

International service learning: benefits to African teachers.

Julie Maakrun

Introduction

Our world, largely through technological advances, has become ever increasingly interconnected. Educators are now more than ever required to learn and teach through the lens of global mindedness, requiring the capacity to teach students how their actions and the actions of others affect people in all parts of the world; encouraging them to be change agents driven through their own critical thinking and actions (Chareka, Leyte & Mills, 2010).

It is critical for pre-service teachers to build their own critical capacity to think globally and as educators they will ultimately respond in either local or global contexts. Global thinking underpinned by civic mindedness, response to need and a call to social action, have all been on the increase in higher education as universities seek to internationalise and produce more globally minded and civically engaged students, as such, service-learning has now become an increasingly important element that offers new approaches to teaching, learning and civic engagement (Boland 2009, Eisenhardt & Sittason, 2009). Consequently, service-learning provides an avenue for students to build sensitivity to issues and problems faced by members of society, heightening the importance for responsive teaching and learning (Swick, 2001).

Background

This specific service-learning experience was conducted in an international setting in Africa. It was the result of a visit to the University of Notre Dame, Australia Sydney campus by the director of a non government organisation to pre-service teachers which encompassed establishing links with the government of Kenya to provide education to some of the local community's most disadvantaged citizens. This particular community was predominantly internally displaced peoples and orphaned children in a rural area situated northwest of the country's capital, Nairobi. The

Abstract

This paper reports on a study aimed at exploring the benefits of an international service-learning experience for teachers employed in a rural primary school in Africa. The primary school, where these teachers are employed was the focal point of an international visit in December 2012 by twenty-four undergraduate primary education students from the University of Notre Dame, Australia. Teachers were interviewed and their responses analysed qualitatively. Explorations of teacher benefits of this visit were articulated in themes that emerged including benefits to the children at the school and the impact the visit had on teacher pedagogy. Teacher responses revealed that the teachers valued the visit immensely as it provided a balance to the school curriculum which teachers articulated as having its primary focus on the country's national standardised testing regime. The article serves as an initial investigation into the gap that exists in current service learning literature, namely the impact of international service learning experiences for members of the host community. Limitations of this study and future implications of this specific visit are also explored.

non-government agency, were responsible for building a primary school for the community, funding the education of students through external sponsorship and the employment of local teachers. The school has a current enrolment of 360 children aged from four to nine years. In addition to the school, the non government agency also built a children's orphanage currently meeting the needs of eighty children. At its inception, involvement in the service-learning experience was based on the good intentions of teacher educators and participating pre-service teachers.

A total of twenty four pre-service teachers elected to participate in this particular experience in December 2012 and were each responsible for the financial costs associated with the experience. In the lead up to the experience the students were required to attend a number of pre- departure meetings that covered logistics of travel; planning and resourcing a variety of teaching activities; a small degree of cultural awareness training and involvement in fundraising endeavours to support building projects in the host community.

This particular service-learning experience was structured to deliver a creative arts and sports program to children at the host school. For the host community in general, this program is delivered outside the parameters of the regular school year as the visiting pre-service teachers arrive one week after the official end of the host school's regular academic year. Children's attendance at the host school during this time is not mandatory, although many choose to continue to come. For the pre-service teachers, this visit begins directly after the conclusion of their academic year and lasts for two weeks. For teachers at the host school, this additional time is part of their negotiated workload with the non government agency and teachers are remunerated accordingly.

As a relatively new experience for both teacher educators and pre- service teachers from the University of Notre Dame – Australia's Sydney campus, the impacts of this experience are short term and outwardly visible. Children at the school became enamoured with the pre-service teachers, a substantial amount of educational resources that were taken were left behind and through fundraising events building projects at the host school were undertaken. Apart from these outward signs, children at the host school participated in learning experiences that they ordinarily would not be exposed to, due in part to the demands of the education curriculum in Kenya.

Literature Review

Service learning as education

This service-learning experience reflects the complexity faced in how one would begin to place the experience in the broader contextual understanding of service learning. As a concept, service learning can be viewed through multiple lenses and perhaps can be regarded as a fusion of many possibilities 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, service learning is defined as an educational methodology that combines community service with clear learning objectives, preparation for community work, and purposeful and critical reflection (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring & Kerrigan, 2001). As a pedagogical tool, service learning is a prevalent strategy which combines learning in community contexts with academic knowledge. As pedagogy, it seeks to combine service and academic learning to promote increased understanding of course content while helping

students develop knowledge, skills and cognitive capacities to deal effectively with complex social issues and problems (Hurd 2006). Thus in education service learning is both methodology and pedagogy.

This specific experience is a pedagogical tool and is co curricular, no course credit is assigned to students who choose to participate; the experience is not directly linked to a specific course unit or learning objectives however it would be safe to argue that content knowledge embedded in a number of academic units is built upon; the experience is undertaken outside the parameters of a regular semester; students do provide a service intended to meet the needs of others and finally, vital to the notion of service learning, students engage in critical written reflection, both of which are aimed at fostering awareness of self, response to issues of diversity, social and civic responsibility .

Service learning as transformational experiences

As pedagogy and as a sustained immersive practice, service learning has immense transformational potential (Butin, 2005a). As transformational methodology, it allows for questions to be raised and for action to be taken.

Service learning as transformational experiences are realised in local, national and international settings. Service-learning in developing countries has been on the rise since the early 1990's (Rubin, 1995). It combines academic goals and instruction with experiential learning through the delivery of organised service activities designed to meet the objectives of community partners (; Crabtree, 2008; Hammersley, 2012). Specifically, service learning programs in international settings provide opportunities for students to act globally, optimising the potential that their actions will be reflected in their thinking and responding locally. International service-learning experiences in particular offer distinctive opportunities to enhance both academic achievement and the professional development of students (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Knutson Miller & Gonzalez, 2010). Thus, ISL experiences allow 'Participating individuals to acquire a new understanding about life, culture, self and others' further, that ... teaching abroad makes more significant and long lasting changes in teachers' classroom practices' (Walters, Garii, & Walters (2009 p.152).

Student benefits from service learning

The benefits to students from such programs, is well documented in literature. Hurd (2006) contends that research demonstrates that courses incorporating service learning provide a number of benefits including deeper understanding of course content and the ability for students to apply course materials to new situations whilst developing a better understanding of complex world problems. These types of experiences allow students to learn through active participation and they provide a purposeful service to the community whilst engaging in reflection activities. For students, three key elements are required to make service learning a valuable experience. According to the National 4H Council (2000) there initially needs to be adequate preparation which includes setting out of objectives of the service experience; secondly, the service needs to be meaningful, it should ultimately make a difference to the community or someone's life and finally, the service experience is guided through discussion or reflective writing.

Proponents of service learning would support the notion that it enhances individuals' sense of community and belongingness to something which is greater than themselves (Lisman, 1998). Ideally for pre-service teachers, it would enhance a respect for and tolerance of diversity, gaining greater awareness of societal issues whilst developing a greater moral and ethical sense (Coles 1993). Butin (2003)

would suggest that for students, the experience of engaging with those different from themselves will allow them to come to better understand, respect and engage with the cultural plurality of diverse societies, for the majority of pre-service teachers, these societies will exist in the classrooms in which they will ultimately teach. Further this cultural perspective would acknowledge that the outcomes of service learning are embedded within the process itself. 'As such, a cultural perspective privileges the affective, ethical, and formative aspects of service learning and is concerned with linking these experiential components to local, national and international issues. (2003, p.1681)

Roose (2001) contends that international placements allow teachers, the opportunity to recognise the importance of culture, its connection to community and the relationships among and between language, culture and practice. For teacher educators, ISL can be used to foster ownership of, sensitivity to, and participation in community-building activities that transform approaches to learning (Swick 2001). It can also lead to teacher educator members having an increased understanding of students, a better sense of student learning and deeper connections between themselves, the students and the institution.

Host community benefits from service learning

Whilst recent research supports the benefits of service learning for students, sadly to the detriment of service learning itself, there appears to be limited research about the impact of service learning on the members in the host community. Cruz and Giles (2000) suggest that this may in part be due to the theoretical, methodological and pragmatic difficulties in defining and analysing elements such as 'community' and 'community impact.' Research is also limited in relation to community perspective on cross cultural experiences as well as any long term impact of experiences on individuals within the communities (Crabtree, 2008). Stoecker & Tyron (2009) would contend that there is a continuing bias toward research into student learning goals, to the exclusion of community outcomes, as a result of service learning programs. Eby (1998) argued that community voice is often ignored or not heard and as such, to include the voice of community leaders in service learning would be of particular benefit so that any potential of harm or dissatisfaction as a result of the service can be avoided.

Mention needs to be made that there are some community satisfaction studies (Vernon and Ward, 1999; Ferrari and Worrall, 2000; Birdsall, 2005). Gelman et al., (1998) would suggest that there is positive community impact which results from service learning however, the emphasis has been on community satisfaction with students participating; relations with the institution and the immediate outcomes of the service.

Ideally, for service learning partnerships to be authentic they need to incorporate the perspectives of all stake holders. Jacoby (1996) highlights the importance that those being served must themselves control the service provided, that the needs of the community, determined by its members, will define what the service tasks will be. It can therefore be argued that for service learning to be truly transformational the voice of all stakeholders needs to be empathically responded to.

Research significance

Current literature serves to support the justification of this research. As mentioned previously, the inclusion of all stake holders is pivotal for service learning projects to be transformational. Stakeholders include students, teacher educators, institutions, organisations and members of the host community. Whilst inclusion of all

stakeholders is important, this research is cognisant of the need and importance of building relationships as a vehicle towards establishing authentic transformational partnerships. Crabtree (2008) acknowledges that relationships are central to service learning experiences, regardless of whether the learning is conceptualised as teaching, development work or social justice.

Eby (1998) asserts that the majority of research around service learning is done by academics; as such the bias in research is towards the learning side of the experience. The needs of programs are skewed towards the interests of students rather than the needs of the community. He further contends that community voice is often ignored or not heard and as such, to include the voice of community leaders in service learning would be of particular benefit to avoid any potential of harm or dissatisfaction as a result of the service. Therefore, there is a critical need for organising such experiences to ensure they include community partners in ways that will at the same time meet the needs of a community whilst providing academic benefit for the student (Stoecker, et al 2009).

Research questions

The research questions were generated from the literature review. Therefore, the present study sought to seek answers from host teachers to the following questions:

- Do you think that the children at the school liked having the students visit?
- What impact did this visit have on the children in your class?
- Do you think that the teachers at the school liked having the students visit?
- Can you tell me more about why they did or why they did not?
- Do you believe that this visit is a positive / negative one for the teachers at the school?
- Do you have any suggestions as to how the visit can be improved?

Participants

Participants in the study were teachers, employed by the school at the time of the service learning visit. The school is situated 160 kilometres north west of Nairobi, close to the town of Nukuru. The school currently educates 360 children, predominantly from families residing in the nearby internally displaced people's camp and from the children's orphanage, which along with the school was built and is funded by the NGO.

Participants, spoke both Kiswahili and English, were briefed as to the objectives of the study and allowed the opportunity to ask any questions of concern. Any potential language barriers were addressed by having the school's principal translate for any staff who required it, but this was not sort by any of the consenting participants. Participants were given a written consent form to sign if they agreed to participate. Confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study were ensured, the details of which were included in an information sheet. Participants were 77% female and 33% male, ranging in age from twenty to fifty-nine years and years of teacher experience ranged from three to thirty years.

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi structured interviews and observations were used in order to identify the attitudes and dispositions of the teachers towards service learning. (Pickeral & Peters Eds., 1998) advocate for the use of such qualitative tools in order to assess positive and negative features of involvement in service projects as well as assessing the responsiveness of the project to the needs and concerns of the community being served. The interviews were conducted individually with all assenting participants. Participants were advised that the interview would be conducted in English, recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions would be done by an independent transcription service.

Discussion

Qualitative analysis of the interviews allowed an articulation of the benefits and value of the experience for both the children and teachers at the host school.

An articulation of the benefits to host children

One of the benefits articulated by a majority of the participants pertains to the impact on the children at the school. Participants commented that the creative arts and sports program filled a void in the holistic notion of teaching and learning at the school. This void was identified partly as the result of education being centred on national standardised assessments where the focus of learning is centred on key subject areas rather than on areas such as practical and creative arts and sport.

The following comments reflect many of the participant's views on the curriculum.

'The Kenyan syllabus, we only work, especially in the subject(s) that will come in examinations so we are just doing maths, English, science, those are the areas that (are in) the examination so we normally rush to finish those syllabus on those particular subjects but arts and crafts doesn't come in....'

'We are always trying to please someone else. I would say they're (children) tired we are doing it to attain goals and marks in (the) exam so that we can have a better name but we're not doing it for the children. I wish we would do it purposely for the child.'

With this context of teaching and learning as a lived daily experience participants' responded to the benefits to host children of the program which reflected the curriculum void felt by teachers:

'I suppose the things they (the children) like doing, the arts, painting, drawing, singing – they really like it because in their normal timetable they really miss out on it.'

'What the students are doing is very good because we have seen a lot of activities being done. We are directing and teaching them (children) because of the exams. I think we need to change the curriculum is very tiresome to the children and it doesn't give them time to do these activities'

One of the more visible benefits commented on by the participants related to the range and variety of teaching resources provided for use in the host school. Resourcing at the school in comparative terms is limited, and so the supply of arts and crafts materials and general classroom resources were welcomed by the host teachers:

'I am very happy because you are bringing in many, many materials and the children love the materials.'

"You are coming with materials which is a very good thing...even the other teachers you know they are very much grateful'

An articulation of the benefits to host teachers

An area of perceived benefit to participants was the professional impact the service had on individual teaching pedagogy. Pedagogy here relates to the practice of what teachers do in classrooms with children that directly impact on the teaching and learning experience in the school. Participants reported:

'I've been challenged; I've learnt a lot from them (pre-service teachers) and so many other teaching methods that I didn't know, I've come to know through them, so even to me, as a teacher, I've also got(ten) something'

' Like yesterday, we went outside – I have never done it; I've taught for seventeen years and I didn't know that it can work very well. Yesterday we went out for a reading lesson. What we do in our schools here, we normally have reading – the whole class- but now they taught me a different tactic of teaching reading lesson(s)'

'I have learnt some more activities from the students and I wanted to practice before they go home, I wanted to make sure I got it...I want to incorporate the activities that I have learnt from the students so that my teaching will be very creative and something which is pleasing to children...they learn through play and they learn through doing activities.'

To what extent these attitudes manifest into the daily teaching practices long term, given the constraints previously mentioned, is unknown at this stage.

An articulation of attitudes of host teachers

Visiting pre-service teachers were assigned to work with a host teacher for the duration of the two week visit. This involved students meeting and working with host teachers to plan out what activities were going to be completed. A participant noted:

'I like them because the students also like the children; they like to play with them, they like to do activities with them. They also love them very much.'

An element that may have an impact on the benefits of service learning is when these experiences are timed and scheduled. As mentioned, for pre-service teachers, this experience occurred outside of regular semester time and for members at the host school, after the regular school year. Views were sought as to the timing of the experience and included:

'I guess this is the best time because you see we have already finished our year, our curriculum, our whole year (of) study and this time around we don't have many things to do. If you'd come in the middle of the year you would see like you're interfering with our syllabus for the year but now we have ended everything, we have completed the exams, I think there's no better time like this. Yes, this is the best.'

'...this is the best time when there's no exam, no distractions or structures set by the government so that nobody can say that you came and disrupted things.'

Future ISL experiences to the host community would be cognisant of host teachers' attitude towards the timing of the visit.

Limitations of the study

It is of note that as interviews were conducted face to face it would be difficult to eliminate social desirability bias, in essence the notion that the participants presented their answers to questions in generally positive terms rather than include negative comments. Not known at the time the research was conducted was that all teachers at the school were employed by the NGO responsible for the school. As such, it would be difficult to validate their responses as either being reflective of genuine sentiment or whether the participants felt that they needed to sound positive about the experience as it was organised in collaboration with the NGO. Additionally, children at the host school are sponsored through the NGO; some by service-learning participants, which may have had an impact on the answers given.

Conclusion and future direction

All international service learning experiences are aimed at developing global awareness, developing common understandings and collaboratively building social justice. The research findings reported here indicate that the experience is valued by host teachers for a number of reasons. It serves to fill an identified void in the school curriculum; allows host teachers an opportunity to reflect on elements of pedagogy; and for the host children it was evident that they enjoyed the company and variety of the activities and instruction they were offered.

The need to include the critical voice of community members to strengthen any continuous relationship is supported by current literature in the field. Strengthening international service -learning experiences will be reliant on the quality of relationships developed between the host community and visiting teacher educators. Through these relationships it is anticipated that participants from the host country will continue to share their perspectives over time, and essentially limit the degree of social desirability bias in their communication. Further, if this international service learning experience is to be strengthened, teacher educators will need to continue to respond to cultural norms and sensitivities, develop open and empathic discourse so as to allow for the needs of all stakeholders to be concurrently met.

Taking subsequent groups of pre-service teachers to the same host community annually, the aim is to make the design of the experience sustainable for the long term and become critically significant to all stakeholders. Long term sustainability of the experience will potentially also allow teacher educators to explore the long term impacts of international service learning on this particular host community.

References

- Blouin, D. D., & Perry, E. M. (2009). Whom Does Service Learning Really Serve? Community-Based Organizations' Perspectives on Service Learning. *Teaching Sociology*, 37(2), 120-135.
- Boland, J. (2009). Teaching and learning through civic engagement: Prospects for sustainability in teacher education. *Issues in Educational Research*, 20 (1).
- Butin, D.W (2003).Of what use is it? Multiple conceptualisations of service learning within education. *Teachers College Record*, 105 (9).
- Butin, D.W (2006). The limits of service learning in higher education. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(4) 473-498
- Campus Compact. (2002). *Membership*. Providence, RI: Available at <http://www.compact.org>
- Chareka, O., Leyte, G., & Mills, A. (2010). 'Let us walk the talk: Successes and struggles in implementing global education as a regular course at university level in Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 10, Spring 2010, pp.120-126, available at: <http://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue10-perspectives4>
- Coles, R. (1993). *A call to service*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press
- Cruz, N. I., & Giles, Jr., D.E. (2000). Where's the community in service-learning research? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall, 28-34.
- Eby,J.(1998).Why Service-Learning is Bad. Available at <http://www.messiah.edu/agape/learning.html#Resources>
- Eyler,J. (2002). Reflection: Linking service and learning - Linking students and communities. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58 (3), 517-534.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D.E. (1999). Where's the learning in service learning? San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Gelmon, S. B., Holland, B., Driscoll, A., Spring, A., & Kerrigan, S. (2001). *Assessing service learning and civic engagement: Principles and techniques*. Providence, RI: Campus Compact.
- Hurd, C.A. (2008) Is Service-Learning Effective?: A Look at Current Research in Shalini, S. (Ed.), *Service-Learning: Perspectives and Applications*, ICFAI University Press: India, 44-60.
- Hutchinson, M. (2011). Measuring Engagement Impact on Communities: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 15(3), 31-44.
- Illich, I. (1990). To hell with good intentions. In J.Kendall (Ed.), *Combining service and learning: A resource book for community and public service* (1), 314-320 Raleigh, NC: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education.
- Lavery,S. (2007). Christian service learning - Does it make a difference? *Journal of Religious Education*,55(1), 50-53
- Lisman, C.D. (1998). Border pedagogy: A critical framework for service learning. *The Michigan Journal of Community Service learning*, 4, 72-80
- Walters,L; Garii, B; & Walters, T. (2009). Learning globally, teaching locally: incorporatnig international exchange and intercultural learning into pre-servcie teacher training. *Intercultural Education*, 20, Suppl. Nos S1-2.
- Miller, K. Gonzales, A. (2010). Domestic and international service learning experiences: A comparitive study of pre-service teacher outcomes. *Issues in Educational Research*, 20(1).
- Paoletti, J. B., Segal, E., & Totino, C. (2007). Acts of diversity: Assessing the impact of service-learning. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* (111), 47-54.

- Peckeral & Peters (Eds.) (1998), *Assessing internal and external outcomes of service learning collaborations*. Denver, CO: Campus Compact National Centre for Community Colleges.
- Pribbenow, D. 2005. The impact of service-learning pedagogy on faculty teaching and learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, Spring. pp.25–38.
- Slavkin, M. L. (2007). Transforming Education through Service-Learning. *New Horizons in Education*, 55(1), 107-122.
- Stoecker, R., Tyron, E.A., & Hilgendorf, A. (Eds.). (2009) *The Unheard Voices: Community Organisations and Service Learning*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Swick, K. (2001). Service-Learning in Teacher Education: Building Learning Communities. *The Clearing House*, 74(5), 261-264.
- Tyron, E., Stoecker, R., Martin, A., Seblonka, K., Hilgendorf, A., & Nellis, M. (2008). The Challenge of Short-Term Service-Learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*(Spring 2008), 16-26.
- Walters, L. M., Garii, B., & Walters, T. (2009). Learning globally, teaching locally: incorporating international exchange and intercultural learning into pre-service teacher training. *Intercultural Education*, 20, 151-158.

Author

Julie Maakrun is Senior Lecturer and Associate Dean – Development and Pedagogy in the School of Education, Sydney at the University of Notre Dame Australia. Julie has been coordinating international service-learning immersion programs for the past six years has received a Vice Chancellor’s Award, an Office of Learning and Teaching Citation (Team) and an Office of Learning and Teaching Award for her work in Kenya.

Julie has over 25 years of experience in both primary and secondary schools with the current focus on the provision of quality education that provides for the achievement of outcomes and key competencies thus empowering pre service teachers to respond to the demands of education.