

Service-Learning Paradigms

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CHAPTER 12
SERVICE-LEARNING IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY:
AN EARLY CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

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This article explores an ongoing service-learning partnership between under-qualified teachers at a number of Johannesburg preschools and final-year Early Childhood Development (ECD) education students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). We devised a service-learning programme that aimed to:

1. prepare student teachers for the realities of the South African ECD educational context, and, in so doing, further their academic insight and professional development;
2. support and assist underqualified ECD practitioners in order for them to reflect on their own pedagogical practice and consequently enrich the learning opportunities they provide for their diverse group of learners;
3. begin to address the specific needs of young children who are underprepared for formal schooling in South Africa today.

Community outreach programmes and service-learning projects are being espoused as important components of courses offered at institutions for higher education (Joint Education Trust [JET], 2001); The University of the Witwatersrand, Mission Statement, 2002). This increasing realization means that learning programmes need to become more socially relevant, and higher education institutions should prepare students to function optimally in diverse educational environments. According to Gallego (2001), service-learning can, if correctly designed, prepare teachers for cultural diversity. We would argue that a feature of this design should be mediation that facilitates the students' acceptance of the service-learning context so that teaching and learning opportunities presented by the situation are maximised.

It is also envisaged that an effective service-learning programme between the Early Childhood Development Department and certain preschools in and around the Johannesburg area could lead to an ongoing service-learning partnership.

Gallego (2001) points out that there are not many studies that have examined the benefits of service-learning for prospective teachers. We could find no studies that examine the benefits of service-learning in an ECD context. This, we feel, is a gap in the current research and therefore forms an additional part of our rationale for this project.

Context

ECD in South Africa is a marginalised field where 60% of the teachers are under-qualified, and a significant number of young children grow up in circumstances that adversely affect their holistic development and negatively impact their ability to maximise their learning potential (Department of Education, White Paper 5, 2001). The paper notes that early identification of circumstance-based difficulties and early intervention are imperative for the optimal development of many of these children.

The ECD department at the University of the Witwatersrand set up partnerships in 2004 with a number of preschools in and around greater Johannesburg. The majority of the teachers at these schools were un- or under-qualified. This means that they did not have a formal teaching qualification but were in possession of either an ECD Level 1 or Level 4 qualification in terms of the National Qualifications Framework². Most of these teachers, therefore, had a wealth of practical knowledge but limited exposure to the theoretical underpinning of ECD practice.

The 10 female students who took part in the project had been exposed to four years of the latest ECD methodology with theoretical underpinning. In the previous three years, they had had a total of four months' teaching experience using a wide variety of teaching techniques. They had not, however, been exposed in any depth to

sociocultural contexts very different from their own white, middle class backgrounds. This, the ECD department felt, was a distinct disadvantage in terms of their preparedness for teaching in South Africa's new democratic educational context.

The stakeholders in this service-learning project were:

- the teachers to whom we have referred above;
- final-year ECD student teachers at the Wits School of Education;
- the preschool children who came from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds.

A substantial number of these children could be described as environmentally deprived. Environmental deprivation is an umbrella term for a host of different factors that singly or in combination could have a deleterious effect upon the holistic development of children. Some children were, in fact, homeless, and others had unemployed parents, some of whom were illegal immigrants. Sometimes the result of these disadvantages meant that the only meal the children had was at the preschool. From another perspective, the children of the illegal immigrants were battling to adapt to a cultural context that was largely unknown. According to the principal at one school, some of the children had been identified as suffering from emotional and/or physical abuse. In a number of cases, parents were only minimally involved in their child's education. Some parents, in fact, were illiterate. Grantham-McGregor (1998) suggests that environmentally deprived children could be viewed as growing up in vulnerable circumstances. Factors that contribute to environmental deprivation include poverty, malnutrition, lack of stimulation, lack of interaction with the caregiver, etc. The children also had a wide range of mother tongues. They were not mother tongue speakers of English and had had limited exposure to the language. Their mother tongues included Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana and other African languages, Portuguese, and French. Their parents wanted them to go on to formal schooling through the medium of English, so the children's unfamiliarity with English was an additional circumstance-based difficulty. Immersion in English, the medium of instruction at the preschools, therefore became a particular focus of the intervention.

The preschools in the study were under-resourced according to the criteria set out by White Paper 5 (Department of Education, 2001). This paper notes that many preschools in South Africa operate under difficult circumstances, which include a lack of adequate funding, lack of qualifications of the ECD teachers, and inadequate support services. There may also be an unacceptably high teacher-to-child ratio. In one preschool that formed part of this project, for example, there was a teacher-to-child ratio of 1:29 in a younger group (3- to 4-year-olds). The ratio of 1:29 is high for

a younger group where no child is “environmentally deprived.” For a group where “environmental deprivation” is present, it becomes extremely difficult for a teacher to maximise each child’s learning potential. Despite these difficulties, however, the preschools in the study could all be seen as truly engaging with the challenges posed by limited facilities and resources. As one of the students in the study commented, “The teachers are so enthusiastic and passionate about their work at the school.”

Toward a Partnership in Action

The philosophy that informs ECD practice and is relevant to the context of this service-learning project draws on service-learning theory, social constructivism, and situated learning theory.

Service-learning is a way of involving students in an experiential teaching and learning situation that is related to their curriculum (Kieselmeier, 2000). Salinas (2005) states that service-learning is “based on a reciprocal relationship in which service reinforces and strengthens learning, and learning reinforces and strengthens service.”

Though there are different definitions of service-learning, important features include active participation of students in a thoughtfully organized programme that meets the needs of a community and provides time for the participants to reflect on the service experience (Billig, 2000). Billig (2000) states that positive outcomes for participants include the development of a sense of civic and social responsibility and assistance in the acquisition of academic skills and knowledge. The benefits from service-learning are, however, dependent on a number of factors, which include how the service-learning meets an authentic community need and includes meaningful planning, service and reflection; the degree of responsibility, autonomy, or choice given to students (both in the selection of the service to be performed and in the planning and evaluation of the activity); the direct sustained contact with the particular organization (not short-term or one-off); the high-quality reflection activities (reflection that connects the experience with content, skills, attitudes, and values); and the well-prepared teachers who serve as active partners and knowledge mediators (not sole decision-makers). Collaborative planning and interdependence in the implementation of these plans were, we contended, central to the development of a service-learning partnership that could enrich all the stakeholders. As Lloyd (2000) states, “Relationship is central in partnership. The relationship of partners is one of joint interest, working together as a team, as equals—yet individuals.”

Another important consideration that is particularly relevant in the South African context is the preparedness of teachers for cultural diversity. Nieto (1992; in

Gallego, 2001) posits that this preparation involves a fundamental transformation of people's worldviews that goes beyond giving information about cultures, curriculum, and instruction. Students need to examine their current beliefs and assumptions. If they do not, there is the likelihood that they will incorporate new information into old frameworks and maintain conventional beliefs and practices (Anders & Richardson, 1991; in Gallego, 2001). They suggest that if service-learning is to be effective, the providers have to listen to what the recipients need and judge to be effective. Service-learning programmes then will become useful strategies for addressing issues relating to cultural diversity.

South African research findings (Smith, 2000, Castle, Osman, & Henstock, 2003) indicate that many students initially resisted becoming involved with service-learning projects. These programs frequently are viewed with trepidation and anxiety. However, research has shown that over a period of time, students became much more confident and began to show a greater sensitivity to the needs of others. Smith (2000) noted that students began to exhibit untapped skills and talents and to unravel certain prejudices, while Castle, Osman, & Henstock (2003) reported that students demonstrated sensitivity to cultural diversity, civic responsibility, and increased personal knowledge.

Since service-learning is experientially based within a particular community, situated learning theory provides a useful orientation from which to view service-learning. According to situated learning theory, real-world contexts make the best learning environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave (1993) emphasises the connection between cognitive development and cultural context. According to Lave (1993), learning is situated within a framework of social participation, and knowledge of the social world is always socially mediated.

The third informing perspective, social constructivism, embraces Vygotsky's notion of the importance of social context—the socially defined processes through which knowledge is constructed and developed (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002, Vygotsky, 1986). As Wells points out (2000; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000), Vygotsky's theory has a number of important implications for the way we think about teaching and learning. For the purposes of this study, one is particularly relevant: the classroom is seen as a collaborative community with an exploratory approach toward teaching and learning. According to Wells (2000), classrooms and schools should be reconstituted as "communities of inquiry."

This notion of inquiry is inherent in the constructivist perspective where knowledge is seen as actively constructed. Constructivist perspectives see human beings as active agents in their own development (Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2002).

Mediation is the engine that drives development. Cognitive mediation involves helping a person through proximal interactions, to construct a new level of understanding (Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2002).

Research Design

This ongoing descriptive case study took place at three preschools in and around central Johannesburg. Students went to their specific preschool for three hours per week during the university term and worked with the children and the teachers. They worked with individual and groups of children. Through observation, reflection, and consultation, the teachers and students identified children with special needs.

We used questionnaires, unstructured interviews, and reflective journals as research tools. We also made use of random observations of the students working with the children and teachers. Students recorded details of each visit in their reflective journals. These details included their perceptions relating to the growth and success of the partnership and a description and evaluation of the learning activities they carried out with children.

Students completed questionnaires toward the end of the project, which provided an overall evaluative tool of their time at the schools. We held unstructured interviews with teachers to capture their perceptions and understanding of the partnership process and the value of the intervention for themselves and the children.

There was considerable discussion and negotiation with the students on the aims of the intervention, the appropriateness of particular teaching and learning strategies, and the dynamics involved in conducting collaborative partnerships. For example, we emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity, which is concomitant with Gallego's (2001) assertion where he also notes that students should examine their current beliefs and assumptions. We also stressed the value of observation and inquiry and the learning potential of nonverbal communication in second language acquisition. Mediation, in fact, became an important feature of this project as stakeholders mediated appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes relevant to the overall aims.

Research Findings and Discussion

The students who took part in the project were nervous initially. They expressed similar reservations in terms of their apprehension in their reflective journals. A number of students said they did not know what to expect. One student wrote, "The first visit was an eye opener; this is going to be a very different learning experience for me." Another commented, "I was nervous, especially about the language barriers; it has

taken time to get used to the environment.”

This finding, that students frequently view service-learning with trepidation and anxiety, correlates with the findings of Smith (2000) and Castle, Osman, & Henstock (2003). Despite this anxiety, students said they were definitely prepared to engage in the challenges of a very different teaching experience. The students' positive attitude, which was reflected in their journals and confirmed by the teachers, undoubtedly assisted in the setting-up of the collaborative partnerships. One of the teachers we interviewed said of her relationship with five of the ECD students, “It's a wonderful working relationship. They have got respect and understanding. We joke and laugh. We understand each other a lot.” Another teacher commented, “They were terrific. When are they coming back?” (The teacher was referring to the mid-year project break as a result of exams at Wits.)

Students likewise commented on the positive attitude of the preschools. They wrote, among other things, “The schools were very welcoming...they were very caring and enthusiastic towards the children...they [the teachers] involved us in the decision-making...they acted on suggestions we made.”

We suggest that the students' positive attitude could, in part, be contributed to the extensive mentoring we gave students prior to the beginning of the project, which they noted as a positive factor in their journals. This mentoring appeared to counter some of the trepidation. Our suggestion is concomitant with the literature on service-learning, which states that if service-learning is to be beneficial, certain features need to be in place (Billig, 2000).

Not all the partnerships appeared to work as well. A student at one of the preschools felt she had limited communication with the teacher with whom she worked. The student commented, “I do what I like, the teachers are not communicating well. I do not enjoy going to the school but the children are delightful...they make it worthwhile.”

A reason for the limited communication could, possibly, be related to the acknowledged time factor involved in the creation of successful partnerships. The students reflected that the formation of a partnership is a process and “processes take time and planning.”

Students focused on the collaborative planning of specialized activities that would generate increased opportunity for second language acquisition as well as overall holistic development. Together with the teachers, the students selected appropriate ECD activities that appeared to stimulate and excite the children. From a theoretical perspective, the students were working within Lave's (1993) situated learning para-

digm in which she contends that learning is situated within a framework of social participation. They learned—the children and the teachers—from the reciprocity of the enacted relationship. In so doing, our aims had begun to be met. This is evidenced in the following quotes from students, who wrote, “One on one intervention enabled children to follow (what the activity was about)...they were proud when they could do the activity, this helps their self-esteem,” and “I worked with him one-on-one. I explained back and front to him using gestures. It was amazing; he actually managed to complete the threading of the shape. I gave him the thumbs up sign and he was eager to do it again.”

According to the students and teachers, children also participated enthusiastically in small group work. One of the teachers said that when the students worked with small groups of children, the children seemed to feel more comfortable and began asking questions in English. The small group work often involved students telling stories and using a wide variety of activities and techniques to maintain interest and make meaning.

There were also a number of whole group activities initiated by students in consultation with teachers. Creative art was an example of this. One student wrote in her reflective journal:

The art activities are very structured; children do a lot of colouring in and worksheets. They [the teachers] don't like painting, it's too messy, but that's what children need, they want to explore and discover and then learning will take place. We gave the children play dough [*sic*]. It was new to them. Just to see their faces was overwhelming. They played with it for over an hour.

The teachers used this example of appropriate pedagogic practice to reflect on their own practice. They added Play-Doh[®] to their art activities and, with the students, co-constructed the value of this material in ECD.

The children's learning was often observable. One student recorded the progress she made with a three-year-old child. She wrote, “There is a small boy...he does not talk. He communicates with facial expressions; he also seems a bit aggressive. I work with him every week. I take him to the staff room and we have a half-an-hour session.”

This student said that initially there appeared to be no obvious improvement. She was becoming quite despondent. Then the “miracle” happened:

He was a bit reluctant at first, but soon cottoned on to what I was doing and then he started responding—at first in a very soft, almost inaudible voice, but then as he became more relaxed, he started speaking louder and eventually he was talking

normally! He is now very confident. He joins in and shouts out answers in the ring.

The change in the children's behaviour also became a noticeable focus of the teachers. They appeared to reflect in more depth on their own pedagogical practice and its impact on the children's learning. One teacher said:

Children will now tell me how they feel. They tell me "I'm tired" [for example]. They are more self-independent. When they come to school in the morning they tell me what they are feeling inside. "My heart is sore" [for example]. There's a growth in their English language.

Another teacher commented:

(The child) is six. She was struggling to recognize her name. The student sat with her; the child made progress. She can now recognize and write her name. She can also recognize the first letter of her name (in other contexts).

Students used a variety of strategies to try to meet the educational needs of the children. They commented on how they adapted their pedagogy to meet the needs of this group of children and how teachers had helped them identify specific needs. We noted how students started to draw specifically on previous knowledge to enhance the appropriateness and accessibility of their activities for the children. For instance, one student wrote, "I am lucky, I did Zulu at college. This has helped a lot getting children to understand us. We are also using pictures and they are working well."

Shortly after writing this, the student went on the university study break. Before going, she shared all the details of her intervention with the teacher concerned, who said she would continue with this process. When the student returned to the school, she noticed that the children had improved 100% in terms of their English language usage. It is probable that the intervention, conducted as it was, initially by the student and then by the teacher, played a role in this language development.

Students reflected on the strategies they used to enhance second language acquisition. They used repetition, pace adjustment, songs, and action rhymes that the children enjoyed immensely.

The students' journals also demonstrated their growing ability to both identify and respond to children's difficulties in particular development areas, such as spatial orientation and awareness, hand-eye coordination, and visual motor perceptual problems. The students attempted to address these difficulties through gross motor movement activities and focused on outdoor free-play activities, inherent in which were many opportunities for informal language acquisition.

There were, of course, difficulties. We have referred to the apparent fact that where communication between students and teachers was not established fully, the partnership was less effective. Students also wrote of the frustration they felt in certain contexts. One student wrote, "I tell a story with aids (felt board pictures). There is a distinct lack of understanding. I have to speak very slowly and repeat myself often. It is a laborious process, and the gist of the story is lost. Still they [the children] enjoy the aids."

Despite this, all the interventions that formed part of the project had positive elements. It appeared, after analysing journal entries and questionnaires, that the quality of intervention was superior in the preschools where a more successful partnership had been established. This observation resonates with the claims of Lloyd (2000), who emphasises the importance of relationship factors in effective collaboration. Furthermore, it also appeared from data obtained from the students and teachers that the more successful the partnership, the greater the learning benefits for the children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We would argue that service-learning, in this particular situated context, fulfilled our stated aims and, in so doing, resonated with the definition of service-learning put forward by Salinas (2005).

The collaborative, reflective partnership between students and teachers that developed during this project provided enabling learning opportunities for teachers, students, and, of course, the children. And these opportunities, our data showed, were realized. Furthermore, we would contend the development of the children noted by students and teachers is a tangible indication that positive factors are emanating from the preschool/Wits partnership that has grown out of the introduction of service-learning into the ECD final study year. One of the limitations of this paper is that it focuses in detail only on the perceptions of students and teachers. The children's perceptions will be the focus of another paper.

There are, of course, aspects that we still need to address. One of these is the negative impact of limited communication on the development of the partnership.

Nonetheless, the study has shown that collaborative partnerships can constructively inform the setting up and implementation of a developmentally appropriate ECD programme. Our findings indicate that what began to emerge, at least at one of the preschools, was what Wells (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000) calls a "community of inquiry" where collaborative reflection and the sharing of expertise enrich the teaching and learning environment.

This project is still in its early days. It needs to continue for the early findings to be refined through the collection of further data. Early indications, however, are that all the stakeholders benefited from the intervention. We acknowledge that there needs to be further research into partnerships themselves and the dynamics involved in establishing constructive service-learning relationships in our particular South African context with our particular educational history.

Several of the findings of this study indicate further related research that is needed in the ECD field in South Africa today:

- The possible establishment of further partnerships in the ECD field that meet an authentic community need and include meaningful planning, service, and reflection.
- Mentoring for students in service-learning projects such as this with a particular emphasis on cultural and second language acquisition issues. We found that it was essential throughout this initial phase to discuss happenings with the students and to draw their attention to the fact that processes in terms of child development and second language acquisition can appear to be extremely slow. As one student said, “It is easy to become despondent and feel that you are making no headway when you do not see any overt progress.”
- The value of theory in informing practice. The three perspectives on which we drew—social constructivism, situated learning, and service-learning theory—are vital components in the collaborative planning, implementation, and reflection on student participation and efficacy in service-learning. We would therefore suggest that all ECD teachers could benefit from a rich knowledge of these theoretical perspectives. The implications of these perspectives should become an inherent part of the dialogue around the construction of shared understanding in a “community of inquiry.”
- Teachers’ perceptions and attitudes relating to service-learning programmes and advantages and disadvantages of collaboration with pre-service education students.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What factors do you think are important in the formation of successful service-learning partnerships?
2. What do you understand by the term “reciprocity” in service-learning in terms of your context?
3. What strategies do you think are appropriate to counter possible negative elements in a service-learning partnership?

Notes

The White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) highlights the importance of a reconstruction and development mandate. Service-learning projects contribute toward the empowerment and development of local communities, make higher education policy and practice more relevant to community needs, and enhance service delivery to participating communities (JET, 2001). Many definitions of service-learning include in higher education institutions, active organized participation, and experiential participation that meet the needs of the community (JET, 2001).

In terms of the National Qualifications Framework an ECD level four qualification equates with the Grade 12 School Leaving Certificate.

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