

DEVELOPING AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PROFESSIONAL VOICE AS A PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

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Abstract

Service-learning is traditionally used as a pedagogical tool in pre-service teacher education programs to connect theory to practice and to provide future teachers with experiences that support school needs and offer early opportunities to engage with children and youth. While the assumption is that pre-service teachers will benefit from service-learning by ultimately becoming more effective educators, the reality is that pre-service teachers often encounter entrenched power structures and deficit models of teaching and learning while participating in traditional service-learning activities. The research presented here examined one college's critical service learning initiative designed to support pre-service teachers as they interrogated existing power structures impacting both teaching and children's learning and lived experiences. The College's rationale for this pedagogical shift was to support pre-service teachers' understanding of equity and social justice and to help them develop an anti-oppressive professional advocacy voice that can be useful when attempting to reduce the systemic barriers they may encounter when working in U.S. schools. The researcher followed 94 pre-service teachers over the course of 10 weeks as they engaged in one of two self-selected critical service-learning projects: (1) Educational policy involvement during a government legislative session (n=51) or (2) Production of podcasts on educational equity issues for the local community (n=43). Survey data and analysis of student reflections were examined. 91% of pre-service teachers indicated that involvement enhanced their ability to implement anti-oppressive practices, and 96% reported that the experience helped them determine who they want to become in a movement for educational and social justice.

Keywords: Teacher education, service learning, educational policy, equity, social justice.

1. Introduction and objectives

Service-learning is a common pedagogical practice in pre-service teacher education programs (Resch & Schrittmesser, 2021). While service learning offers pre-service teachers opportunities to engage with children, youth and experienced teachers in community and classrooms settings, some research finds that service learning can reinforce personal biases and negative stereotypes (Kirkland, 2014). Additionally, pre-service teachers report they are often ill-prepared to respond when they encounter entrenched power structures and deficit models of teaching and learning while participating in traditional service-learning assignments. During the past decade a shift towards models of critical service learning has occurred, with pre-service education programs encouraging future teachers to see themselves as agents of change and use service learning to respond to injustices in communities (Bond, 2016; Mitchell, 2008; Tinkler, Tinkler, Reyes, & Elkin, 2019).

While teacher preparation standards require new teachers to have a basic understanding of equitable and inclusive learning (CAEP, 2022, CCSSO, 2022), they do not require teachers to be able to examine systems in order to effect change. In contrast, standards in social work and human services education require that pre-service professionals understand systems of oppression and know how to advocate for equity and social justice with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people (Council for Standards in Human Services Education, 2019; Council on Social Work Education, 2015). These professions have a long history of embedding personal standpoint and systems learning early in the pre-service curriculum, often before students work with vulnerable people in the field (Friedman, Karim, Feiler, Padner & Erich-Gyard, 2020). The scope and sequence of the social work and human services curriculum offers opportunities for pre-service professionals to begin to develop a professional identity and voice along with the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of their future work prior to engaging in field-based learning.

The research presented here describes the work of one U.S. based college that maintains a vision of pre-service learning that “advances knowledge, honors diversity, and promotes social justice” (Woodring Mission and Vision, n.d.). In 2020 the College began to shift away from traditional service learning activities and move towards pre-service teacher’s understanding and development of a professional advocacy voice. This shift was tied to a larger ongoing initiative focused on preparing *community teachers* by connecting the teacher education curriculum with previously disparate college programs – notably human services and nursing. This research examines pre-service teacher’s experiences as they engaged in critical service learning projects within an education equity and social justice course.

2. Methods

Research followed 94 pre-service teachers attending one university in Washington State (USA) over the course of 10 weeks while they worked on self-selected advocacy projects. The first project focused on educational policy and advocacy during a state legislative session. Fifty-one students explored education bills and selected one bill to focus on throughout the legislative session. Pre-service teachers learned how to read educationally relevant bills, reports, and substitute bills, and then follow the bills through the legislative process. They also watched hearings and listened to testimony for and against their bills. While not required, some students offered their own testimony, while others met with their local legislators to discuss implications of various bills for teachers and learners. Students then created an infographic to explain the bill to families and educators. The second group, comprised of 43 pre-service teachers, learned about the importance of podcasts for information sharing and education advocacy and then created podcasts on education equity issues for families, students, educational administrators and/or local community members.

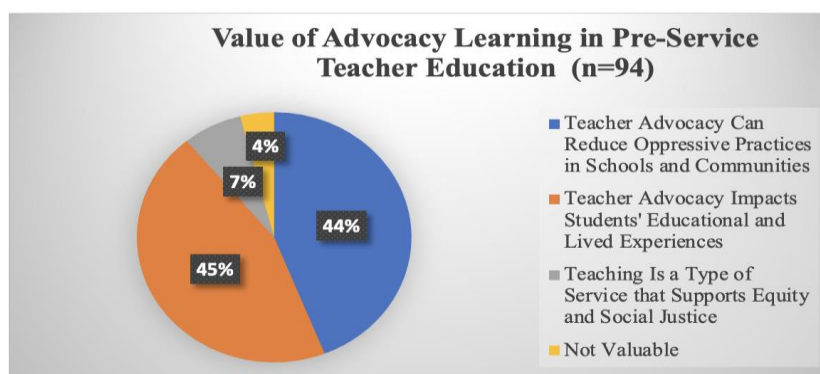
All of the pre-service teachers were in their initial year of a two-year educator preparation program. The projects were embedded in a course focused on examining how culture and social justice impact education, schools, and teaching. At various points during their participation in the project pre-service teachers were asked to provide feedback on their experiences and learning. Survey data, student reflections, and artifacts were collected and analyzed for both the podcast and legislative advocacy projects.

3. Findings

The 43 social justice podcasts were categorized into seven categories that included content on education in relation to racial equity, mental health, LGBTQ+ experiences, poverty, juvenile justice, disability and school policies. The 51 legislative advocacy projects focused on statewide bills under consideration including teacher training on indigenous history, education of children in the foster care system, comprehensive school counseling programs, emergency waivers for high school graduation during the pandemic, and multicultural education in schools.

An analysis of survey data from the 94 participants found that 91% agreed or strongly agreed that their involvement in the professional advocacy project enhanced their ability to implement anti-oppressive practices in schools and communities, and 96% indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that the experience helped them determine who they want to be in a movement for educational and social justice. Approximately 4% of participants indicated that they found very little or no value in the project. Findings did not differ significantly according to the type of project selected.

Figure 1. Most important learning: themes associated with professional advocacy projects.



Students were asked to share their most significant take-away from the project. Responses were coded and categorized into two primary themes that did not differ according to the type of project selected (Figure 1). According to participants, knowing how to use one's voice and expertise for equity and social justice is foundational to becoming a teacher in order to (1) reduce oppressive practices and (2) positively impact students' educational and lived experiences. As one future teacher who participated in legislative advocacy noted, "I will use what I learned to take action in my job because I want to be involved in decisions that help my students in their education." A pre-service teacher who participated in the equity podcast project concluded, "I got so much out of this experience. I was able to open my mind and do new things that I didn't know I could do. I learned a lot about equity and education. I also learned that I have a voice, and I now know how to use my voice."

4. Concluding thoughts

This research points to the value of pre-service teachers acquiring an understanding of the systems, policies, and practices that will impact their teaching and student learning. While much of this work is context specific and not meant to be generalized to other communities, the projects described here offer two viable ways of engaging pre-service teachers in critical service learning that helps them develop skills and offers opportunities to use their professional voices to advocate for laws, policies and practices that contribute to equity and social justice in schools.

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