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**The impact of transformative learning in a critical service-learning program on teacher development: Building a foundation for inclusive teaching**

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# **The impact of transformative learning in a critical service-learning program on teacher development: Building a foundation for inclusive teaching**

With international and national policies requiring teachers to adopt inclusive practices worldwide, this paper examines the impact of transformational learning in a critical service-learning program on final-year pre-service teachers' approaches to inclusive teaching. Data from emailed questionnaires and focus group interviews are analysed through a social, critical framework. The results indicate that the critical service-learning program provided the students with an opportunity to consider diversity and inclusion in selecting teaching strategies, and to enact values suitable to inclusive practices and appreciation of diversity in schools. In this paper we argue that transformative learning experiences about inclusivity and diversity are needed if pre-service teachers are to be challenged to adopt inclusive values and practice in schools. A critical service-learning program for pre-service teachers provides a solid foundation on which to develop or build on the ability to think and teach inclusively.

Keywords: critical service-learning; diversity; inclusive education; pre-service teachers; service-learning; transformative learning

## **Introduction**

Inclusive education involves all students having the right to be included, to actively participate with others in learning, and to become valued members of the school community. This approach to education emphasises community and democratic participation in which teachers work together to meet the challenges of supporting the diverse needs of students (Carrington, MacArthur, Kearney, Kimber, Mercer, Morton, & Rutherford, 2012). Inclusion has also been described as an ethical project (Allan, 2005) that challenges the attachment of hierarchical values to people whereby some are considered more worthy than others. A focus on values is important in this paper where we consider ways of supporting pre-service teachers to build a foundation for inclusive teaching through participation in a critical service-learning program.

Pre-service teachers need to comprehend that working inclusively is underpinned by values, particularly values of social justice and citizenship that promote equity, participation, respect for diversity, compassion, care and entitlement (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). In reality, pre-service teachers may have values that support exclusive practices that marginalise students: The teachers may be ‘trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations’ (Larrivee, 2000, p.293). Therefore, to ensure that teachers are well-prepared to meet the needs of their students, it is important that teacher training programs support critical reflection of social values and educational practices that support inclusion and exclusion of students in schools. As Sosu, Mtika and Colucci-Gray (2010) observe, in teacher training it is transformative learning experiences such as prior experience with people who have diverse needs (e.g., disability) along with knowledge and personal efficacy that influences a pre-service teacher’s acceptance and respect for diverse students.

Transformative learning helps a person achieve a shift in outlook through critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2000). When pre-service teachers are confronted with perspectives that are different to the ones encountered at university, they make attempts to comprehend these and also to re-examine their own previously held values and beliefs. As Mezirow (2000, pp. 23-24) observes, ‘informed and reflective decision’ to achieve meaningful transformative learning depends on ‘taking action on reflective insights [that] often involves overcoming situational, emotional and informational constraints’. A central aspect of transformative learning is the ability to become ‘critically reflective’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 125).

Service-learning is a powerful pedagogy that is designed to facilitate transformative learning (Carrington & Selva, 2010). In teacher education, there has been a growing movement over the past decade to integrate service-learning into teacher education in order to improve the quality of teacher candidates (Billig & Eyler, 2003).

## **Service-learning**

Service-learning can be conceptualised as pedagogy that incorporates experiential learning and community service, and researchers have worked to develop cogent theoretical frameworks that could support the development of service-learning knowledge and practice in educational settings (Bringle, Hatcher, & McIntosh, 2006; Morton, 1995).

Service-learning programs can be identified either on a continuum or as distinct models (Morton, 1995). Programs on a continuum have a charity perspective at one end and an advocacy or social change perspective at the other end. Models of service-learning, in contrast, are built on a clear underlying set of assumptions and therefore have their own paradigm. 'Critical service-learning' is the term used to describe a social justice-oriented model to community service-learning within a social-cultural framework. There is a strong articulated set of assumptions that drive the planning and expectations for this type of approach (Mitchell, 2008). A critical service-learning program should prompt pre-service teachers to understand the cause of injustices, encourage them to see themselves as agents of social change (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002), and take a measure of responsibility for the future of our society and the critical issues facing communities. A critical service-learning approach supports the critique of: social values; educational policy; and, practice that opposes inclusion and facilitates the development of values and practice that will inform more inclusive schooling.

Extant research attests to a range of benefits for students, faculty, institutions and community to be derived from service-learning programs (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). For example, Hones (1997) reports on narrative data about the outcomes of a service-learning program in a university course to prepare teachers for diversity. Hones noted that, although many of his students' narratives revealed a deepened understanding of the 'extreme social and economic inequalities that separated the lives of many urban children from their

own lives' (1997, p. 22), a number of students failed to examine their preconceptions about who or what was to blame for the children's poor performance.

Such a deficit view is common among pre-service (and practicing) teachers who often blame the child, or the family. If we want pre-service teachers to appreciate diversity and develop more inclusive attitudes and practices, we must challenge this deficit assumption. Hones (1997) concludes that teacher educators who want to implement a critical service-learning program need 'to challenge students to grapple with their own preconceptions about diversity in the light of readings, discussions, and reflections on their own experiential learning' (p. 23).

The critical service-learning program discussed in this paper is designed to complement the field studies experience in schools by requiring the pre-service teachers to complete 20 hours of non-paid service work with partner organisations prior to engaging in their final practicum and internship in the last semester of their teacher education degree.

Our service-learning program has transformative learning as its primary aim, which is achieved through teaching students to become 'critically reflective' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 125). During their academic learning activities, our students read, discuss, and engage in tutorial activities that facilitate the questioning of traditional beliefs and their own assumptions about diversity, social justice, and the role of schools in society. During tutorials we explicitly teach and model the inclusive values and practices that we expect our pre-service teachers to develop. During their service-learning activities in the community, we expect our pre-service teachers to critique and reflect on knowledge they have learnt at university. We want the pre-service teachers to become more aware of their beliefs and practices as well as those of others, and to plan how they could contribute to a more socially just society.

Pre-service teachers who enrol in our critical service-learning program engage in service within a range of community programs that support people and children who are marginalised and have diverse backgrounds and needs. Partner organisations include homework clubs for children who are refugees, drop-in centres for people who are homeless, rehabilitation centres for people who have an acquired brain injury, and aged care facilities.

Our previous research (Carrington, Mercer & Kimber, 2010; Carrington & Selva, 2010; Saggars & Carrington, 2008) indicates that service-learning experiences in teacher education can inform the development of a set of values, such as respect and empathy, which underlie inclusive relationships and practices in schools. These values inform an inclusive ethical framework that influences a teacher's approach to relationships with school staff, students and their families (Carrington & Saggars, 2008).

This study, which was conducted in Queensland, Australia, draws on data from an emailed questionnaire in 2009 (13 pre-service teachers), as well as transcripts of focus group interviews conducted in 2009 and 2010 (25 pre-service teachers). While we acknowledge the small sample size in this study, the results show that the critical service-learning program was a positive experience for the students and impacted on their ability to think and teach inclusively.

### **Methodology and methods**

In this study, pre-service teachers experienced a critical service-learning program aimed to transform and build on their thinking about diversity in society. We acknowledge that the study did not include pre-test data about existing values before the critical service-learning program. The focus of the study is on addressing the research questions: (a) How do pre-service teachers describe the impact of a service-learning program on their preparation for becoming a teacher?; and (b) What impact does a service-learning program have on the values necessary for an inclusive approach to teaching? The program was based on a critical

service-learning model; therefore, a social-cultural framework was used to inform our planning of questions to gather data, to determine the appropriate ways to address the questions, and for the analysis and final discussion.

### ***Participants***

Two groups of participants were involved in this study. The first group comprised pre-service teachers who had completed the 2009 service-learning program, as well as a 4-week teaching practicum in a school and were now completing their final-year internship. The internship is a professional transition experience of 20 continuous teaching days that bridges pre-service teaching and beginning teaching. It is the culmination of preparation to enter the teaching profession and provides university students with an opportunity to practice as a professional, under the guidance of a mentor teacher. The first group of students (n=13) responded to an emailed questionnaire. The second group of participants in the study were pre-service teachers who had only completed the service-learning program. These students participated in focus group interviews. In 2009, 12 students participated in a focus group and in 2010, 13 students participated in a focus group.

Ethical approval was granted by the University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to inviting pre-service teachers in the service-learning program to participate in this study.

### ***Data collection***

In 2009, the email questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent to 30 pre-service teachers who had completed the service-learning program, a 4-week teaching practicum, and were on internship. Thirteen pre-service teachers responded and completed the questionnaire that had seven open ended questions. The emailed questionnaire was appropriate for data collection



because this group of pre-service teachers were teaching full time in schools in their internship and did not return to lectures at the university campus.

In 2009 and 2010, pre-service teachers who had completed the service-learning program were invited to participate in a focus group interview. In 2009, 170 students completed the service-learning program and 12 students participated in a focus group. In 2010, 252 students completed the program and 13 students participated in a focus group interview.

The technique of using focus group interviews was used because of the benefits to be gained from the interaction within the group. This process was viewed as a supportive process for a group of pre-service teachers who can compare their learning and values gained through the service-learning experience. The focus group interviews were conducted by one of the authors who was not associated with the implementation or the assessment of the service-learning program.

The focus groups were guided by a set of open ended interview questions (see Appendix B). Probe questions were often used to gather more information or to clarify a response from the participants. The focus group interviews were conducted on campus and took approximately one hour to complete. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for theme based analysis in response to the research questions.

### ***Data analysis***

NVivo 8.3 – a software package for qualitative research – was used to assist with the analysis of the questionnaire responses and the focus group transcripts. Content analysis was used to code the data, and to identify categories and themes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) which addressed the identified research questions. Analysis involved reading through the interview transcripts and looking for common themes in the data, usually sentences and paragraphs, and constantly checking the emergent understandings and clarifying these with the research team

(Marshall & Rossman, 1999). It should be noted that the authors/researchers who collected and analysed the data from the participants were not teachers of the students and were not associated with the assessment of the program for university credit. Themes that relate to the two research questions are reported here.

## **Results**

The questionnaire responses and focus group data were de-identified and numbers were assigned to each participant. These numbers are reported in brackets after the reported data below. The findings are reported in relation to the two research questions. Themes relating to each research question are labelled, described, and exemplified with quotes from the data, with the data source acknowledged.

### ***Research question 1***

With regard to the first research question — How do pre-service teachers describe the impact of a service-learning program on their preparation for becoming a teacher? — three themes emerged; namely, joining theory with practice, influence on inclusive teaching, and acceptance of diversity.

#### ***Joining theory with practice***

Pre-service teachers' understanding of the theory of inclusive education was enhanced through their experience in service organisations to create a philosophy of inclusion. Seeing how inclusion worked in practice became important in their development of positive values towards inclusive education:

... up until now, uni has been quite theory based, and that's a good idea ... But once you actually have personal interaction and meet people, yeah, it really strengthens your desire to do good and to have positive change. (Focus Group, Student III)

... in practice a lot of teachers probably would be like, oh it's too much time why bother. Just cater for the mainstream kids. But when I was there realised it doesn't actually take much time, it doesn't take much adjustment. Just like a few adjustments in your planning and then you can cater to those kids as well. (Focus Group, Student VI)

As these comments illustrate, when academic learning experiences are applied to lived experiences, there is deeper learning and a deeper focus on the application of inclusion.

### *Influence on inclusive teaching*

Pre-service teachers who completed the internship could reflect on the benefits of participating in the critical service-learning experience and how it would inform a more inclusive approach to teaching. Their extended classroom teaching experience in the internship provided an opportunity for the participants to use their new skills, knowledge and understandings:

The service-learning experience has given me firsthand experience and awareness. In the classroom I am more aware of students' needs and do my best to ensure that those needs are being met. (Questionnaire, Student 3)

Student 6 reflected on seeing students who had only been in Australia and speaking English for a few months being expected to complete the same assessment tasks as students who had been living in Australia since birth:

It made me realise that my students will each have different needs and I need to cater for that. When it comes to teaching and learning a one size fits all approach is not going to work, for the teacher or the students. (Questionnaire, Student 6)

As these responses demonstrate, the service-learning experience heightened the pre-service teachers' concern for student needs and emphasised the importance of inclusion.

### *Acceptance of diversity*

Pre-service teachers who worked in the homework program for children who are refugees had opportunities to practise pedagogy to support students who speak English as an additional language and develop empathy with people from other cultures. The service in these organisations provided hands-on experience in implementing approaches to teaching that were informed by a growth in understanding and empathy. The following extract indicates the challenges for pre-service teachers who are completing the internship:

In my class at the moment I have the most diversity of anywhere I have been ... Also in my class I have a range of learning difficulties as well as students who are very bright and require extension. I have spent a great deal of time planning for each lesson.

(Questionnaire, Student 13)

As described in the previous quote, the critical service-learning experience prepared pre-service teachers for diversity in classrooms. Without the service-learning program, many pre-service teachers would have had limited experience with individuals from diverse cultures and may have viewed culturally diverse students as problems because they had little understanding of how to engage with families and children with different cultural backgrounds and values. Student 3 (questionnaire) and Student I (focus group) provided insights into the learning involved:

I guess seeing and hearing students from the organisation talking about some of the conditions and situations that they came from overseas, really makes me aware of how that has an impact on their education but also too their social skills. (Questionnaire, Student 3)

Because a refugee from the Horn of Africa has got a very different experience to a refugee from Afghanistan, and their communities are also different and the expectations that parents will have obviously are different. Their journey, their path to which has led them to this country where they're all put under this same umbrella as refugees is also

different. So seriously unpacking all that has made me understand and been a lot more critical I guess about it all. (Focus Group, Student I)

Critical service-learning also enabled students to change their perspectives as this comment illustrates:

I think that my beliefs and views, in particular about people from migrant and refugee backgrounds or students who have English as a second language what I think I have gained is an awareness of my own beliefs, and how they can impact on how I interact with other people, have definitely changed. (Focus Group, Student 5)

When doubt about appreciating diversity was expressed, it was to illustrate the process of becoming more inclusive instead of justifying their perspective:

I think, for me, one of the biggest things in developing and reflecting, it was getting over my own personal inhibitions, in particular stereotypes. I wasn't one of those teachers that said I'm not stereotypical or I don't stereotype but then technically they still do. I did not think I was going to be one of those but I caught myself out while I was out there which was a huge thing for me to reflect upon. (Focus group, Student 1).

### ***Research question 2***

With regard to the second research question —What impact does a service-learning program have on the values necessary for an inclusive approach to teaching? — three themes emerged; namely, that service-learning has a positive impact on pre-service teachers' values in relation to: respect; empathy; and, ethic of care.

#### ***Respect***

An inclusive approach to education is about 'consciously putting into action values based on equity, entitlement, community, participation and respect for diversity' (Booth, Nes, & Strømstad, 2003, p.1). The theme of respect was widely referred to in the questionnaire and interview responses. The critical service-learning program reinforces this value and, if pre-service teachers have prejudice and values that do not support inclusion, then the teaching

staff and pedagogy connected with the service-learning program will help to challenge those views.

Student 3 (Questionnaire) recognised a need to adapt a Mother's Day activity to cater for a Jehovah's Witness student, 'simply by changing the mother acrostic poem to incorporate her name instead'. Student 6 worked with a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder during their internship and stated:

Dealing with this student was very different to how I had to deal with the other students. His development was quite different from his peers and so he needed to be treated this way. (Questionnaire, Student 6)

The following pre-service teacher from the focus group provides a clear summary of the values that will inform her work as a teacher:

I think two more values that really became clear to me were the need for communication and for mutual trust and respect. Because if you don't have communication and respect, nothing – it's not going to work and I think that's relevant in everyday life and all your interactions with people. (Focus Group, Student III)

The views of this student were reflected in the responses that others provided, for example:

I guess it's just that treating everyone as they're valued for who they are, and reducing distinctions and not thinking yourself superior, or thinking other students superior and not ... I guess you have to give some students more time than others, and more support, but not just allowing students to slip through the cracks. (Focus Group, Student 7).

As Milner (2010, p. 119) observes, 'preparing teachers for diversity, equity, and social justice are perhaps the most challenging and daunting tasks facing the field' and critical service-learning assists in pre-service teachers experiencing different forms of

diversity – racial, ethnic, social, economic, ability – and thus provides them with experiential experience in working productively with diversity.

### *Empathy*

In service, the pre-service teachers develop care for and empathy with others, both hallmarks of quality teaching. The critical service-learning team anticipates that such experiences and empathy will influence the curriculum and pedagogy that teachers use in their classrooms.

Students 9 and II described a development of care informed by empathy rather than sympathy and pity:

The service-learning experience helped me to remember that everyone is different; however, everyone is human and we all need the same love and attention. It allowed me to be more compassionate than I may have otherwise been. I also learnt to treat people with respect and empathy rather than with impatience and/or sympathy. (Questionnaire, Student 9)

I know with mine that empathy was a major one but not sympathy. That came across because none – you didn't feel sorry for anybody there. Because if you did that comes across as patronising anyway and they are very capable of doing whatever they wanted to do. (Focus Group, Student II)

### *Ethic of care*

A caring teacher seeks to create a respectful, supportive bond with students in an environment built on mutual respect. The development of a classroom community reflects a sense of belonging to a group and connection with others. Many personal experiences in the service-learning program impacted on the pre-service teachers in positive ways to further develop caring relationships. Students 6 and 12 spoke about how they showed they cared for their students while teaching in the internship:

... one of the students' parents split up while I was on prac and so I really had to support him emotionally and help him to understand that his mum and dad still love him and

always will and that I was there if he needed to talk. (Questionnaire, Student 6)

I have responded to the diverse range of students within my school/classroom during internship by accepting each student I come into contact with as an individual and by trying to connect with them by getting to know their interests, likes and dislikes. I purposefully asked follow up questions about students' life outside school.

(Questionnaire, Student 12)

Student 2 described priorities of developing individual relationships with students and establishing their individual strengths and weaknesses when establishing a new classroom once she is teaching, indicating her care for positive relationships that respect difference:

Every class has had students with learning difficulties, disabilities, dysfunctional families, economic or other problems; however, I don't treat these students with any significant difference to 'other' students. All students have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others, regardless of whether they have one of the above labels attached.

(Questionnaire, Student 2)

Student IV described her learning about compassion from the staff in the service organisation. The opportunity to learn from others who are working in inclusive ways can be powerful, and this pre-service teacher understands there is a need for having care and compassion in her work:

... I found it really profound to how compassionate the staff could be towards their patients, despite a lot of situations that they regularly had to go through. Then for me as well there was that same level of compassion too. Just balancing those sorts of – your own needs in terms of feeling like you've done, you've made a difference and you've been compassionate without overdoing it. (Focus Group, Student IV)

In summary, the critical service-learning program was found to have an impact on the beginning teachers' approaches to inclusive teaching by providing an opportunity to join theory with practice, influencing their inclusive teaching practices, and by preparing them for diversity in the classroom. The service-learning program was found to impact on the values



of respect, empathy, and ethic of care.

## **Discussion**

The study examined how pre-service teachers described the impact of a critical service-learning program on their preparation for becoming a teacher as well as the impact the service-learning program had on the values that are necessary in order to implement an inclusive approach to teaching. The pre-service teachers in this study did not just learn about the theory of inclusive education; they observed and practised inclusion in their broader community. This meant that the participants were able to discuss and explain their personal experiences of values such as respect, empathy and care that contribute to healthy communities (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). The pre-service teachers experienced diversity in our society from a more informed and authentic perspective rather than just from reading about the ideas in a university textbook. By questioning their assumptions and the status quo, space is created for the language of possibility (Giroux, 1988), where teachers can imagine their role as contributing to a better education for all. In this study, the participants discussed how the critical service-learning experience influenced their approach to teaching in inclusive ways.

The pedagogical approach of critical service-learning enabled the pre-service teachers to ‘understand and take action in a way that feels authentically grounded in critical reflection’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 49). While we have no pre-test data regarding the students’ values prior to their participation in the service-learning program, analysis of the data from the study suggests that some students might be experiencing transformations in their thinking about inclusion; however, only longer-term research can conclusively determine whether value transformation is occurring. The service-learning program provided pre-service teachers with the opportunity to demonstrate the values of social justice in their teaching practice, and to develop a greater respect for diversity, equity, care and compassion. Applying Brookfield’s

(2005) theory of critical reflectivity, the pre-service teachers were contesting hegemonic views about diversity. In addition, the participants were able to discuss educational approaches that support inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

We have noted that ‘the major responsibility for changing teacher attitudes and skills about inclusion and collaboration rests with teacher-preparation programs’ (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009, p. 236). A critical service-learning program such as the one reported on in this paper can encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change in the education system (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). We believe that this type of program can inform an inclusive teaching approach informed by the values of social justice.

While this study had a small number of participants (n=38), the findings suggest that transformational learning experiences in a critical service-learning program can facilitate the development of the attitudes, values and practices that support inclusive educational approaches in schools. While some students may have already possessed inclusive values and attitudes, the service-learning program provided all the students with a foundation on which to develop and build on their understanding of inclusive practices. A future research interest will be to measure pre-existing values and the medium-to-long term impact of this type of service-learning program on teachers as they face the challenges of working in complex school communities.

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## **Appendix A. Email questionnaire**

(Note: EDB004 is code for the course on inclusive education in the Bachelor of Education))

1. As an intern, how have you responded to the range of diverse students (disability, culture, family differences etc.) in your school/classroom?
2. What experiences of teaching for diversity (disability, learning difficulties, cultural differences etc) have you had since you completed EDB004 and the service-learning program?
3. Tell us what you have been doing since you completed EDB004. (Where are you teaching, contracts, offers? Full time position, etc.)
4. Think about your class on inclusive education (EDB004) and the service-learning experience at QUT. How did your learning help you in your role as an intern teacher?
5. How did the service-learning experience prepare you to teach students who have diverse needs?
6. How did the service-learning experience influence your teaching approach?
7. Are there any questions you have for the academic service-learning staff at QUT?

## **Appendix B. Focus group questions**

- What kind of values did you adopt as a volunteer at the service-learning site?
- Why did you choose these sets of values?
- What values do you uphold as most important for service-learning?
- How did you fine-tune those values during your service-learning experience?
- How do you think service-learning encourages values of diversity and inclusivity?
- How far does service-learning promote civic responsibility?
- What are your views about ethics of care as a value in service-learning?
- Why do you think it is important?