

Challenges and Rewards Associated
with Service-Learning in International
Contexts:

Pre-Service Teacher Outcomes

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Abstract

This paper examines outcomes associated with the international (China) service-learning experiences of U.S. pre-service teachers. Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to assess participant perspectives before and at the conclusion of the course and its associated service-learning experience. Results suggest the international service-learning experience significantly contributes to both professional and personal development outcomes. Participants reported initial site-based experiences were particularly challenging. At the conclusion of their service-learning experiences, they reported positive impacts on their understandings of and abilities to apply course content, development of professional skills and strategies, and development of cultural competencies including knowledge and dispositions related to effective interaction with linguistically and culturally diverse children. Furthermore, participants reported enhanced confidence and stress and coping skills. Pre-service teacher recommendations for successful

international service-learning experiences as well as recommendations for future research studies are offered.

Empirical studies indicate experiential learning participation has the potential to impact academic achievement, career goal clarification, civic engagement, and cultural competencies (e.g. Batchelder & Root, 1994; Ference & Bell, 2004; Fitch, 2004; Knutson Miller & Gonzalez, 2009; Kiely, 2004; Knutson Miller & Yen, 2005; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002; Osborne, Hammerich & Hensley; 1998; Strage, 2000). International service-learning experiences in particular may offer unique opportunities for enhancing academic achievement and professional development (Annette, 2003; Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Grusky, 2000; Knutson Miller & Gonzalez, 2009, 2010; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Roberts, 2003; Stachowski & Tyler, 2007). Potential outcomes include heightened personal and professional flexibility (Roberts, 2003), appreciation of cultural diversity, awareness of global issues, expanded notions of community, and enhanced development of cultural competencies (Alfaro, 2008; Annette, 2003; Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Cushner, 2007; Hartman & Rola, 2000; Kiely, 2004; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Roberts, 2007; Van Hoff & Verbeeten, 2005). Furthermore, it has been argued that international service-learning experiences are potentially transformative in nature (Grusky, 2000; Kiely, 2005; Roberts, 2003).

Knutson Miller and Gonzalez (2009, 2010) examined the value-added nature of service-learning in domestic versus international settings. In both an initial program evaluation study and a subsequent study of program outcomes, participants across service-learning contexts reported

their experiences (a) enhanced their abilities to apply course content, (b) improved their understandings of skills needed and provided preparation for their future careers, and (c) contributed toward their understandings of challenges and resources within their respective placement sites/communities. The international service-learning context appeared to facilitate enhanced outcomes in relation to development of professional skills and strategies as well as personal development. For example, international participants reported higher skill development gains and greater relevancy of the experience to their professional goals. They also reported higher gains in terms of understanding challenges and resources within the placement site/community and awareness of global needs, greater enjoyment in working with linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse individuals, and greater benefits of their service activities to the placement site/community as a result of their experiences than domestic service-learning participants. The international service-learning context was also generally rated by participants as more impactful than the domestic service-learning context.

Empirical study is needed to continue to build and support the theoretical rationale for field-based experiences in domestic and international settings (Annette, 2003; Roberts, 2003; Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005; Wade, Boyle-Baise, & O'Grady, 2001) and align such experiences with specific learning and professional development goals (Boyle-Baise, 2005; Root, Callahan, & Sepanski, 2002; LaMaster, 2001; Maxie, 2001). The purpose of the present investigation is to further examine the impact of international service-learning experiences on participant development and to present rationale and

recommendations for those considering such experiences. As stated previously, international service-learning experiences provide unique professional development contexts for pre-service teachers. The pathway to related outcomes, however, may not be entirely smooth as previous investigations indicate participants may experience personal and professional challenges as they begin their international experiences. For example, Roberts (2003) discussed participation in an international service-teaching project in Costa Rica. In narratives linking service and learning experiences, participants discussed initial issues related to limited classroom resources, classroom management, and physical challenges in Costa Rican classrooms. Experiences of discomfort and uncertainty in respect to negotiating a new cultural context were also discussed by pre-service teachers in reflections on an international service-learning project located in Honduras (Malewiski & Phillion, 2009).

The specific location of the international service-learning experience should be further considered as it may impact participant expectations, outcomes, and recommendations. In the current investigation, service-learning experiences were located in Chinese classrooms. Luo and Wendel (1999) and Freeman (1998) specifically discuss the context of Chinese classrooms. Luo and Wendel describe the Chinese as having great respect for education and learning. Teachers are held in high esteem and viewed as "information givers and sole possessors of knowledge" (p. 281). Teachers and other school personnel determine the class structure, information flow, and school rules/procedures and are viewed as primary information sources and authority figures.

According to Luo and Wendel students are expected to be quiet, orderly, and productive. Interruption of teachers by students is considered highly inappropriate with the possibility of direct, public teacher confrontation of any student not engaging in expected behaviors. Students are generally expected to be punctual, quiet, orderly, and productive. Similarly, Freeman described Chinese classrooms as teacher-directed with an emphasis on conformity. Positive developmental outcomes associated with this emphasis were also considered. For example, Freeman noted the positive impact of this approach on children's abilities to produce works of art.

Purvis (2001) wrote about her experiences teaching in a Chinese school. She described typical 40-minute teaching periods over a six-and-a-half-day week. She indicated more formal lessons were taught in the morning followed by an approximate two-hour lunch break. Afternoon lessons took place after the lunch break. Class sizes were generally larger than those found in American classrooms. Purvis also characterized students as being more familiar with direct instruction or lecture-oriented approaches than instruction integrating analysis, interpretation, group work, or discussion. She found Chinese students to be polite, pleasant, and hardworking. She also reported that, in her experience, students were hesitant to orally express themselves in English.

In recent years, English language instruction has been integrated into the school curriculum in several Chinese cities (Boyle, 2000; Cameron, 2003; Wu, 2001). Wu indicates related challenges arise in availability of written material and general lack of understanding of Chinese students' learning processes in formal school environments. Cameron adds that diversity

in children's motivation for language learning and levels of English proficiency are likely in Chinese classrooms. Cameron argues teachers must consider (a) how children react when they encounter a new/second language, (b) that young children in particular often do not enter the second-language-learning context with established literacy skills, and (c) the need for talk, including rhymes and stories, in young language learner classrooms. She recommends that teachers consider the "meaning" or motivational aspects of language learning and language use in their interactions with children. Related teaching demands include sustaining children's attention and instructional adaptation based on student responses and responsiveness to learning opportunities.

In summary, the articles reviewed here suggest that initial and ongoing undergraduate-level service-learning experiences may be impacted by the cultural context of Chinese classrooms in general as well characteristics of English-language classrooms in particular. Pre-service teachers are likely to prepare by reading about cultural context in advance of their service-learning experiences and naturally engaging in comparison/contrast between expectations and past experiences in U.S. classrooms. Similar to Cameron (2003) and Wu (2001), Boyle (2000) asserts that teacher motivation to consider features of the Chinese cultural context, including student response style and experience with various pedagogical approaches (e.g., direct instruction) is critical. He argues that teachers who are adaptable, resilient, and willing to learn are likely to consider the opportunity to facilitate English language development and literacy in China to be a rewarding personal and professional development opportunity.

Outcomes related to undergraduate-level, pre-service teacher service-learning experiences in Chinese English-learner classrooms are specifically examined in the present investigation.

Method

Participants in this investigation included 68 undergraduate-level students (7 males, 61 females; 19 Asian American/Pacific Islander, 36 Caucasian, 11 Latino/Hispanic, 1 Native American, 1 Other) enrolled in a 3-unit upper division course at a California State University campus. The majority of the participants ranged in age from 19-23. Completion of this 3-unit course was required for graduation. Participants in this study self-selected the international service-learning option for completion of major fieldwork requirements. Service-learning activities were negotiated between site-based and campus-based personnel who had coordinated an international service-learning experience the previous year. Site needs and interests were aligned with course learning objectives and participant professional development levels. Site-based professionals were particularly interested in opportunities for Chinese children to interact with English-speaking university students through songs, games, and other enrichment activities designed to facilitate English language and literacy development in Chinese classrooms. Facilitation of such activities was appropriate to course learning goals and participant professional development levels. Participants prepared a series of theme-based lesson plans to facilitate in the classroom environment. Four of 12 possible themes were requested by site-based professionals; participants identified and developed the remaining themes and related activities based on personal interest

and knowledge. Preparation for the service experience included participation in a five-week seminar course focused on professional development and cultural preparedness achieved through completion of related readings, discussions, and assignments (e.g. lesson plans, pre-departure reflections, and other written coursework). The international service-learning experience was situated over a two week period with approximately eight hours of scheduled activity per day.

Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to assess participant perspectives before and at the conclusion of the course and its associated service-learning experience. All participants completed matched-item, pre-post experience surveys that included Likert-type items (scale ranging from 1 to 4) designed to assess potential academic, civic, career, and culturally-related outcomes associated with service-learning experiences. Survey items were modified from Diaz, Furco, and Yamada (1999) and Garcia-Nevarez and Gomez (2004). Paired sample t-tests were used to examine within-group pre-post service-learning differences. Participants also submitted a series of eight structured reflections linking course content and service-learning experiences. Reflection prompts focused on pre-departure expectations, site-based experiences, and service-learning outcomes. Comparative content analysis was used to identify primary themes integrated in participant reflections. All data were examined by two coders, one of whom had no connection to the course or participants; emergent themes discussed by virtually all participants (90% or more) are reported here. Quotes from participants' narrative responses are included as illustrative of identified themes.

Results

Quantitative Analysis. Quantitative analysis of pre/post service-learning surveys indicated alignment of participants' expected and achieved outcomes in several respects. For example, participants anticipated (pre) and reported (post) that the international service-learning experience would contribute toward their understandings of (M pre = 3.67, M post = 3.74) and abilities to apply course material (M pre = 3.65, M post = 3.72) as well as their development of professional skills and strategies (M pre = 3.72, M post = 3.81). In addition, international service-learning participants reported they expected to and enjoyed opportunities to work with English language learners in Chinese classrooms (M pre = 3.65, M post = 3.77).

Statistically significant differences between expected and achieved outcomes were also found. For example, participants reported feeling more well-prepared for future careers (M pre = 2.98, M post = 3.16; $t = -2.48$, $p < .05$) and more aware of related career responsibilities (M pre = 3.41, M post = 3.56; $t = -2.44$, $p < .05$) than anticipated as a result of the international service-learning experience. They also indicated the experience had a greater than anticipated impact on their career choice (M pre = 2.89, M post = 3.18; $t = -2.53$, $p < .05$). Participants reported a greater than anticipated understanding of challenges and resources in the placement community (M pre = 2.88, M post = 3.50, $t = -5.87$, $p < .001$) as a result of their experiences as well. Furthermore, they indicated a greater actual than anticipated benefit of their service to the placement school/community (M pre = 3.37, M post = 3.63, $t = -3.20$, $p < .01$) at the conclusion of their service-learning experience.

In addition, participants indicated greater concern about global issues (M pre = 3.21, M post = 3.34; $t = -2.04$, $p < .05$) and greater than anticipated enjoyment in working with diverse individuals (M pre = 3.57, M post = 3.71; $t = -2.40$, $p < .05$) at the conclusion of their international service-learning experiences. Personal growth was also an area of significant impact. For example, participants reported the experience had a greater than anticipated impact on helping them to identify personal strengths and weaknesses (M pre = 3.66, M post = 3.83; $t = -2.47$, $p < .05$). Finally, participants were asked to indicate the relevance of "lessons learned" from their experiences to their personal and professional development after completion of the international service-learning experience. Participants indicated the international experience contributed greatly to both their professional ($M = 3.79$) and personal ($M = 3.96$) development.

Qualitative Analysis. Participants were asked to discuss their rationale for involvement in this international service-learning experience. Comparative content analysis of participant reflections indicated motivation to engage in the international service-learning experience was based on opportunities for (a) professional development, (b) study abroad, (c) completion of major and course requirements, and (d) exploration of the specific cultural context. All participants anticipated this experience would provide them with professional development opportunities that included direct interaction with school-aged children. They anticipated both personal and professional growth as a result of international service-learning experiences. For example, one participant stated, "I enrolled in this program because I have always wanted to

study abroad and when the opportunity came up, all the pieces fit together. This program also excited me because you get to work directly with children.” Another wrote, “I decided to participate because I saw it as an opportunity to grow as a future teacher. I believe my experience working with students who are learning English in China will help me when I am working with ELL students in U.S. classrooms. I also want to see what education is like in other countries. I hope this experience results in me becoming a great teacher.” Another participant indicated, “I want to learn more about how to teach and interact with students from different cultures and with different levels of English fluency.” A fourth participant stated, “I enrolled in this course to gain a diverse and multicultural experience. It was also very important to me that I could get necessary units for graduation.” In addition, one participant stated, “This is a once in a lifetime experience that I couldn’t pass up. I have always wanted to travel. I hope to learn about myself and how I handle being in a new environment. I also hope to gain teaching experience and adapt my plans to unforeseen changes.”

The initial site-based experiences of participants were frequently described as complicated, exhausting, challenging, and exciting. Noted challenges included reactions to hotter than anticipated temperatures and larger than expected class sizes. For example, one participant stated, “I was soaked in sweat after the first three classes. I really hated how freaking hot it was.” Another wrote, “There were 30 to 40 kids in the classes. There were more students than I planned for.” Additional challenges included need for lesson plan modification and differences between anticipated and actual student responses.

One participant stated, “The understanding of English varied among students and our lesson plans were modified drastically.” Another noted, “It was nerve racking when you wouldn’t get a response from the class when you thought you would.” A third indicated, “My first two days on site were very interesting. I had to adjust to the fact that the lesson plans that I had thought would be appropriate were not. I expected to have children who understood and/or spoke more English. I also felt like the children looked at me like I was an alien.”

Many participants discussed both challenge and excitement during the initial service-learning period. For example, one participant wrote, “My first two days on site were a mixture of excitement and confusion.” Several discussed transitions from the first day to those that followed. “The second day was better. All these ideas/projects for the kids just started flowing into my head.” Another noted, “The first day was a lot of feeling out what level the students were at and acclimating to China. The second day I interacted better with the students. I was learning what got them to participate and understand.” A fourth wrote, “The second day, I had an extremely successful day! It was awesome and I felt great! The kids loved it, and I felt like they were learning something!” Another reflected, “The first day was hell. At the end of the second week I knew what to do, felt confident in my lessons, and fell in love with the students.”

Participants were also asked to discuss the impact of supervision on their service-learning experiences. They noted the significance of supervisor feedback, constructive criticism, and support throughout the international experience. For example, “She (service-learning site

supervisor) gives us input in a very constructive way. It helps us with our lesson plans when she is able to see things that are missing.” Another participant wrote, “She was always there for us when we needed her and always offered to help us with materials, ideas, or modifications with our lesson plans”. Open communication channels were also emphasized by participants. For example, one noted, “We can always go to her with advice or questions. She never intimidates us or makes us feel incompetent.” Another added, “Her door is always open when we need resources or have questions.” Additional comments included, “She has many ideas and suggestions” and “she offered supplies, ideas, and support to many of us.”

As also indicated in the quantitative analysis, the international service-learning experience provided a significant context for the development of multicultural competencies. For example, in their reflections, participants discussed strategies used to facilitate communication with children whose first language was not English. In general, strategies identified by participants were multi-modal in nature. That is, participants described the use of verbal, visual, and nonverbal/physical strategies to facilitate communication and understanding of Chinese children. For example, participants indicated that they used “a lot of visuals”, “hand gestures and cues”, “simple words and sentences”, “pointing and drawing on the board”, and “body movements” to facilitate student comprehension. One participant stated, “I used visual aids, drew examples on the board, and acted out examples for the students—sometimes almost charades. I reinforced the lesson by having the students draw, sing, play, or build the

activity. The quality of students’ responses and work were indicators of comprehension.” A second participant wrote, “Some of the time I would just simply ask, ‘Do you understand?’ Other times I would use their native language and ask, ‘Dong bu dong?’ (Do you understand?). I then took the students outside to play the game to see if they really did understand.” Another noted that in order to assess comprehension she incorporated “a lot of thumbs up or down and happy/confused facial expressions.” Most participants noted a general tendency of Chinese students to say, “Yes,” when directly asked if they understood. They then noted the need to observe nonverbal cues to more accurately judge student comprehension. For example, one participant indicated, “The strategies I used to determine if what I said was interpreted accurately and understood by the students included observation of students’ facial expressions and body language.”

At the conclusion of the international service-learning experience, participants discussed the impact of their experiences on anticipated career goals and developing knowledge of instructional strategies. One participant wrote, “I learned more about classroom settings, conducting lecture and activities, classroom management, and myself.” Another noted, “I learned classroom management and teaching strategies. I also learned how to use positive reinforcement to encourage students to participate.” One added, “The China cohort provided the ultimate pre-teaching experience. I feel much more confident now about student teaching and (job) interviews.” And as summed by a fourth, “During this experience we were in classrooms and I had no idea if I would sink or swim. I learned that I can swim. This

experience confirmed the fact that I want to teach after I graduate.”

Participants also emphasized the impact of the experience on personal flexibility, self-esteem/confidence, and stress and coping skills. For example, participants noted, “I learned that I’m very flexible and can adapt well to new situations” and “I learned how to function under pressure.” Another participant wrote, “I learned to be more confident in my abilities to communicate with children who speak a different language. I am also a bit more independent than I used to be in coping with stressful situations on my own.” To sum, one participant reflected, “I learned a lot about myself during this course and fieldwork experience. I found strength and creativity that I didn’t know I had. I was really impressed with how well I adapted to change and how comfortable I became in a foreign country. I never imagined I would be taking taxis and wandering around the streets of China. I was really proud of how smoothly I adjusted when I found out I would pretty much need to start from scratch on my lesson plans.”

The overall evaluation of the international service-learning experience provided by participants was strongly positive. One participant reported, “Being in China gave me a chance to develop professionally and personally. I learned a lot about patience, improvisation, and use of effective teaching strategies. This experience allowed me to grow and learn about another culture. I also developed an understanding of how well I adapt in new situations and my ability to be flexible.” Another summed general group consensus, “These three weeks have been the greatest experience ever.”

Finally, participants provided recommendations for future international service-learning experiences in submitted reflections. They specifically focused on the importance of physical and psychological preparation for the international experience. One participant stated, “I would advise future participants to over plan, bring lots of materials, and plan to work until you are exhausted.” Another advised, “Find interesting age-appropriate subject matter that can be put into simple language.” A third stated, “I would recommend bringing lots of simple visual aids and crayons. I would also advise someone to embrace the experience, take advantage of the opportunity, and have fun.” And a fourth indicated, “I would first say to be over prepared. I feel that participants need to be very dedicated to the experience and open minded. This field experience takes you out of your comfort zone but can teach you so much. It would benefit someone going into this to prepare many lesson plans and come with many supplies.”

Participants described this course and its associated international service-learning experience as unlike any they had experienced previously. Many had previous experiences in fieldwork courses and in American classrooms where they had opportunities to interact with children under the supervision of a credentialed teacher. The participants described the international service-learning experience as quite different and in fact, “life changing”. Participants described their experiences as both eye-opening and as extremely personally and professionally fulfilling. It was described as a “once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Discussion

Findings reported here indicate international service-learning participation has the potential to positively impact academic, civic, and career-related outcomes. As suggested by Roberts (2003) and Malewski and Phillion (2009) these outcomes follow initially challenging participant experiences as they adapt to a new cultural context. Features of Chinese classrooms discussed by Freeman (1998), Luo and Wendel (1999), and Purvis (2001) were also addressed by participants in this investigation. Specifically, issues related to student response style, class size, classroom resources, and diversity in English proficiency were reported in participant reflections. As suggested by Boyle (2002) and Cameron (2003), participant ability to adjust to challenges present in the international, less than familiar, context is significant in the achievement of program outcomes.

Participants in the international service-learning experiences discussed here reported positive impact on their understandings of and abilities to apply course content as well as development of professional skills and strategies. Participation also contributed to the development of cultural competencies including knowledge and dispositions related to effective interaction with linguistically and culturally diverse children. Although personal development outcomes were not stated outright in the purpose of this investigation, they must be addressed due to their noted significance, specifically in relationship to enhanced confidence and stress and coping skills. These findings compliment those reported by Knutson

Miller and Gonzalez (2009, 2010), Pence and Macgillivray (2008), and Talbert (2009).

In summary, international service-learning experiences offer unique opportunities for enhancing academic achievement and professional development as proposed by Annette (2003), Brindley, Quinn, and Morton (2009), Grusky (2000), Roberts (2003), and Stachowski and Tyler (2007). As indicated here, primary outcomes include career clarification and skill development. International service-learning participants reported professional growth in contexts including career goal confidence, instructional planning, and implementation of teaching strategies. Participants also noted greater knowledge of community and community resources, appreciation of cultural diversity, and concern about global issues as a result of their experiences. Furthermore, growth in general cultural competencies and dispositions including the use of multimodal communication and assessment strategies was also demonstrated in reflections on participant experiences. These findings build on those reported by Brindley, Quinn, and Morton (2009), Pence and Macgillivray (2008), and Roberts (2007).

Pre-service teachers concluded their international service-learning experiences were extremely positive and offered recommendations for future groups. Recommendations noted the importance of preparation for international service-learning experiences. The significance of pre-planning in relationship to classroom management/organization, instructional strategies, and instructional resources was emphasized. Pre-service teachers also commented on the importance of mentorship from site and university supervisors in providing appropriate levels of scaffolding and support, particularly as

participants navigate the initially challenging experiences associated with the linguistically and culturally “different” field context. Finally, pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of attitude in achieving the potentially positive outcomes associated with international service-learning experiences.

It is recommended that future investigations include triangulation of participant perception data with performance-based indicators of academic achievement and professional development. Longitudinal study is also required to examine the impact of these experiences on later professional practice. The data reported here suggest international service-learning experiences provide significant professional development opportunities for those who indicate interest and select to complete course requirements in such settings. The extent to which pre-departure positive attitudes and dispositions were essential elements to achievement of the outcomes reported here may be further studied in subsequent investigations. It does appear that international service-learning experiences provide additive, unique, and potentially powerful contexts for the development of pre-service teachers with an enhanced awareness of global needs and resources and a strong foundation upon which to build further multicultural competencies. Such professionals are likely to positively impact the learning experiences of all children in culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings in both the United States and abroad.

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