnt a lot about what schools are doing to help youth at risk ... but I think the biggest thing I gained from my experience was the knowledge I developed from listening and learning from the students, teachers and other professionals across the school”. Finally, one pre-service teacher observed, “previously I was concerned about the level of preparation teachers have to undergo to prepare lessons and classroom material. After my service learning I see value in this preparation”.

Thirdly, pre-service teachers emphasised the positive nature of the service-learning engagement. Comments included: “I really enjoyed the service-learning experience and found it applicable to Early Childhood Education”; “I believe there is no better feeling in the world than helping others, as a teacher/adult in society ...”. One pre-service teacher who experienced an immersion into a remote indigenous community commented, “this trip has been life changing ... I think the experiences on this service-learning immersion are vital for all Australians and not only educators as there is so much we don’t know about our country”. This sentiment that the value gained from service-learning should be encouraged and promoted was expressed in a journal reflection, “I would greatly advise service-learning to anyone ... as it is a highly worthwhile learning activity that positively affects both parties”.

Finally, some pre-service teachers indicated more pragmatic reasons for deciding to enrol into the service-learning courses. Comments expressed included, "it sounded interesting"; "it was the only elective I was interested in"; "to fill in a gap in my timetable". No pre-service teacher among this cohort reported their experience as unrewarding.

Why did you choose this placement?

One of the requirements of the service-learning courses is that students organise their own service-learning placements. Pre-service teachers indicated two main reasons as to why they might select a placement: relevance to their field of study and previous personal experience in serving a charity, church or community need. Many pre-service teachers favoured a service-learning placement in an educational area of interest. Typical comments expressed included, "because I am going into education and I want to get as much experience as possible"; "I wanted to help in a placement that I could also benefit for my studies as a teacher"; "it links to education and it offers an experience that I can implement into my own classroom and teaching strategies". One pre-service teacher remarked, "service-learning is effective when the placement aligns with my future profession, enabling me to gain valuable experiences while helping the community". Those pre-service teachers who undertook an immersion experience in either a remote Aboriginal community or international placement were quite explicit in explaining their choice. For example, "I wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture and experience being in a remote school". Another commented, "to see education in action, overseas, particularly in a country so different to Australia ... an international context working with children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds".

The second main reason for selecting a placement reflected the respondents' association with prior personal experiences and the intrinsic desire to serve a charity, church or community need. Comments included: "I chose the agency, because as a young person, I have been to festivals in the past and have had my own experiences with alcohol. So I wanted to be able to help those who were experimenting, personal mental health is a large thing to me, especially male health, as I've had previous experience with it"; "I have already been involved with the church, so it is reasonable for me to do my service there ... and I was passionate about my beliefs". One student used the service-learning opportunity to initiate and develop a non-for-profit business model to support women in low socioeconomic areas by encouraging them to participate in physical activity to increase their overall holistic health.

What were the most memorable aspects of this service-learning experience?

Pre-service teachers' comments focused on three broad themes, (a) the value of service; (b) the value and appreciation of personal interactions; and (c) a realisation of personal skills and abilities. Comments relating to service included: "these students wanted to talk to me about such sensitive things, really touched me ... I felt I had really made an impact in these students lives"; "Hearing peoples' stories. Hearing what it is like going through a traumatic experience and how they bounce back with this organisation's help."; "building a house for a family in a Cambodian village"; "Spending time with the students and seeing

how they managed with their disabilities”; “Seeing the kids interact and help develop their social skills to become more confident in their actions”. A student working with the Red Frog Volunteers wrote, “They asked me why I would sacrifice my time and miss out on a festival to give out water and look after drunk people. This gave me the opportunity to talk about my faith and how volunteering makes a difference”. One pre-service teacher participating in a remote Aboriginal community immersion commented, “... getting to see the students learn in a different environment – out in the bush - and just being part of the community for a short time”.

Pre-service teachers were clearly impacted by personal interactions during their service-learning. Comments included: “Creating meaningful relationships ... watching the kids make lifelong memories with their siblings”; “A sense of community. Everyone coming together for the same cause is inspiring”; “Gaining the trust from the kids I worked with watching them understand and question what was being taught.” A respondent undertaking an overseas immersion commented, “... after visiting houses of the students we were teaching – it put everything into perspective and made me so grateful for my life-style.”. A second pre-service teacher undertaking an overseas immersion indicated her most memorable experience was the answer given by a student in a village when asked if the student would wish to live in Australia, “she wouldn’t want to live anywhere else as she loved her country. This really broke my heart as she was so happy – although living below the poverty line”.

Pre-service teachers also noted as memorable a realisation of their personal skills and abilities. Comments included: “I have a genuine passion for caring for vulnerable people, I really enjoyed every conversation and every act of kindness”; “I was eager to give back to the community and broaden my professional skillset by participating in an organisation that was within my local community”; “I developed empathy, respect and compassion for the volunteers and service they are providing to aid mental health, crisis accommodation and community engagement to relieve poverty and distress for men”. Other respondents helping in educational settings remarked: “When serving, I noticed I had the ability to cultivate passion and confidence in children”; “Facilitating students to achieve success in literacy outcomes through highly scaffolding teaching”. Evident amongst the pre-service teacher’s journals were descriptions of their self-confidence in applying pedagogical teaching skills during their service-learning. For example, “dealing with this boy’s behaviour was the highlight ... it gave me multiple opportunities to use different strategies.” Another commented “I used my knowledge to develop a “word board” with the students and the teacher was grateful and continued to use my idea”.

What were the challenges that you faced on your service-learning experience?

Pre-service teachers categorised challenges under three themes: the need to secure a suitable placement, the ability and confidence to adapt to new circumstances, and confronting uncomfortable moments. Pre-service teachers are required to organise their own service-learning placement. This approach is designed to foster leadership and initiative among the pre-service teachers. Two levels of difficulties were noted. Firstly, in the process of contacting a potential service-learning provider, some pre-service teachers

reported anxiety and disappointment at being rejected or ignored. For example, "I was extremely disappointed with the lack of responses and call backs which knocked my confidence, and it became very frustrating". Some pre-service teachers reported anxiety at being interviewed for the service-learning placement as exemplified by the comment, "The uncertainty if the Down Syndrome organisation would accept a university student ... my nerves were very high from the idea of meeting new people".

Pre-service teachers expressed concerns regarding their ability and confidence to embrace new circumstances. Examples include: "I didn't know how to behave, how to function or how to interact with people who have such severe illnesses."; "some staff at my agency were not welcoming and were unhelpful". Pre-service teachers involved in remote Aboriginal communities or overseas placements faced different contextual realities as expressed in the following comments: "Accepting that the home life of the children could not be easily changed"; "Seeing first-hand the poverty and hardship of the community"; "The cultural difference ... as everything was totally different to what we thought was 'normal'". Several of the pre-service teachers commented that their emotional unpreparedness was challenged, "As a highly empathic individual, witnessing the effect of people's trauma was very challenging"; "It was challenging adapting to a new culture and be cautious to not offend anyone and be respectful of the locals"; "There was a lot of interaction/public speaking, so it was tough staying relaxed and not being nervous". A pre-service teacher volunteering at a juvenile detention centre commented, "Coming from a background different from a lot of girls I worked with, it was sometimes confronting and overwhelming".

Pre-service teachers were also confronted by uncomfortable situations, which challenged their confidence and ability to cope. Some pre-service teachers volunteering in educational areas were challenged by behavioural issues. For example, "Dealing with challenging behaviours, primarily adapting my teaching to meet the physical affective and intellectual needs of students"; "a lot were behaviour challenges, how to offer the best support and education to students who struggle to understand". One pre-service teacher expressed uncomfortableness dealing with established teachers, commenting, "I really found it hard talking to other teachers. It was quite challenging as I felt out of place".

What would you like to have known prior to commencing your service-learning?

Pre-service teacher responses fell into three themes: prior knowledge of specific learning strategies, the availability of more information in preparing for the placement, and greater preparation for overseas and remote immersions. Some respondents expressed their desire for specific strategies as exemplified by comments such as "Some more ways to manage a classroom with students with disabilities - more behaviour management techniques"; "How to deal with very small kids who don't possess skills required for activities". Given the cohort consisted overwhelmingly of pre-service teachers in their first and second year of the course, it was not unexpected that inexperience would be an emerging factor. The second theme, access to more information to assist in preparing for the placement, was reflected in the following comments, "more ideas of placements"; "what to wear?" and "I

wouldn't have left it to the last minute." One student suggested having access to past student placements would have been helpful.

The third theme related to students who undertook an immersion overseas or in a remote Aboriginal community. These students' concerns were more pragmatic in nature, with comments such as, "A bit more background knowledge about the indigenous people and culture would have been helpful"; "What resources were available overseas and what we needed to bring to enhance teaching (although some of this information was already provided)", and one student enquired about, "The content we were going to be teaching".

The survey data from this question identified a degree of anxiety and apprehension amongst some pre-teachers prior to their service-learning placement. However, 22 respondents of the survey (50%) indicated they were satisfied and adequately prepared to embark on their service-learning placement. For example, "I had all the information I needed"; "everything was covered and everyone is just helpful, you are there to help. Don't stress about feeling like a burden".

What aspects if any of the service-learning experience do you believe have prepared you for your career in teaching?

Pre-service teachers highlighted two broad themes. The first related to personal development through concepts such as empathy, communication, compassion and self-efficacy. These notions were expressed in comments such as, "empathy was developed and understanding peoples' point of views and where they came from"; "I believe I am an empathetic person but learning about others strengthens it"; "speaking to lots of people and teaching in front of 30 students". Some pre-teachers expressed their feelings and concerns by showing compassion for the children and people with whom they associated, "realising the vulnerability in children and really paying attention to observing children in case they are having difficulties at home", and "Working with people who have a serious distressing issue and being able to sit down with them and listen".

The second theme centred on the concept of relevance and transference of experiences to a teaching environment. The comments made were suggestive of a direct correlation between the experiential value of the service-learning and the preparation as a pre-service teacher. One respondent commented, "The opportunity to work with diverse students with diverse learning needs and abilities and the requirement to differentiate teaching and learning experience to meet those needs, has been invaluable". Another stated, "it has assisted my ability to differentiate a task and approach all students in an inclusive and welcoming approach". Several pre-service teachers were enthusiastic and positive of their experiences commenting, "All the aspects, it was extremely informative": "All of it, the time I spent at the school was all made up of learning for me". One pre-service teacher highlighted specific learning skills gained while working with Aboriginal youth, "I have gained a deeper understanding of the challenges that Indigenous kids face regarding their education". Other comments touched upon the notion of conceptualising the degree of work and understanding needed to evolve as a competent professional teacher, "I am able to appreciate the work Kindy teachers do and how I can incorporate strategies I learnt

into my own classroom”, and “I believe having this knowledge and understanding will help me be able to teach our next generation to be critical and creative students”.

Discussion

The discussion is based initially on the four research questions outlined in the beginning of the article. The final part of the discussion reflects on comparisons with the previous three replication studies. Question 1 related to benefits pre-service teachers identified in undertaking a service-learning course. The qualitative responses from the pre-service teachers indicated the following three benefits: an increased understanding and awareness of mutual benefits through positive, interactive service-learning experiences for both those being served and those offering the service; an emerging realisation that pre-service teachers had the skills and ability to make an important and valuable contribution to the community; and a general broadening of pre-service teachers' perspectives from being exposed to the differing social contexts within wider society. Pre-service teachers who experienced remote or international immersions especially gained powerful and valuable experiential insights into cultural diversity. Experiences in school settings were particularly advantageous and directly related to teaching pedagogies. Key among these benefits was the joy of confirming that teaching was, in fact, a correct career-choice. The quantitative data from the pre-service primary and early childhood teachers indicated a range of specific benefits (Figure 1). Particularly significant and highly valued were such attributes as improved communication skills, respect for others, enhanced confidence, the ability to work outside one's comfort zone, and decision-making skills (respondent rates 95% to 84%). To a lesser degree, the quantitative data also supported perceived benefits in five further attributes: developing leadership skills; showing initiative; displaying empathy and compassion; problem solving skills; and an appreciation of the world outside the classroom (respondents' rates 82% to 68%).

The second research question explored what challenges pre-service primary and early childhood teachers experienced in undertaking a service-learning experience. Several pre-service teachers expressed anxiety and apprehension at the thought of being thrust into and not being adequately prepared for the new experience. Some commented that they felt unprepared and anxious when they were required to undertake an interview process for a placement. Various respondents reported frustration, annoyance, and dejection at the lack of response when initiating a placement. Respondents who undertook remote and international immersions were often challenged by the differing cultures and community standards. Several pre-service teachers experienced confronting, unsettling behaviours from students. Others noted negative community attitudes and found these challenging. While acknowledging the challenges, however, most respondents reviewed the experiences as significant in their personal growth.

The third research question examined the relevance of the service-learning course in preparing primary and early childhood pre-service teachers for the profession. Pre-service teachers believed their participation in the service-learning program provided value-added learning experiences which assisted in their formation as teachers. They reported a greater

sense of self-efficacy, identifying the following characteristics as relevant to their professional development: enhanced confidence, empathy and compassion, comfortableness working outside their comfort zone and the ability to display initiative. The quantitative data demonstrated that these four factors had between an 88% to 77% positive support rating (Figure 1). To a lesser degree, pre-service teachers also highlighted the following attributes: working with adolescents; developing leadership skills; enhancing professional practices; and acknowledging the world outside of the classroom, were also perceived as relevant factors (65% to 59% support). All pre-service teachers, irrespective of the type of service-learning undertaken, indicated at least two ways they had been enhanced professionally by their service-learning. Many made valuable connections between skills gained during the service-learning engagement, and the transferability of these skills into classroom practice. Several pre-service teachers commented that they were able to conceptualise and appreciate the standards and the degree of preparatory work required as a teacher, because of their service-learning engagement.

The fourth research question addressed pre-service teachers' sense of social awareness as a result of participating in a service-learning course. Respondents' journals and survey data reflected a wide spectrum of understanding of social issues. Respondents noted a significant disparity between economic, social, educational, and physical needs between groups and individuals in the community. Those pre-service teachers volunteering in schools, commented on their empathy towards students with learning difficulties and recognised the need for additional student support. The respondents immersed in overseas and remote rural communities referred to perceived social justice issues including poverty, standards of living, and lack of educational resources. Similar social awareness issues were commented upon by secondary pre-service teachers in the previous studies.

As described earlier, the current research into the service-learning experiences of primary and early childhood pre-service teachers is a replication study following on from three previous studies (Coffey & Lavery, 2015; Lavery & Coffey (2016); Lavery, Coffey & Sandri, 2018). These studies examined the perceptions of pre-service secondary teachers engaged in service-learning. The current qualitative and quantitative results from primary and early childhood pre-teachers, support and closely mirror the type of encounters, lived experiences and educational benefits gained as recorded in the previous studies. This current study provides further evidence that the service-learning programs continue to affirm that pre-service teachers, irrespective of their program focus (primary, early childhood or secondary), do perceive service-learning experiences as a beneficial enhancement to their understanding and preparation towards their development as teachers.

Limitations to the research

There were four limitations to the research. Firstly, all of the participants had a dependent relationship with one of the researchers who taught the two service-learning courses. However, there was no dependent relationship with the other researcher. In order to address this situation, the researcher with the dependent relationship was not involved in any initial correspondence with participants, nor administration of the survey. Journals

were only collected following marks having been submitted to the final Board of Examiners for these courses. Secondly, limited demographic information was collected from participants to protect their anonymity. This fact may well impact on the understanding of participant experiences. Thirdly, the volunteer nature of responses places a potential limitation on generalisability. Those who volunteer to participate are usually different from non-volunteers. They tend to be more motivated or more interested in the study (Gay, et al, 2012). However, a majority of pre-service teachers did participate. From a total population of 52 pre-service teachers, 44 completed the survey and 35 submitted their journal. Finally, as with all closed questions, the two multi-select questions (Qs 8 and 9) in the survey have disadvantages that include evoking ideas the respondent may not otherwise have, causing confusion where many choices are offered and allowing for a misinterpretation of a presented option (Copeland, 2017).

Conclusion

Responses from primary and early childhood pre-service teachers affirmed the premise that a service-learning course is a valuable experience in the formation of pre-service teachers. The results from the study indicated that service-learning engendered a capacity for pre-service teachers to be resilient, empathetic, grow in personal and professional attributes and gain confidence in their own abilities. The service-learning engagement provided opportunities for reflective and reflexive evaluation of the service-learning. It assisted pre-service teachers to envisage a more holistic community approach towards teaching through experiencing a wide diversity of needs inherent in the community. As such, the study highlights that service-learning programs can enhance pre-service primary and early childhood teachers' understanding and preparation towards their development as teachers.

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Appendices

A: Questionnaire survey (Primary and Early Childhood pre-teachers)

1. Why have you elected to do this service-learning course?
2. In which area did you undertake your service-learning?
 - a. Education - school/coaching/tutorial.
 - b Agency - addresses the disadvantaged (e.g. soup patrol, homeless ...)
 - c. Volunteer work for a charity
 - d. Community service. (e.g. life saving, age-care, conservation ...).
 - e. Other (describe)
3. Why did you choose this placement?
4. What were the most memorable aspects of this service-learning experience?
5. What were the challenges that you faced on your service-learning experience?
6. What would you like to have known prior to commencing your service-learning experience?
7. What aspects if any of the service-learning experience do you believe have prepared you for your career in teaching?
8. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program impacted on your professional development? (tick the applicable options)
 - Enhanced confidence
 - Developing leadership skills
 - Showing initiative
 - Working outside of one's comfort zone
 - Greater empathy and compassion
 - Appreciation of the world outside the classroom
 - Developing skills working with adolescents
 - Professional practice
 - No impact
 - Other (please indicate)
9. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program impacted on your personal development? (tick the applicable options)
 - Enhanced confidence
 - Developing leadership skills
 - Showing initiative
 - Working outside of one's comfort zone
 - Greater empathy and compassion
 - Appreciation of the world outside the classroom
 - Developing communication skills
 - Developing problem-solving skills
 - Developing decision-making skills
 - Respect for others
 - No impact
 - Other (please indicate)

B: Journals (Instructions given to Primary and Early Childhood pre-teachers)

Students are required to keep a descriptive journal/diary during their placement in which they record interactions, experiences, insights and responses to issues that arise. On each occasion, before putting pen to paper, students should ask themselves the following questions and use the responses to these questions as *a guide* for the journal/diary writing.

- a. What interactions/experiences or moments had a positive impact on me?
- b. What interactions/experiences or moments had a negative/worrying impact for me?
- c. What/How am I learning about the people and the society I am interacting with?
- d. What am I personally learning about myself, and how is it affecting my personal and professional development?
- e. From my experiences, what other questions arise for me about the nature of the interactive experiences encountered?
- f. To maintain confidentiality and respect for those involved with the agency, do not use real names when writing in your journal.

Associate Professor Shane Lavery is the coordinator of postgraduate studies in the School of Education, the University of Notre Dame Australia. His postgraduate teaching areas include educational leadership and applied research methods. He teaches service-learning to pre-service secondary teachers and facilitates national and international service-learning immersions in initial teacher education.
Email: shane.lavery@nd.edu.au

Sandro Sandri teaches in the School of Education, the University of Notre Dame Australia. He teaches service-learning, social justice and sustainability studies to pre-service early childhood, primary and secondary teachers. He holds qualifications in science, education, and counselling and has local, national and international experience working with disadvantaged communities.
Email: sandro.sandri@nd.edu.au

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