

Learning Through Service: Preservice Teachers' Reflections from an International Service-Learning

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to describe the impact of an international service-learning project on a group of preservice teachers. International service-learning can be a valuable educational enterprise with both major-specific and general education benefits as well as contributing to the international community. This project was granted by Pilot Overseas Internships, sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, and was intended to allow undergraduate students to gain field experience in an overseas professional institute. Six female preservice teachers participated in the 30-day long project and worked with children and inservice teachers in Kathmandu, Nepal. Preservice teachers indicated that the project broadened their international visions, affected their value of life and showed them the importance of always being prepared. They also acknowledged the merit of learning foreign languages, and expressed further interest in getting involved in the social welfare system to serve those in need.

Overview

International service-learning has gained a lot of attention over the past few years; this pedagogy has been used in various disciplines in higher education. Bringle, Hatcher, and Jones (2011) describe international service-learning as a unique pedagogy that incorporates the domains of service-learning and international education but with a focus on intercultural competencies. According to Pusch and Merrill (2008), learning that enhances self-knowledge and intercultural development is

central to international service-learning. Moreover, learning instructional practices such as experiential activity and reflection are also essential to international service-learning (Montrose, 2002; Pagano & Roselle, 2009).

There are many types of international service-learning according to Jones and Steinberg (2011), depending upon the disciplines and institutes. Bringle and Hatcher (2011) define international service-learning as “a structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally” (p. 19). This report focused on the lens of student learning outcomes as their perspectives can inform future teaching and learning pertaining to international service-learning.

Service-Learning in Teacher Education

Integrating community service with learning in the university curriculum is a common practice in my university. Preservice teachers are expected to apply their major subject learning to help local residents. From this experience, students have the opportunity to transmit their major subject knowledge or skills and carry out a project or a series of activities that benefit others as well as themselves. Kerins (2010) points out that individuals' knowledge, skills,

and value of their major subject can be enhanced through the reflection of service activities and subject theory. In turn, preservice teachers are able to apply their content knowledge while reflecting on the needs of the community. Chambers and Lavery (2012) quote the definition of service-learning as a teaching method "which combines community service and academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking, and civic responsibility." Service-learning, therefore, can be seen as a bridge that assists students in connecting their theoretical learning to practical world needs.

Bernadowski, Perry, and Greco (2013) indicate that service-learning has gained the attention of teacher educators, with many incorporating service-learning into their teacher preparation programs through a variety of method courses. Compared to the field experience of student teaching, Spencer, Cox-Peterson, and Crawford (2005) argue that service-learning can benefit preservice teachers by including real life experiences that enhance and extend their knowledge/skills of teaching. Miller and Gonzalez (2010) confirm that service-learning acts as a bridge to connect professional development and community needs. They listed the impacts of service-learning on professional development of preservice teachers to include: academic achievement, career goal clarification, civic engagement, and cultural competencies.

Cultural competence is one's ability to interact effectively with diverse groups. Seeberg and Minick (2012) believe that teacher education needs to engage preservice teachers in empowering cultural competence so they can transmit subject knowledge to their future students. Seeberg and Minick (2012) found that service-learning has a significant impact on preservice teachers'

awareness of the issue of cultural competence, as participants developed the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with different culture backgrounders.

Kiely (2004) believes that international service-learning can install profound, transformational learning to provide students with international knowledge, the attitude to adjust their lifestyle, and engage in social justice work. Heyl and McCarthy (2005) suggest that teacher education programs should provide preservice teachers with the international experience and the ability to incorporate a global vision into their future teaching.

The report used qualitative methods to show the benefits of an international service-learning project (ISLP) through the reflections of the preservice teachers who participated in the project. This paper intends to describe the development of these individuals in the areas of leadership, knowledge, skills, and compassion to research the impact of the ISLP on the preservice teachers.

Background

In September 2012, the author was invited to participate on a Taiwanese preservice teachers volunteer team, which was convened by the faculty of the Department of Primary Education at National Taipei University of Education (NTUE). A total of 12 preservice teachers and four professors went to a Nepali private boarding school¹ in Kathmandu for 10 days of complementary classes. I observed and organized preservice teachers' daily activities, which led me to realize that an international service-learning program would benefit Taiwanese students in providing them

¹ School name is anonymous. It is a boarding school in Kathmandu. Founded by a Buddhist monk in 2002, this charity-run school provides free education,

accommodation, food and medical care to children in need in Nepal. Most of students are from the remote regions of the country such as Dolpo and Mustang.

with an international outlook. This delightful experience led me to consider how to take my students abroad to broaden their horizons, enhance their international vision, and enrich their experience in helping others.

There were two challenges I faced in offering an international service-learning program. First, I needed to find financial support for the preservice teachers because many of them could not afford the expenses for an overseas internship. Second, I needed a trustworthy institution as my host with resources to offer a safe field experience for the preservice teachers. The first challenge was overcome when I received a grant from the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, which provided compensation for six preservice teachers' and two faculty member's travel expenses. The second challenge was solved after I met with Mrs. Prabha (Rajbhan Cadari) Pradhan, chairperson of CanHelp Nepal and executive chairperson of Socio-Economic Welfare Centre for Energetic Women (EWC), both are non-government organizations (NGO). I had a chance to meet Mrs. Pradhan the first time I visited Nepal. We became close acquaintances, as she had participated in the NTUE's volunteer team. CanHelp Nepal undertakes donations from Australia and elsewhere to carry out courses for serving local teachers, setting up computer classrooms, helping children in need, and other needed services. EWC is an organization established to provide support for women's employment and entrepreneurship. The organization was founded to change the status of Nepali women in the home and society. The missions of these two organizations correlate with the goals of my project. Moreover, Mrs. Pradhan was highly interested in my project and accepted my request of being the host of the project.

Lee (2010) states that the three key points of service-learning are: cultivating students' understanding of the social issues of human

existence (including: history, culture, politics, and so on), emphasizing the principle of reciprocity, and grasping the significance of learning. Based on Lee's suggestions, the current project engaged preservice teachers in an overseas internship, in hopes that through immersion in professional knowledge and skills training in the field experience, preservice teachers will learn the Nepali cultures and understand the needs of the local people under the mechanism of mutual cooperation.

Methodology

Participants

Initially, many early childhood preservice teachers expressed interest in ISLP. However, not many participated in the selection process because we required students to speak in English during the interview process. Although I felt it would be difficult to effectively implement the project with a limited number of preservice teachers, I was able to identify and select six who fit the criteria and had positive attitudes towards the project.

The six participating early childhood preservice teachers were all female; one was a freshman, two were sophomores, and three were juniors at the time of their participation. Shelly, the freshman, received her diploma from an international multi-languages high school. Shelly was proficient in writing English however, she was less confident in speaking English. Jojo, a sophomore, was very talented and skillful in dance and organizing activities. Chris, a sophomore, originally from Hong Kong, came to Taiwan at age 18 for her undergraduate study. Chris was willing to learn new things, and she expected to broaden her world views through this project. Selina, a junior, was willing to take care of others, and was easy going. Min, was a quiet junior. Nikki, a sophomore, spoke fluent English and demonstrated good communication with English speakers. Nikki

was the team leader of the project; she assisted me in organizing team meetings, sending messages to team members, and documenting project materials.

All six preservice teachers were required to join a two-hour per week, 18-week long, advanced English class to advance their English communication ability and to learn about cultural sensitivity. To prepare teaching materials for the project in Nepal, the preservice teachers were grouped into three pairs, each pair was assigned to learn and use various computer software, such as Microsoft Word, Excel, Power Point, Search Engine, Web Side, and Web Mail, etc. An English language teaching demonstration was held to verify participation in the curriculum content and the presentation methods learned in the course. A pre-travel briefing was held to discuss items such as cultural taboos, eating customs, food hygiene issues, traffic safety, individual medications, visa forms, vaccine injections, suitable clothes, etc. This cultural literacy meeting was held to prepare preservice teachers for the trip and to ensure that they understood the essence of service-learning.

Course Content of Pilot Overseas Internship

Our journey began in late June of 2014. While in Nepal, we met twice daily for approximately 30-60 minutes. Generally, the host organization explained the daily activities in the morning, and then we had a group meeting in the evening to discuss the activities and their effectiveness. The four weeks of activities are summarized below.

Week One

We were invited to participate in a five day inservice teacher training workshop which was organized by the CanHelp Nepal organization. Inservice teachers were from local public schools and were between the ages of 20 to 50. The teachers had limited

training in using teaching materials to teach mathematics, language, and arts. The inservice teachers also had limited experience in using computer software. Mrs. Pradhan explained the reason she included us in this workshop was to point out to us that if we wanted to change the quality of the school, we first needed to change the quality of teaching. We spent all day with these inservice teachers learning about their educational practice, current educational circumstances and need for educational reform.

Week Two

We interviewed children living in poverty, administered children's IQ tests, and attended a conference for women who work at Mirco Bank (a local organization/banking institute that lends money for women who work on the farm). From these activities we came to understand the operational content of the internment agency, learning the promotional models for maternal and child support programs, and mastering the substance of effective social welfare programs.

Week Three

We offered computer courses to local inservice teachers in which the six preservice teachers shared their respective expertise in computer software. During the teaching process, the preservice teachers realized the difference in experience with various technology and software between themselves and the inservice teachers.

Week Four

Based on observing different kindergarten classrooms, preservice teachers developed teaching materials which met their needs. Preservice teachers, based on their training from the university, assisted kindergarten teachers in using local resources/materials, and developing teaching and learning activities. From the process of

interaction with local teachers, our preservice teachers learned how to translate their professional expertise into methods to assist the local teachers.

From participating in the field, preservice teachers came to understand how NGO operates, and experienced first-hand the nature and value of the programs for those who are in need under the support of United Nations aid. From their service, they learned how to work with women and children from different backgrounds, providing assistance to meet their needs according to their circumstantial context. The data source for this report came from preservice teachers' internship reflections.

Findings and Discussion

The value of service-learning is derived from involvement in the process of providing service, reflecting on one's own shortcomings, and improving one's capabilities to better provide a more complete social service in the future. After having completed their four weeks of service-learning, analysis of the six preservice teachers' journeys and project reports revealed the following findings.

Change Personal Values and Images of Nepal

Due to prior viewing of media reporting daily life in South Asia, preservice teachers have biased stereotypes, thinking of countries like Nepal as full of poverty, filth, an unhealthy environment, and chaotic traffic conditions. Upon arrival in Kathmandu, the first scene that these preservice teachers experienced was seeing women and children begging in the streets.

The wealth gap in Nepal is huge...you often see groups of children on the streets looking for food to eat...we didn't carry food...we always evaded them in fear. (Min)

The preservice teachers were able to participate in the NGO's service-learning course after extensive contact with the local women and children, which led the preservice teachers to see Nepal in a different light.

Before coming here I had never thought that a minor operation for strabismus was something unavailable to many children; having wellington boots to wear and walking round all day long they're happy; and on rainy days being able to have a hot shower is, in fact, a luxury; electricity blackouts alternating by district were something bound to happen every day... (Nikki)

From the school visit, I saw the thoughtless waste of my own original lifestyle, and also saw that actually I'm very fortunate. We are not born more intelligent than they are, so although we are now at university, they are only unable to study because they're forced by the circumstances of their environment... (Fan)

According to the World Bank statistics of per capita income, Nepal was 730 U.S. dollars in 2013 and Taiwan was nearly 22,000 U.S. dollars. Although it may not be correct, comparing the per capita income of the two countries shows that Nepal is a relatively less developed country. Going to a less developed country for an internship seems like a dubious idea for preservice teachers, which leads them to wonder the kind of growth and progress they will get? The growth of change in the preservice teachers' personal values while going through this spiritual retreat was easily seen. For example, Nikki commented:

Coming to this land...our spiritual sense of satisfaction is washed away. From the very beginning I adopted the mentality of someone giving out

help...then I found that a mentality which is lacking is more terrible than a lack of material wealth. It turned out that I was the one who was getting help from them.

In the process of providing service, the preservice teachers came to realize that they themselves benefit, and were thankful for that. The preservice teachers became aware that by putting their own capabilities to use through service-learning, they were able to provide something valuable to meet the needs of local people.

Our strength is limited, but through the CanHelp Nepal organization, we have been able bring a lot of resources to schools or communities, especially computer-related knowledge. (Min)

Computer use is not widespread in Nepal, but they really want to learn this technology product. Through this service trip, I realized that we have a lot of stuff, and also that we can help other people in need. (Fan)

If we want to change Nepal, we should start by improving the availability of education and the quality of teachers. (Jojo)

By participating in this project, preservice teachers learned to better appreciate the importance of education. They also discovered that their own computer abilities could be used to help local students and teachers. Bernadowski, Perry, and Greco (2013) believe that through service-learning, preservice teachers can raise their self-efficacy, become aware of their own strengths, improve on their own shortcomings, and become successful educators.

Services provided by the organization for women and children are mainly support-oriented, fostering self-reliance on those receiving aid in Nepal. The preservice

teachers believe this can result in promoting social welfare policies in Taiwan.

The work of the EWC agency is also highly admirable, helping women's employment in communities, and thereby improving household budgets and raising the status of women in their families. Many subsidy systems in Taiwan would be well advised to carefully consider this approach. Sometimes, granting more money is of no use to the people in need of help. After all, we see one news item after another in our society, about the 'professional unemployed' not going out to work, and not taking care of their elders, relying on farmer's welfare allowances and so on. (Jojo)

Providing services in the field changed the viewpoints of many of the preservice teachers and gave them a different understanding of Nepal and a new perspective of social welfare policies. Upon reflection, the preservice teachers' sense of national identity was enhanced

When we came back to Taiwan, everyone was very curious as to what local life in Nepal is like. In our post-trip presentation, everyone was surprised to see our photos. How, in such an unimaginable country, could there be so many purely smiles? The Nepali people even make us feel ashamed that in such a country, with political unrest, stuck in a chaotic society, they all still love their own country, and are always proud of their own country... (Nikki)

Nikki became aware that the political turmoil in Nepal did not affect the local peoples' love for their society and their country. Mrs. Pradhan is a typical example of a great leader of an internship organization, as she is constantly coming up with ideas on

how to improve the quality of education, and how to improve the status of women.

During the service-learning experience, preservice teachers came to appreciate the importance of women in social development, as well as the use of education as a way out of poverty. As a result of seeing suffering, they came to reflect on their waste of resources and behaviour oblivious of their good fortune. Chambers and Lavery (2012) consider the importance and value of service-learning to be improving participants' understanding of the needs of others, while at the same time helping participants to see their own inadequacies. In the daily work review meetings, the preservice teachers related their findings and reflected on all they had seen. The viewpoints formed by preservice teachers in the process of service-learning could be profoundly beneficial to their academic judgement in future teaching.

Becoming a Better Prepared Teacher

Upon coming to Nepal, one of the tasks allocated to the preservice teachers by the internship organization was kindergarten and elementary school teaching. In their university curriculum, the tradition is that preservice teachers learn more about the direct instruction approach to teaching. It is teacher-centered in that everything is prepared beforehand and teaching proceeds according to the steps designed in the lesson plan. By contrast, the service-learning approach focuses on the needs of those receiving the services. Preservice teachers benefit from providing school service is derived from reflection on their practical experience of involvement in field experiment.

Education can also be seen as a kind of 'opportunity providing' institution. There is a lot of room for improvement to education in Nepal, and I was very lucky to have this opportunity to come to Nepal to visit

and serve in many schools through the CanHelp Nepal agency, particularly with respect to kindergartens, which left a deep impression. Seeing local kindergarten teachers teaching things like mathematics questions and English grammar on the blackboard made me wonder whether these children were really able to understand it? (Min)

The preservice teachers felt confused by the excessively cognitive-oriented teaching of local kindergarten teachers. Mrs. Pradhan considered it necessary to change the teachers' way of thinking through professional development workshops. As a result, Professor Chen from the author's university was invited to go to Nepal in July, and provided local kindergarten teachers with some professional development workshops. Before Professor Chen conducted the course, she observed the scenery near the site, and then invited the teachers to gather various types of leaves. Professor Chen asked the teachers to make an impromptu picture book with leaves as the theme. The educational philosophy that Professor Chen introduced was, using local resources/ materials to lead the children into learning about their environment. The preservice teachers believed that Professor Chen's workshop enabled the local teachers to reach a new realization about approaches to teaching.

Seeing these teachers excitedly playing with leaves, they must have been quite stimulated; the teachers were assiduously taking notes. Although this kind of class can be called play, of course, it's also a way of learning, and it's one which is also more suitable for young children. (Jojo)

When the preservice teachers took part in the workshop classes, they played the role of assistants helping the local teachers make the

picture books. From the process of service, they came to realize that teaching materials can be found in their daily lives and this makes learning more meaningful for children. In their service-learning, they learned more practical experiences in which they would not learn in the classroom.

We also benefited a lot from that study workshop of Teacher Shu-fang's. Even if there is no extra money available to purchase teaching aids, there are still a lot of materials available in our everyday lives. Also, how effectively we use these source materials depends entirely on whether or not we have fully explored their possibilities. They may, perhaps, be even more practical than the materials you can buy. Just like those tiny leaves, which were more able to allow 3 to 5 year-old children to learn than a blackboard. (Jojo)

Kerins (2010) points out that service-learning is a bridge connecting academic courses with the outside world. From their activities in service-learning, preservice teachers reflect on their existing subject knowledge, theories and values. Kerins further indicates that service-learning provides students with the opportunity to apply what they have learned with the purpose of being able to help others. Preservice teachers also realized that the daily schedule of the Nepali lifestyle was not fixed and could be changed in an instant. Often times, preservice teachers' original plans for the day would change or new tasks were added a day before or just before they were to implement their lessons/plans.

We are getting used to the uncertain schedule. Mrs. Pradhan joked about it and stated that it's part of their Nepali traditions. Our schedule can be changed in the last minute before we do our lessons. It

actually helps us to become teachers that are always ready for any challenge. (Nikki)

With this one month past, our courage to always be prepared was also trained. These are not things we learn in the classroom when learning how to write lesson plans. Here, we really do have to make the best of locally available materials, because there are really no extra resources available for us to waste. With this approach, our capabilities are truly inspired. (Chris)

At first, the preservice teachers struggled with adjusting activity planning, but later on when dealing with issues arising from the need to make changes, through discussions among their members, they were able to plan new courses of action. The situational context in which they found themselves approximates a problem-based service-learning project (PBSL), although this was not the original intention of the researcher. West and Simmons (2012) consider problem-based service-learning to provide students with problem-solving skills for the problems they are faced with. Students not only gain the skills needed to complete the work while using PBSL, but they also increase their self-confidence. From preservice teachers' responses regarding the varying tasks given to them by the internship agency, it was apparent that preservice teachers developed problem-solving skills and self-confidence.

Acknowledging the Importance of Foreign Language

Many students begin learning English in middle school or upper level elementary school in Taiwan. However, they lack opportunities for contact with foreign nationals and cannot understand the importance of being familiar with a foreign language.

I can say that my first trip abroad was the first time I appreciated the importance of English. Usually in Taiwan, although we know that English is an important tool with which to communicate with foreigners, growing up in an environment where I had no opportunity to meet foreigners, it was in fact difficult for me to appreciate its importance. (Min)

The environment influences students' learning attitudes. English is commonly used in international service-learning, but only one of our members was able to speak English fluently. Faced with Nepali students and teachers who are proficient in English, preservice teacher Fan's feelings were documented.

In Nepal, English is also not their first language, but virtually everyone can speak English, and even manage a little basic Chinese dialogue. They are very keen learners and actively learn new things. Often people who saw us speaking Chinese also wanted to learn a few words of Chinese with us. I'm sure their learning resources are not as plentiful as ours, but they speak English more fluently than we do... (Fan)

From direct contact, preservice teachers realized that they have a wealth of learning resources, and should seize the opportunity to learn and improve their skills. Preservice teacher Nikki said:

I want to thank my family's two sisters, who always encouraged me to constantly immerse myself in life and the use of English. When my comrades were shattered from a full day of meetings or lectures, and just wanted to hide back in their rooms, I was still able to use my spare time to chat with the local teachers or

women, and exchange ideas...that's when I found how sweet the fruit of my past effort was. (Nikki)

Language is the key to international service-learning. Apart from learning through experiences with their service, how to use English to carry out conversations, members also become aware of their own inadequacy and reflected on their future courses of action. Service-learning provides trainee teachers the opportunity to reflect. Spencer, Cox-Petersen, Crawford (2005) affirm that teachers' reflections can help them clarify their thinking and anticipate decisions and follow up action.

Conclusions

Service-learning stresses equality and provides mutual benefit in both those providing the services and those receiving the services. Both parties are able to expand their knowledge base from this model. International service-learning provides preservice teachers with the opportunity to learn about different cultures and interact with the local cultures. The findings of this study support previous research that consider those individuals who have previously been involved in international service-learning to have wider linguistic and cultural outlooks, and they are more apt to pay attention to the special qualities of others in order to provide instructional strategies that meet their needs (Bringle, et al., 2011; Miller & Gonzalez, 2010).

By participating in an overseas service-learning project, preservice teachers were able to experience the discrepancy between textbook knowledge and the real world. As preservice teacher Niki said:

In the days I spent in Nepal, I realized that in junior high school and in high school, the teacher in class at most mentioned which average incomes there were, some high and

some low. But for me, at that time, I didn't think much about it, because that was only so I would be able to provide the standard answers during exams.

Standard textbook answers cannot solve practical problems in the real world. Through service-learning, preservice teachers become aware of the existence of unfairness, injustice, and inequality in the real world, which changes their values in life, and raises their self-efficacy. It is evident that the international service-learning experience has helped preservice teachers of this study to reflect upon not only their teaching but also the complexity of social and educational issues in Nepal and beyond. This finding echoes what both Montrose (2002) and Pagano & Roselle (2009) suggest, that

reflection can be a very powerful tool to empower preservice teachers to see the reality from a critical lens. Chambers and Lavery (2012) identify confidence as the key element for teachers in their teaching, as confidence gives teachers enough courage and motivation to face the diverse responsibilities of the teaching environment. Preservice teachers who participated in this overseas service-learning project learned to solve problems in circumstances that were beyond their control. As a result, these preservice teachers not only built on their knowledge and skills but also their confidence. This international service-learning experience proved to serve as a valuable vehicle for preservice teachers to learn what textbooks could not offer, and about themselves and the people that changed their mind sets in Nepal.

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