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Emergency Room Mode —A Service-Learning Case

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Dr. Wilberschied is assistant professor of foreign and second language education, and her research interests include service learning as a tool for recruitment and retention of minority teachers. Bauer, ABD for Doctor of Education, has research interests in evaluation. The research interests of Gerdes, M.Ed., include adult education and vocational ESL.

Abstract

This study examines the outcomes of a two-part service learning project in a summer practicum for English as Second Language (ESL) teacher endorsement candidates. First, 10 mainstream K-12 teachers with 2 to 30 years' experience needed practice teaching students with linguistic and cultural differences. Their own service learning was to implement a summer family literacy program for ESL students. Second, these teachers had planned a service learning component for the ESL students. Teachers, feeling obliged to correct all the perceived linguistic deficits in students, went into a panic that they described as "emergency room mode." Regarding service learning and any other non-classroom activity as distraction, they chose to have ESL students abandon such activities. Teachers did gain significantly in understanding and implementing concepts studied in university classes, but their conclusions about service learning varied.

Introduction

Currently, K-12 public schools in the United States include populations of students who differ significantly from those of previous generations, who are increasingly linguistically diverse, even in small and rural districts (Berube, 2000). Nieto (2002) observed, however, that teachers overall have become increasingly monocultural, a majority of White, middle class females from the dominant culture. In suburban and rural districts, 40 percent of the teachers received their teacher training in the 1960s, when teacher candidates were being prepared to serve White, English-speaking, suburban populations (Berube, 2000). In addition, Nieto (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1995) noted that many White teachers do not see themselves as culture-bearers and are unprepared to address issues of cultural differences in their classrooms.

Preparing teachers to deal with diversity is not a simple task. Phinney and Tatum (2000) described a developmental scale for White students in teacher education courses illustrating the long, demanding, and arduous process that members of the dominant (White, middle-class) culture undertake when they make the commitment to come to terms with their own race and its implications in society. Ladson-Billings (1995) discussed the need for a model of culturally relevant instruction for all students. Added to these challenges is often that of acquiring the skills and knowledge to help English as a Second Language learners (ESL) acquire language and build meaning without viewing them from a deficit perspective (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Such a perspective mistakenly treats the student as a deficient individual rather than as one who has language skills and background knowledge and is in the process of further acquisition.

Nieto (2002) called for the transformation of the educational system into one that reflects the diverse demographics of modern schools. This paper reports on a case study of the effectiveness of service learning as one method to prepare teacher education students for the multicultural and multilingual classroom.

Literature Review

John Dewey receives credit for articulating the formative ideas upon which service learning pedagogy is based (Cooper, 2002), which link community service with course content and reflection upon the relationship of the two with the growth of the individual. Service learning methodology shows potential for preparing teachers efficiently and effectively (Root, 1997).

Eyler and Giles (1999) coined five “Cs” to represent important elements of service learning projects. “Connection” represents the concept that classrooms do not exist as isolated entities, but should expand into the lives of students, communities, and institutions. “Continuity” represents the notion that class work should extend beyond the time frame of the course and allow students to reflect and grow through the testing and re-testing of their beliefs and concepts. “Context” presents the idea that students learn most efficiently when applying theory to solve real-world problems. “Challenge” suggests that students develop more complex worldviews and changed perspectives through addressing relevant problems. “Coaching” asserts that students in service learning projects should always be given emotional and intellectual support throughout their experiences so that they are not overwhelmed. These are the aspects that the mentor, instructor, and supervisor of the study attempted to integrate into the service learning course discussed in this study.

The participants in this study had had little or no prior experience with ESL learners, but preservice teachers with only monocultural experience can benefit when such experiences occur through service learning. Zlotkowski (1998) wrote that service learning in second cultures provides students the most efficient production of deep learning. Heuser (1999) noted that, as students become part of communities of speakers of another language, they begin to see the world through the eyes of the people of those communities. Finally, Eyler and Giles (1999) said students who participated in service learning projects take steps towards biculturalism. We hoped to facilitate such experiences for the participants.

Community involvement outside the classroom was one another experience we hoped to facilitate, because it is one of the desired behavioral characteristics that Ladson-Billings (1995) noted for preservice teachers. Ladson-Billings also mentions their commitment to facilitating students’ ability to fulfill high standards, and the ability to approach students from their own life experiences. These are essential for their ability to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. Buchanan, Baldwin, and Rudisill (2002) observed that service learning experiences can help to engender those characteristics, along with sensitivity to community based issues and critical metacognition. They further state that preservice teachers who participate in service learning are helped to find their own strengths.

Service learning has enormous potential for guiding teacher education students of both minority and majority cultures through a complex and demanding process. We thought the opportunities for deep learning and experimentation in an authentic context would allow the teachers to move beyond the populations they were used to serving and into the world of ESL students with as much support as possible.

Method

Participants

All teacher participants were students in the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) Program of a large, midwestern university and were seeking TESL

endorsements on their teaching certificates. The ten teachers (all female) had from two to 30 years of classroom experience and were full-time educators in the K-12 context. Two of the participants were ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, one in the primary grades and the other in the secondary grades. Two were high school English teachers. Others held the following positions: elementary physical education teacher; elementary gifted education teacher; primary reading teacher; second grade classroom teacher; coordinator of family/childhood literacy program; and middle school English teacher. Of these students, three had had previous experience working with ESL students. The group had completed 4 to 12 hours of coursework in TESL. Their lead teacher mentor was a bilingual teacher with 22 years of teaching experience, much of it in TESL; her assistant was also bilingual and had just completed a one-year internship under the supervision of the mentor. The university instructor and the TESL endorsement supervisor were also experienced ESL educators. The entire working group thus included ten practicum teacher (PT) participants and those who worked with them during the practicum—one mentor teacher, one mentor's assistant, one university instructor, and one TESL endorsement supervisor.

Setting

As a practicum experience in TESL and a service learning project, the ten PTs established and staffed a free ESL summer program with a family literacy approach, open to any K-12 ESL students and their family members throughout the greater metropolitan area. Easily accessible through highway connections and bus routes, the high school site in the center of the town was within easy walking distance of the public library and a local park.

Procedure

Six months before the opening of the summer program, the university practicum instructor began making arrangements. This was to be a service learning project for the TESL PTs. They were to establish and operate a summer program that focused on serving the needs of area ESL students. Need for such a program existed throughout the region because traditional summer school models neither adapted instruction for ESL students nor focused on supporting and sustaining English language development. The practicum instructor contacted community leaders to explore opportunities for service learning projects for the K-12 ESL students and performed a needs analysis of community agencies. The consensus of the instructor, practicum supervisor, PTs, and community members was that the most appropriate service learning project would be in a park honoring veterans where the summer program ESL students and PTs would clean and mulch flower beds. The city would provide all the supplies for the project, and a bilingual worker would help orient the students to their work in the park. The practicum instructor and the university endorsement supervisor met with school officials as needed to make logistical arrangements for the practicum. They also conferred with each other regularly, discussing learning needs and objectives for the summer.

During the spring prior to the summer program, endorsement teacher candidates met for one hour a week with the university endorsement supervisor and the mentor teacher to plan the K-12 summer program. They discussed issues such as thematic units, publicity for the program, and service learning methodology. The summer practicum instructor received reports on what transpired. The PTs selected the instructional content themes—outer space, community, and Fourth of July. The endorsement supervisor introduced service learning as a teaching technique that the PTs would implement with their K-12 students in the local park in addition to the PTs' own service learning

project, which was the summer program itself. The lead mentor teacher was responsible for writing the lessons for the program.

The summer program occurred over five weeks of the university's summer quarter. On the first day, PTs divided into teams to enroll those who had not preregistered, assess all students, and interact with arriving students while everyone was processed. It was impossible to predict exactly what kind or how many K-12 students would enroll, so teachers did not know who they would be serving until everyone had registered. By the end of the week more than 55 children and parents had enrolled, and the PTs decided to divide the students and their parents into four groups: primary, elementary, secondary, and adults. PTs chose to teach the age groups with which they were most familiar or experienced.

By the beginning of the second week, the teaching group had established a routine. PTs taught K-12 children and, in many cases, their parents, from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. Monday through Thursday. Mondays and Tuesdays were days spent with their age-divided classes working on building English language skills by studying the instructional content thematic units. The content themes were entitled "Stars and Stripes," and teachers integrated strands of US history, astronomy, narrative, song, and mathematics with the service learning project for the ESL children and adults that took place in the veterans' park. On Wednesday, all classes visited the community's public library. The entire program went to the local park and worked on the service learning project on Thursday.

PTs were required to reflect on their experience throughout the term. The practicum instructor also completed reflections and shared them as models. Following each instructional day, PTs met to discuss events, and on Fridays, they came to the site for a day of planning. One-hour reflective discussions opened the planning day, and written, weekly reflections were turned in by the following Monday. The practicum instructor gave PTs feedback on those reflections within two days. This feedback and her model reflections acted as the 'coaching' element (Eyler & Giles, 1999). In addition, at the end of the course, PTs submitted a written final reflection, summing up their learning in the course. The practicum instructor also completed a final reflection, which she submitted to the TESL endorsement supervisor. These reflections provided the main source of data, but emails, transcriptions of daily and weekly reflection sessions, and interviews provided triangulation (Bogdan & Bicklin, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Analysis and Results

Each of us read the reflections and made a list of recurring topics. We met and compared the three lists, compiled a consensual list, and read the data again. We affirmed our identification of four topic strands, all of which appeared in writings for two to four weeks, plus the final reflections: "Emergency Room Mode"—the term that PTs adopted to describe their panic regarding their perceptions of ESL students' linguistic "deficiencies;" Teacher Confidence—growth along a continuum in taking responsibility for making instructional decisions; Identification with ESL Families—progress in finding similarities between themselves and the ESL students; and Dominance of the Power Culture—insights into marginalization of ESL students and their teachers and the need to become advocates. Each main strand encompassed two to four key elements or supporting ideas. We then categorized the remarks and cross-checked one another. We further checked emails and transcriptions to triangulate.

Strand I: "Emergency Room Mode"

This strand contained 24 comments from seven teachers over four weeks and the final reflection. From the first day of family enrollment, the PTs began to experience shock regarding the differences in language and culture of the students. PTs were experienced K-12 teachers, but most had never encountered ESL students. Even one experienced ESL teacher expressed surprise that not all ESL students spoke Spanish. Stress levels climbed as one PT noted, "I think we have shifted from a long term process point of view to an emergency room point of view. Our preconceptions of the urgency of the need is driving our choices." That is, the important concepts they had carefully developed during the previous year's courses and planning sessions—the developmental nature of second language acquisition and the methodology of service learning—were forgotten as they encountered actual ESL learners with limited English proficiency. Their panic continued despite coaching from the mentor teacher and the practicum instructor, as PTs became increasingly worried about ESL students' performance on proficiency tests.

IA. Mistrust of developmental nature of second language acquisition Many PTs were simply baffled during the first week with how to handle the low levels of English of the K-12 and adult students. One described her fruitless efforts to communicate by "sitting down and talking directly into their faces. I guess I thought they didn't understand me because I wasn't close enough." Another observed, "...the sense of urgency and enormity of need can cause teachers to feel that they are wasting time if they engage students in activities that are casual or social in nature. Development is often slow and activities that promote development are not time efficient." The sense of urgency quickly developed into a resentment of any learning activities the PTs perceived as non-academic. They began to question the value of the library visits and the time spent in the local park. Soon, a campaign began to reduce the time allotted for these activities, or even to eliminate them altogether.

The practicum instructor reiterated the developmental nature of language acquisition, but PTs accepted the concept of developmental language learning only at the end of the program, having had time to experience it with their K-12 students firsthand. This had serious consequences for the service learning project in the park.

I B. Mistrust of Service Learning Many of the teachers made no connection between the service learning in the park and the discussions in which they participated during prior and current planning meetings. They stated that park activities sacrificed too much time from academic pursuits, that attendance of ESL families decreased on park day, and that not all the teachers worked in the park (Medical reasons were the major factor that prevented two from continuing after the first visit.) One PT summed it up in her final reflection: "I would not call our service learning project an overall success. For service learning to be a success, everyone must be on board....legitimate need must exist and the students must know they are providing a true solution. I'm not convinced that our one week unit on community was sufficient explanation of the program for our students. Their service work needs to be intertwined with the course work to the point where they are indistinguishable. Our practicum was a successful example of service learning....we should have considered the physical limitations, interests, and perceived community needs of both teachers and students."

II. Teacher Confidence

This strand contained 19 discussions by eight teachers in four weeks and the final reflection. PTs had difficulty in perceiving their ESL students as normal children.

Initially it was hard for them to transfer previous K-12 experience to what they knew about ESL students. The challenges in communication so compelled the teachers that they obscured their view of the whole student. As the practicum continued and teachers were able to interact with K-12 students and their families, this perspective changed. Eight PTs noted in their reflections that the hands-on experience gave them opportunities to experiment in a no-risk environment. Four mentioned that they felt sufficiently confident of the value and effectiveness of their newly acquired teaching strategies that they would apply what they had learned not only with ESL students but also in their regular classrooms.

II A. Team Teaching Teaching in teams challenged many of the PTs, and the variations of prior teaching experience of teammates was a major issue. Four PTs described feeling intimidated by teammates who had previous experience in ESL teaching, foreign language teaching, or more years of experience in K-12 teaching in general. Four others said they had to force themselves to step back and let new ESL teachers experiment. Six PTs described feelings of wanting to “play nice” and not offend colleagues, even though they acknowledged benefits to being able to advocate for themselves and their experience as educators.

II B. Parent Involvement More than 15 remarks appeared in journals and transcripts, and the following example is illustrative. One participant’s struggle with parent involvement reflected growth in her confidence as a teacher. She initially expressed reservations about having parents in the classroom because of the potential effect on teacher classroom control. In the second week, she ended her reflection asking herself how she could teach the parent what is considered acceptable behavior in US classrooms. By the fourth week, she discussed the benefits of parents working with children to develop academic skills. Her final reflection noted that it was a good idea to involve the parents in classes both because they learned with their children and gained knowledge about interaction with school personnel.

III. Identification with ESL Families

This strand appeared in 19 instances in reflections from weeks one through four and the final reflection in the writing of eight teachers. Throughout the practicum, the PTs blended practical experience with ESL students and their families with the theoretical preparation from course work. This blend allowed them to approach ESL populations as students with needs analogous to those of students they had experienced in other venues and to plan appropriate and realistic modifications.

III A. Humanity of ESL Population Eight PTs progressed from having theoretical constructs of English learners to actually knowing the learners of English. One teacher, who was a new mother, identified with the mothers of the students, remarking on their courage and perseverance in learning something new with their children. Another teacher reflected on the feelings of people who left homelands they knew they would never see again, wondering how children from refugee camps could possibly relate to life in the United States. Through relationships built with the ESL families, PTs soon reported seeing whole students, not students locked behind barriers of linguistic gaps.

III B. Modifications for ESL Becoming more familiar with the students gave PTs opportunities to develop teaching strategies through modifications. “Early in the week I learned to SLOW down,” observed one after the second week. “Though I was covering more simplistic material than I do with my mainstream classes, I was

explaining it in the same way. That clearly won't work." Another PT struggled to combine the whole language approach with structured techniques that stressed repetitive skill-based exercises. They reflected upon the value of routine for ESL students in reflections and the need to make students comfortable enough to take risks with language.

IV. Dominance of Power Culture

Six PTs commented regarding this strand in 17 reflections for weeks two through four and the final reflection. For many of the teachers, the practicum was a first opportunity to confront the dominance of the majority culture in US schools. Some expressed surprise at how little school districts do to acknowledge the presence of these students. A PT, also a practicing ESL teacher, expressed the following:

"I ... realize just how hard my job is.... I wish I received cooperation and kindness from the teachers in my school. I feel so isolated and alone at my school. There are very few teachers who care to bother with the problems of ESL students."

During the fourth week, a PT reflected on the invisibility of her student's gifts in poetry and his extensive knowledge of political systems to the teachers in his home school district. "He needs to take some initiative to make himself noticed.... However, his anecdote struck an emotional chord. I know I would be frustrated to live with so much to share and only be able to share a portion."

IV A. Disenfranchisement of ESL Programs Five PTs reflected on the fact that the ESL teacher "is pushed into some corner and expected to do his or her magic," as one PT observed. She had erroneously assumed that ESL students were being fully served in the "educational cafeteria." Another PT expressed concern that her ESL student would be "doomed to failure" if he did not learn to express himself in English. Another PT noted that, because ESL jobs were so "up in the air" locally, she would remain a classroom teacher and ask to have the ESL students in her district assigned to her.

IV B. TESL as a Political Activity Many PTs concluded that teaching ESL is a political activity. Two decided to collaborate to write a grant for a bilingual school. Another PT noted that she could start her district developing guidelines for ESL students. Several PTs also discussed the trust that parents of ESL students have in ESL teachers and the need to advocate for those students and their families in school communities. "What I am realizing...is that TESL is at least as political as educational," concluded one.

Discussion

Several service learning elements enhanced the learning of the PTs through their implementation of the summer program. Participation in an authentic setting, community ties, and reflection all contributed to students' deep learning of material. Dealing with real students in a context where service was clearly needed gave relevance to the program that university classes had not. One PT said that working with ESL students in the summer program had recharged her. Another PT's reflection helped her to eliminate a bias: She had begun the practicum with the deficit model (Boyle-Baise, 2002), the idea that ESL students were deficient because they had not yet acquired English. Her attitude at the beginning represented that of most of the PTs. By the end of the practicum, she discussed her insight that the ESL students had understanding and were able to express in their native languages. The PTs also reflected on how their learning would apply to and enhance their teaching in their mainstream classrooms.

This degree of involvement was engendered through finding authentic needs and partnering with others to meet them.

We could not have established a service learning experience of this magnitude without previously established ties to the community. One of the PTs worked for the district that housed the summer program. We thus knew whom to call and had a notion of the red tape the setting would require us to address. We had insight into the needs of the community and acquaintance with those most receptive to a service learning project. Just as important, some of us had established ourselves within the community as residents and volunteers. Such relationships helped to prevent any notions that we might be proposing superficial acts of charity that have little impact (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Arranging this service learning project reminded us that it is essential for those using this methodology to know the communities in which they and their students will be working. Unless service learning is truly a collaborative effort among stakeholders, it can be unwieldy and ineffective.

This study also reinforced the value of reflection in a service learning project. PTs engaged in service learning and reflected on their experience, but the ESL students that they taught were not enabled to do so. Reflection clearly helped reinforce concepts and the value of the PTs' lesson modifications. K-12 students did not make such connections. It seems that their teachers' commitment to K-12 student reflection about the park project was insufficient to overcome panic regarding students' lack of preparation for proficiency exams. Without this essential commitment, opportunities for the ESL families to make connections were lost.

Implications and Conclusion

The tremendous effect of the "Emergency Room Mode" reinforces the importance of Eyster and Giles' (1999) coaching "C" in Service Learning. The PTs would have been unable to see the developmental aspects of second language learning without coaching from the instructor and the lead teacher mentor during reflective group discussion, written reflective feedback, and lesson observation discussions. Yet, focus seemed possible only at the expense of their opportunity to experiment with service learning techniques. This leads to the question of a threshold level for the PTs' ability to test multiple concepts or theories during a service learning activity.

The "Emergency Room Mode" also affected teacher confidence in the initial stages of the practicum. This was evident in the PTs' expressed yearning for more traditional structure. From the first week, the teachers indicated they would have been more comfortable not having to address logistical features that they were accustomed to having administrators handle. The instructor indicated continually that ESL teachers often made such decisions on their own when they worked in school districts and that a goal of the practicum was for PTs to have opportunities to do this with collegial support. However, teachers indicated resentment about the unnecessary stress. In her final reflection, one of the teachers noted that the stress was self-induced. Their reaction in their initial encounters with this new population of students was a type of culture shock that blinded them to their own abilities.

Culture shock also initially affected the PTs' ability to make instructional decisions. The teachers were all experienced and had entered the practicum confident of their abilities to offer students instruction. Yet, when they faced the ESL students, they questioned their ability to make appropriate decisions regarding placement, adaptations, and assessment. In the latter stages of the practicum, they noted with some surprise that

ESL students were really not so different from other students. The experience of the PTs underlines the importance of modeling and coaching in service learning experiences, in addition to the other "Cs" mentioned by Eyler and Giles (1999) to help students develop insights.

From that initial "Emergency Mode," however, evolved a community of teachers, dedicated to serving ESL students. They went beyond the service learning requirements for their own course; PTs willingly brought their own materials to contribute to the program, stayed late to complete discussions and projects, and even came to work ill. Two PTs brought their own children to the program frequently, and everyone noted the benefits of having members of the majority culture in their ESL classrooms, including the fact that native-speaker children often opened valuable channels of communication with ESL parents. PTs noted that the program had energized them as professionals in TESL. This growth is best exemplified by this comment from a PT: "...with the right tools almost any dream could come true. So, on a personal level, I have decided it is time to stop being a cog in the system and start being a wheel."

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