Perceived importance of skills, values and attitudes by final-year pre-service teacher education students entering a Service-learning program

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Background

Service-learning has become increasingly predominant in higher education because of its ability to enhance student learning and foster civic and community engagement (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). While a considerable body of literature attests to a range of benefits derived from this pedagogical approach (Peterson, 2009), there have been few systematic empirical studies of student outcomes (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). A measure developed to assess student outcomes, while also addressing issues of reliability and consistency, is the *SErvice LEarning Benefit* (SELEB) scale (Toncar, Reid, Burns, Anderson & Nguyen, 2006). Although designed to assess business and marketing students' perceived Service-learning experience benefits, the items mapped closely onto the skills, values, and attitudes that we emphasise when challenging preservice teachers to reflect critically upon their assumptions, values and beliefs in preparation for teaching in highly diverse but inclusive classrooms. This pilot study, utilising an adapted form of the SELEB scale, contributes to the small but growing body of research (Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron & McFarland, 2002) concerned with measuring the effectiveness of Service-learning in developing students' academic and civic learning as well as their role as agents of change (Stamopoulos, 2006).

Research Questions

This study was designed with two purposes. First, we wanted to examine our final-year students' perceptions of the level of importance that specific practical skills, citizenship skills, interpersonal skills, enterprise skills, and personal responsibility had for them in relation to their preparation as inclusive classroom teachers. Specifically, we wanted to compare the perceptions of the students who chose to undertake the Service-learning Pathway (SL) with those who preferred to complete the subject in a traditional manner on campus or by external study (NSL) for two reasons. First, we wanted to know whether there were any pre-existing differences between the two groups because we our SL students have consistently achieved higher grades overall than their NSL peers. Second, identification of any differences would assist us in reviewing and revising the Service-learning program for the coming year when we will no longer be offering the traditional university-learning pathway. The second major purpose for the study was to examine the possible contribution of our adaptation of the SELEB scale. We are keen to adopt a mixed-methods approach to our ongoing research program.

Methods

The 280 participants (223 females and 57 males) completed our self-report questionnaire, the SELEB PLUS, at the beginning of semester. The SELEB PLUS is an extension of the SELEB scale, a validated and reliable instrument developed by Toncar et al. (2006). We modified the 7-point Likert-type scale by adding 3 additional questions related to enterprise and citizenship skills. The data were entered into an SPSS 17.0 data file and analysed by means of descriptive statistics, analyses of variance and for the SELEB PLUS, internal consistency and factor analysis.

Frame

Our program of research, which is informed by critical social theory, examines the interdependence of Service-learning, values, and quality teaching as well as the nature and extent of students' transformative learning during Service-learning. To date, we have relied on qualitative in our assessment of outcomes for students and service organisations. In this pilot study, however, we

wanted to ascertain whether there were measurable pre-existing differences between the SL and NSL students before the Service-learning program commenced.

Research findings

The analyses of data from the SELEB PLUS (α = .76) indicated that there was a significant difference between the SL (n = 96) and NSL (n = 181) students (F = 7.45; p = 0.01) in relation to their overall ratings of importance. There were also significant differences between the two groups on 9 items across the five domains of interest (Practical Skills, Citizenship Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Enterprise skills, and Personal Responsibility) indicating important factors for us to consider in our ongoing program of research and teaching. On all items except social self-confidence, the SL students rated items as more important than did their NSL peers. This finding is of particular interest because the SL students have frequently described their marked increase in self-confidence as a result of their experience of Service-learning.

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