

The Educational Implications of Trans-Global Service Learning Project in Jamaica: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research is to examine the educational impact of a trans-global service learning project with American preservice students in Jamaica. The goals were to 1) examine the educational experiences of preservice students that participated in the trans-global service learning in Jamaica, and 2) examine the role that their participation played in their ability to teach in diverse school settings. The results from multiple data collection and analysis show that students were transformed into global teachers with new cultural lenses. Several themes emerged from the study. The findings have practical, policy, and leadership implications.

Introduction

Each year, an increasing number of students from the United States of America travel abroad to participate in various service learning programs. Service learning is a prominent pedagogical approach embraced by most colleges and universities across the United States. Jacoby (1996) defines service learning as “ a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (p.5). This teaching and learning strategy incorporates meaningful community services with instruction and reflection.

In an effort to promote trans-global networks, students are afforded the opportunity to travel abroad to increase their global awareness. According to Webster and Arends (2012), international service learning serves as a platform for students to use these skills in an authentic environment, thus resulting in transformative learning (p.2). With the opportunity to interact with different cultures, students can understand the complexities of the experiences and to question their own sense of being, set of values, and ideologies (Crabtree, 2008). But, there is no research study on the impact of international service learning on preservice student’s ability to teach in a diverse school or their global leadership ability.

The purpose of this phenomenological research is to present the findings from a faculty-led service learning program in Jamaica. Specifically, it highlights collaborative efforts between the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State (A&T) and the Shortwood Infant, Primary and Junior High School in Kingston, Jamaica. The goal of the initiative was to provide instruction to a group of students who were performing below grade level in literacy and numeracy and who are at risk for school failure. It also showcases the A& T students’ reflections on their experiences in a different culture.

This specific trans-global service learning project was implemented in response to a vital aspect of the engagement goals of the institution- the (A&T) preeminence 2020 strategic plan. Embedded in the institution's preeminence 2020 strategic plan are initiatives to implement programs that demonstrate the value of varied global perspectives and international collaboration.

Service Learning

The essential purpose of trans-global service learning programs in higher education is to provide opportunities for students to gain first hand experiences in international contexts. The immersion of students in diverse cultures is an innovative way to heighten their global awareness and beliefs. It also positions students to become active participants in the solutions of real-world issues and social problems (Starke-Merriyerg & Wilson (2008). Most importantly, the diverse experiences students gain from international service learning can also lead to students' reflection and ultimately personal changes. Webster and Arends assert, "global learning at its best allows students to interrogate the process of learning and questioning common philosophies and rhetoric" (p.2).

Students who participated in domestic or international service learning programs pay more attention to social justice and are more apt to take on civic responsibilities and to gain understanding regarding global competitiveness. (Steiberger, Ford and Hale, 2005, Webster and Arends, 2012). The missions of the international service learning programs are different in terms of durations, and the formality of the academic instruction. This form of international service learning program was unique in that it investigated students' reflections of their experiences as they attempted to improve the literacy performance of students who were at at-risk of school failure.

Theoretical Frameworks

To gain an understanding of how the trans-global experiences in the Jamaica could personally affect the students' experiences, this study was grounded in Mezirow's (1997) perspective transformation theory. Perspective transformation is defined as a change in one's perspective or "collective frames of reference," thus resulting in "subjective or objective reframing" of points of views and habits and mind (p. 9). Critical to this study is Mezirow's view that we make meaning from our experiences through reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection.

The study was also guided by the reflection theory. Bond, Keogh and Walker in Jordi, (2011) defined reflection as "an activity in which people respond to their experience, think about it and evaluate it" (p33)". Researchers suggest that "the act of reflecting is what differentiates service-learning from acts of volunteerism charity, community service, internships, and study abroad (Crabtree, 2008; Jacoby, 2009). In support, Webster and Arends (2012) suggest by adding that for "students to truly reflect on service-learning experiences requires that they describe the complexity of the interaction of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors". Below is a description of the operation of a service learning program that occurred in Jamaica, over two summers.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the focus of this study:

1. What are the experiences of preservice teachers that participated in the trans global service learning in Jamaica?
2. What is the role that their participation in global service learning play on their ability to teach diverse students?

Methodology

This qualitative study seeks to investigate the responses of pre-service students from one School of Education in North America who partnered with college students in Jamaica to participate in a service learning project. The service learning experience entails tutoring at- risk elementary school students in reading and numeracy. The essential is how did this trans-global service project impact the participants' experiences? The participants were graduate and undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in a service learning program abroad. The undergraduate students were juniors and seniors pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree with a concentration in elementary education. The graduate students were pursuing a Masters of Arts in Teaching, with a concentration in elementary education. In an effort to include more volunteers in the project, college students in the host country were also recruited. These students were recent graduates from the Shortwood Teachers' College. The elementary elementary students attend the Shortwood Practicing Primary and Junior High school, which is located in a suburban area on the outskirts of Kingston, the capital city of Jamaica.

It is adjacent to the Teachers College. Tutoring sessions took place in some classrooms at the neighboring Shortwood Teachers' College.

Preliminary Planning

The planning period for service learning project took about one year. Basically it entails:

- (a) Submitting a letter of intent and proposal to the Office of International Programs. The proposal included letters of support from School dean and the department chair, itinerary financial support and a course syllabus to which the project will be aligned.
- (b) A preliminary trip to the host country to gain the approval from the principal of the elementary school and to make accommodation arrangement for our students.
- (c) Following the submission of the proposal, flyers were used to advertise the program the project. The office of international programs held various study-abroad fairs, the purpose of which was to advertise all the programs and respond to students' questions and concerns.

Preparation for Service Learning in Jamaica

The goal of the service learning program was to provide pre-service students opportunities to gain self-reliance and global sensitivity through partnership on an international platform. This entails spending engaging tutor third, fourth and fifth grade students who are performing below their levels in literacy and mathematics. In preparation for the faculty-led service learning programs, the tutors had to undertake training in instructional strategies for literacy and mathematics so as to be able to meet the needs of the students who were described as struggling learners. Before their departure, students attended workshops that provided information about the logistics of the project, namely the school's curriculum, the climate of the country, the food, the culture, do's and don'ts. Students also learned about some of the country's political and social issues. After many sessions of training, they were given a manual that contains reading and numeracy activities, instructional strategies for the reading process, and web-based resources along with a checklist of reading skills. The checklist was used to assess students' knowledge of the appropriate reading skills. Students were asked to do informal assessment prior to offering instruction so as to determine the individual needs of each student.

Data collection procedure

The qualitative data were collected through examination of participants' responses documented in their reflective journals, informal interviews, blogs, observations and digitalized portfolio presentations. In addition, the tutors were asked to complete a written report of their daily activities with the students. Each student was also required to compose a reflective journal on the daily experiences in and outside of the scheduled planning sessions. They were also required to document in a journal, what they were learning about the society during the time outside of the usual planning sessions. They were asked to reflect on how they were being influenced by their experiences. Information retrieved from the responses at the end of each session was also documented. The anecdotal records included students shared experiences and offered insights on how to adequately address the needs of students throughout the tutoring sessions.

Data Analysis and results

To interpret the data the researchers employed an interpretive paradigm which allows the researcher to understand the participants' experiences based on their points of view. Additionally, the researchers also incorporated the discourse analysis which explores individuals' perceptions of their own experiences while undertaking a service-learning program (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The analysis of data consists of collecting and sorting the data into emerging themes.

Tutoring Sessions

For each year, the tutoring sessions in Jamaica occurred over four weeks. The students tutored the elementary students for three hours from Monday to Thursday. Each day, the tutors escorted the students from their classes to classrooms on the neighboring college campus. Students looked forward to meeting their tutors and bonding with them. Students were exposed to a variety of texts during each literacy session. The daily activities included Read-Aloud, Guided Reading, Word Study, Writing and Numeracy. These activities which were designed to meet the needs of individual students were based on ongoing informal assessment. The tutors provided opportunities for students to use many manipulative and hands-on activities to teach reading and mathematics concepts. The tutors worked in pairs with small groups of approximately eight to ten students.

For each session one tutor would offer instruction while the other documents and the interactional patterns that occurred between the teacher and students. This innovative approach allowed the tutors to share their notes on the lesson, reflected on the occurrences and planned strategies that address the educational needs of individual students. At the end of each session, tutors then completed a reflective journal which was shared at a debrief session. In each of the debrief sessions, tutors reflected on their practices during interaction with their students, and shared techniques that could be used to address enrich students' learning.

Results of Tutoring

Throughout the duration of the service learning projects, the tutors worked diligently to meet the needs of all their students. They stayed up late at nights to write lesson plans, and make literacy and numeracy games for stimulating students' learning. From observation of the classroom atmosphere, the students' responded favorably to the tutoring that occurred during both summers. The tutors expressed that the students were very friendly and polite. The reports indicated that initially a few of the students resisted by acting up during the sessions. However, they soon realized that the tutors' expectations which were communicated to them. The soon realizes that they were accountable for their learning. Therefore, it was important to take ownership for their learning. It was obvious that small groups and opportunities to participate in hands-on activities seemed to spark student's responses to the instruction.

For both programs, the classroom teachers gave positive review about their students. Although the tutoring period went by fast, the teachers expressed that they have seen improvement in the students' attitude to learning. They felt that for the most part, majority of the students had become more attentive. One teacher remarked that it was as if a light bulb was turned on for some of the students who were struggling in her class.

On the second visit to Jamaica next year, the plan was to continue tutoring the students who had previously participated in the program. These students and would now be in the fourth and the fifth grades classes. However, some of the students in the fourth and fifth did not return to the program. The reason being, their teachers felt that they demonstrated some growth in their academic performance. So, based on the teachers' recommendations, we selected some other fourth and fifth graders to join those who participated in the program in the first year. Also selected were some students from the third grade classrooms.

At the end of the program, also it was decided that an innovative way to supplement the reading instruction throughout the year was to offer each of the students' classroom teachers a one-year subscription to an on-line program- Reading A-Z. This program allows teachers access to an abundance of leveled texts. The teachers would download books from the website and made available to their students an adequate amount of leveled reading material in the class as well as to take home.

Reflections

In addition to the daily responses, the tutors were asked to do an overall reflection on the program. The responses from all tutors were positive. They unanimously expressed that they have gained much from the program. According to them, their students were very engaged in the program and enjoyed the activities. They remarked that the experience was life-changing. By observing the weekly reflections, there were many indications that they found the experience challenging, but they became advocates for their students. All tutors said they fell in love with their students and they certainly had a genuine passion to dedicate themselves to meet their needs. They stayed up late at nights, prepared lessons. They also incorporated technology and hands on activities so as to stimulate learning. The team teaching exposed them to much discussions and reflections on how they can focus on the educational needs, especially of struggling readers

Interaction with the culture

As part of Service Learning, Students acquired Social and Cultural Benefits. Apart from tutoring, the students spent time socializing outside of planning sessions and visiting numerous historical sites. From the many data sources, it was evident that when students study abroad, they make lifelong friendships with other students in host countries, others they interacted with as well as with the students they taught. The memories and friendships made could potentially last forever, and open up a global network of job prospects and other connections.

Participating in service learning overseas for one month fosters a sense of teamwork in students as the group they travel with gets tighter as they experience the challenges of a multicultural situation together. And, at the other end, students also learn to depend on themselves, as well as how to ask questions and be proactive, and provide and solicit help.

The cultural benefits of service learning abroad are more obvious. Spending extended time in a foreign country tends to give students a wider look at the world. They become more reflective about their own culture and what that culture has instilled in them. Students are likely to have increased respect for other cultures and appreciate the differences between cultures. This openness to different approaches eventually makes them better problem solvers and team players. Personal benefits of studying abroad abound. Students increase their self-confidence. They also increase their independence and maturity. In this ever-changing world it is important to have the ability to adapt, in various environments.

When the students return home from studying abroad they are ready to change the world, which is important, as they will be the future leaders of their country. The Students who previously participated in service learning believe that the experience abroad helped them to better understand their own cultural values and biases, and confirmed that the experience contributed to their developing a more sophisticated way of looking at the world. Indeed, the experience provided a vantage point from which they can view the world and consider how fortunate they are to be living in a country full of opportunities. They all agreed that they might not have all they desire, but they now understand what it means to be contented as they experienced the little resources that people from other lands have to work with.

This service learning project also broadened A&T students and their partners' definition of diversity and the challenges that emerged on a daily basis. It was obvious that they became more aware of the fact that although they share some similarities in terms of values and skin color, there were areas of differences that sometimes evoke conflicts. Finally, for these students, it was a life changing experience. One student, Jan wrote in his reflection journal:

I got an awakening experience after visiting Bob Marley museum, for some reason I felt connected to the movement that Bob Marley was doing in the 70s and 80s. I felt this connection to Jamaica when I first got off on the plane and but soon as I arrived there, the feeling was like I was back to my roots I couldn't explain the feeling". (Jan)

Samantha, a graduate student reflected on how personal the experience was to her. She said:

Jamaica was not my first international travel. However, when I went to Europe, as a teenager, my group was well protected from the outside parts of Europe. We were taken to the highly toured areas and stayed in fancy living areas. Therefore, we really did not get to mingle or even socialize with the locals.

Initially, my first reality check was the notion that I was considered by the outside world as an American, simply plain an American. I realized this when I we had to complete an immigration form in which we had to indicate our nationality. I hesitantly wrote out "American" I was appalled that to the outside world I was not considered only as an African American.

Once I we started socializing with our Jamaican peers, I had to let them know that it was the first time in my twenty three years that I have been simply referred to as an American and not as a Black or African American. As much as I tried to explain to them that there reside other nations within the United States such as mine, the African American community, they still saw me as an American.

Another thing that gave me reality check was the fact that not only was I a legitimate American, but I am truly blessed and privileged to be an American. I consider the similarities in terms of our shared histories. Although we lived in different part of the world, history tells us that we share the same ancestors who were stripped from the motherland.

The social issues affecting the education of the students became real to all the tutors, who participated in the service learning project. Based on their responses, it was obvious that they became aware of the urgency to address the needs of those students who have fallen through the cracks and continue to fall further and further behind.

Sonia, a recent graduate teacher from Jamaica remarked:

I gained more experience from this project than I have ever had in my years of training. As a Human Ecology major teacher, I did not realize that students in third and fifth grades are performing at such low level. Now, I know how to teach struggling learners.

Brian said: Participating in this program has changed my life for the better.

Stan also reflected on the experience he gained from his involvement in the service He wrote:

Participating in this program has opened my eyes to how to deal with struggling learners. The experience let me realize that as long as quality time is spent with these students they will have a chance of achieving something in school and in life.

Jatavia: On my journey of completing service learning in the beautiful country of Jamaica, I have been enriched with knowledge of both their culture and my own. The cultural difference not only surprised me but it also brought an understanding and appreciation for everything I have here in America. ... Traveling to Jamaica was a well-rounded learning experience for me. If the opportunity arises to study abroad I think that every college student should take it. Once you begin to question your culture your eyes will be clear and open to dissimilarities.

Overall, the trans-global faculty led service learning projects serve in a global sphere as a vantage point from which our students can view the world and consider how blessed they are to be living in a country full of opportunities. They all agreed that they might not have all desire, but they now understand what it means to be contented as they experienced the little resources that people from other lands have to work with.

Conclusion

Learning is not just a process of accumulation of information. Instead it is about how the new knowledge that the learner encounters is integrated with his prior. The role of reflection in student learning changes the way in which people understand the world around them, rather than an accumulation of facts and procedures'. Savin-Baden (2000:9) defines learning as a 'cyclical process' where students develop understandings of themselves and their contexts, and the ways in which they learn effectively. Ramsden (1992:16) refers to it as a 'long and uncertain process of changes in understanding'.

This increasingly popular view on learning is in line with the constructivist perspective on learning. Learning in constructivist terms is about constructing knowledge and understandings of the world around, through questioning, interpreting and analyzing information. It is about using the processed information to integrate current experiences with past experience and knowledge (Marlowe et al, 1998: 10).

Reflection thus forms the important link between processing the new information and integrating it with the existing understanding of the world around. The value of reflection in learning lies in its ability to help learners to clarify their thoughts, to gain insights and, to deepen their understanding of the information that they receive (Higgs, 1988:47). According to Andrusyszyn (1997:2), reflection is a deliberate cognitive activity where learners connect thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the learning activity in which they are involved.

Since the inception of the global experience in higher education students who had never before travelled outside of the USA, now have the opportunity to advance their academic growth. Additionally, it creates for students global network environments that encompass cross boundary knowledge making, collaboration and if possible lifelong partnership.

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