

Assessment Of The Impact Of Service Learning On Academic Growth Of College Students

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ABSTRACT

Research studies on service learning and teacher education have concluded that one of the major challenges is the lack of assessment studies that document the impact of service learning on students' academic development. In this research study, the perceptions of 65 preservice teachers on service learning were assessed. The major goals of the study were (1) to assess the perceptions of preservice teachers on service learning, and (2) to analyze the impact of service learning on preservice teachers' academic growth and achievement. The results from the analysis showed that participation in service learning activities resulted in students' gain in the area of diversity, fairness, strong work ethics, and patience. The result on the impact of service learning on achievement was inconclusive.

INTRODUCTION

In this era of educational reform and revisioning of teacher education programs, it is imperative to infuse service learning as a pedagogical tool in preservice teacher preparation. One of the goals of teacher education institutions is to produce quality teachers that will serve P-12 students. Service learning (S-L) is a pedagogical approach in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet community needs (Buchanan, Baldwin, & Rudisill). Swafford, Jones, Thornton, Stump, and Miller (1999) stated that teacher quality is influenced by teacher content knowledge acquired during their preservice education. Furthermore, the authors emphasized that service learning experience in teacher education is viewed as an important element in advancing the quality of teaching and learning. Sullivan (1991) concluded that preservice teachers with service learning experience had success in student teaching experiences. Bhaerman, Cordel, and Gomez (1998) stated that one of the challenges in service learning in teacher education is the lack of assessment studies that document the impact of service learning experience on students' academic and emotional development. This study was undertaken to fill the gap in research on the impact of service learning projects on preservice teachers' academic achievement. The focus of this research study was (1) to evaluate the perceptions of preservice teachers on service learning, and (2) to analyze the impact of service learning on preservice teachers' academic growth.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was based on a conceptual model of service learning adapted from Furco (1996) that emphasized that preservice students learn and develop through active participation and engagement in well designed service learning experiences that meet community needs. This model view service learning as a two-way activity that involves community service and student learning. Root (1997) concluded that students acquire course content as a result of community services from service learning activity and community reap the benefit from student participation in service learning.

METHOD

Participants

The participants for the study (n=65) were selected to include preservice teachers from the Foundations of Education class. All the participants enrolled in either elementary or secondary education programs at a doctoral-degree granting Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the southern region of United States. About fifty-five percent (55%) of the participants participated in service learning projects tutoring third, fourth, and fifth grade students from a low-performing elementary school located in the school district of the university, while 45% participated in the traditional internship activity in a public school setting. Both groups were assessed to determine the impact of service learning on their academic growth and development.

Instrument

Since service learning is a powerful educational tool for preservice teachers, it is also crucial to understand it from both subjective and objective lenses. In this study, the researchers employed mixed method approach by using both qualitative and quantitative survey questionnaire, observations at the service learning site, and analysis of class documents to assess the impact of service learning on their academic growth. The goal of this methodology was to provide stronger evidence for a conclusion through convergence and collaboration of findings (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The participants were administered a Service Learning Survey (SLS) toward the end of spring semester of 2007. The instrument was constructed after a thorough review of literature on service learning. The instrument included basic demographic data, as well as open and close-ended questions to assess the perceptions of the participants on service learning. The three open-ended questions asked the participants to describe their feeling regarding their participation in service learning activity, to discuss the benefits of service learning to their growth as future educators, and finally to discuss challenges faced in the field of service learning. In the close-ended questions, participants were asked to rate each question using a Likert-type scale that ranged from 0 – 5, with 0 indicating “strongly disagree” to 5 indicating “strongly agree.” The close-ended section contained 15 questions that were organized into three categories – perceptions on S-L, benefits, and challenges.

Analysis

The method of analyses used in this study (Creswell, 2003) as characterized by an initial phase of qualitative analysis followed by quantitative analysis. First, a qualitative thematic strategy of data analysis was employed to categorize and make judgment about the data. This analytical procedure allowed important themes to emerge. The second phase involved the use of descriptive and inferential statistics to assess the perceptions of the participants on service learning and the impact of service learning on the participants’ academic growth and development.

RESULTS

Both qualitative and quantitative findings from the survey, as well as document analysis findings are categorized in the following sections.

PERCEPTIONS ON SERVICE LEARNING

The participants in this study voiced widespread agreement with the belief statement that “service learning is a strong tool to prepare quality teachers.” About 94% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement. When asked whether S-L activity contributed to their content knowledge of Foundations of Education, about 83% strongly agreed with this statement. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that S-L activity has strong benefit for preservice teachers and should be incorporated in other education courses. Qualitatively, the participants indicated that participation in S-L projects is a confirmation of their intention to become teachers. One participant commented, “This is a pure example of what teaching is all about.” Another stated, “S-L is like learning while you are on the job; it is certainly an on-the-job training.”

BENEFITS

The preservice teachers in this study strongly agreed with the statement that “participation in S-L activity contributed to their social-emotional development.” About ninety-one percent (91.0%) of the participants strongly agreed with the statement. When asked whether “participation in the S-L activity contributed to their mastery of theories of learning, about 89.0% of the participants strongly agreed. They strongly stated that S-L participation has helped them in the area of diversity, fairness, strong work ethics, and patience.

CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges indicated by the participants focused on the availability of S-L projects in their intended teaching levels. This challenge seems to be highly critical for the participants since they conducted their activity tutoring elementary school students, while the majority of their intended teaching levels are high schools. Other challenges mentioned were: (1) transportation problems, (2) limited courses with S-L projects, and (3) S-L activity was not aligned with their curriculum. An analysis of the relationship between service learning and academic growth of students was inconclusive.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

From an analysis of the course achievement data, the researchers found no significant differences between the achievement of students who participated in service learning projects and those who participated in traditional internship in public setting.

CONCLUSION

This research study is limited by its size. The sample size of 65 participants poses limitations in terms of generalizing the findings to a larger population. S-L is a strong pedagogical tool in teacher education with strong benefits in the preparation of quality teachers. The participants in this study strongly echoed the benefits of S-L in the areas of diversity, fairness, strong work ethics, and patience, which are elements of teacher quality components. The researchers hope that this study, with strong implications to teacher education institutions, will add to knowledge and the discussion on service learning and teacher education.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Comfort Okpala is currently the Assistant Dean for Assessment in the School of Education at North Carolina A & T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina and an Associate Professor with the Department of Human Development and Services. Dr. Okpala has a variety of educational publications in key educational journals like the *Journal of Early Childhood*, *Journal of Education Finance*, *Journal of Educational Researcher*, *Urban Education*, *Journal of Applied Business*, and *Journal of Negro Education*. She has presented her research work in local, state, national and international conferences like American Education Finance Association (AEFA), American Evaluation Association (AEA), American Education Research Association (AERA), and others.

Dr. Leon Sturdivant earned his doctorate degree in Curriculum and Instruction from University of North Carolina at Chapel-Hill in 1993. Since 2006, he serves as an adjunct professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education. He has been actively involved in a lot of initiatives like Content Mentoring for National Science Foundation Grant, and the University and Community Partnerships. Dr. Sturdivant has presented at conferences, churches, and community events on the local, state, and national levels on relevant educational topics.

Dr. Linda Hopson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Services where she provides leadership and facilitates learning for candidates in the Masters in School Administration program. She has presented at the local, state, and national levels, and has published in a number of educational journals.

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