

Evaluation of pre-service elementary teachers' perceptions of community service-learning course

Behiye Akcay¹, Ferhat Ensar²

¹Department of Elementary Education, Istanbul University Beyazıt, Istanbul, Turkey

²Department of Turkish Education, Yildiz Technical University, Esenler, Istanbul, Turkey

Email address:

bbezir@gmail.com (B. Akcay), fensar@yildiz.edu.tr (F. Ensar)

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to determine pre-service elementary teachers' perceptions of a Community Service Learning (CSL) course. The sample consisted of 102 pre-service elementary teachers taking the CSL course in the 2012-2013 spring semesters. The Perceptions of Community Service Practice Survey, personal journals, and open-ended questions were used as data sources. The survey had five subscales including student socialization, personal development, perception of the course, perception of the institutions, and perception of the advisor. The findings showed that pre-service teachers had a positive attitude toward the course especially in the socialization subscale with a statistically significant result compared to the other subscales.

Keywords: Community Service Learning, Education, Pre-service Teachers, Gender

1. Introduction

Community Service-Learning (CSL) is an evolving pedagogy that entails students volunteering in the community for academic credit (Gallego, 2001). Roots of the CSL course are based on studies by John Dewey, William James, Ernest Boyer and Paulo Freire (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Ernest Boyer (1996) argued the importance of connecting university resources to social and civic organizations in the community.

CSL course started with the "Morrill or Land Grant Act" in 1862 and 1890 (Kesten, 2012). The theoretical background of the course is based on John Dewey's movement on "progressive education" in 1902 (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Dewey argued the importance of experience in child education in which learning occurs when personal experiences are directly linked to knowledge (Crump, 2002; Gallego, 2001).

Dewey's pedagogy of learning was not embraced immediately. In the 1960's and 1970's this view started to be popularized by the national service programs like the Peace Corps (Mooney & Edwards, 2001) and when the federal government started to support projects in which teachers work with students in poor communities (Potthoff et al., 2012). Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey were the first researchers who used the CSL concept in the current

sense in 1967 (Elma et al., 2010; Gokce, 2011). During the 1980's, "serve and learn" programs started to be popular and President Bush's "thousand points of light" report was published (Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Potthoff et al., 2012). During that time secondary and higher education curricula included service learning programs (Potthoff et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2005). The National and Community Service Act in 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993 were accepted by the USA government.

CSL is a teaching and learning approach which is aimed at promoting hands-on service experience and academic learning among pre-service teachers during their undergraduate education (Cetin & Sonmez, 2009; Crump, 2002; Wang et al., 2005). The course is intended to provide a link between young people and the community because direct involvement with different social organizations in the community gives students valuable real-life experiences. They can engage with real-world problems and are faced with challenges to find solutions to those problems (Crump, 2002; Swick, 2001). Gallego (2001) argued that community-based experiences provide unique learning opportunities for pre-service teachers distinct from the classroom and the school environment. The course also gives pre-service teachers an experience to improve their personal development and academic performance (Shumer, Lam, & Laabs, 2012).

In Turkey, the Council of Higher Education (YOK) had a reform on teacher training programs in 2004 in accordance with the Bologna Process (Sakar & Ozturk, 2011). After The Sorbonne declaration of 25th of May 1998 which stressed the central role of universities as key to promoting democratic societies, the Bologna Process was launched in 19 June 1999. Ministers of Education from 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration. The aim of the Bologna Process is to allow the diversity of national systems and universities by creating a coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. Today 49 countries participate in this process to be part of the European Higher Education Area. Turkey has been a full member of the Bologna Process since 2001 (The Bologna Declaration, 1998; Sorbonne Joint Declaration, 1999).

In the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year, the Community Service Learning course was offered in the teacher training curriculum. The course content covered both classroom and service experience and was offered to junior students as a one term mandatory course. The scope of this course is to promote service experience and academic learning to pre-service teachers who can determine the actual problems of society and to prepare a project for finding a solution as well as encouraging students to participate in panel discussions, conferences, congresses, symposiums, and scientific activities, as audience or speaker (YOK, 2007).

The context of the course is differing in each university. The course context in the present study is explained below:

- Students determine the activities and the relevant institutions or organizations in advance during the Fall term to be able to give enough time to the course instructor to obtain permission for desired activities.
- Students' projects should be original and able to support creative thinking.
- Students are required to prepare a portfolio throughout the term. This portfolio must include activity reports, pictures, brochures, and certificate of participation, personal journals and self-assessment reports (Istanbul University, 2012).

Potthoff et al. (2012) explored the impact of CSL courses on pre-service teachers' knowledge, attitudes and skills. A total of 136 pre-service teachers participated in the study. A 53-item Likert scale survey was used to collect data. The results showed that pre-service teachers had overall satisfaction of the course and their knowledge, skills and attitudes were improved.

Gallego (2012) examined community and classroom experiences for developing pre-service teachers' understanding of learning in context. A total of 117 university students agreed to participate in the study. Multiple sources were used to collect data including audiotape and videotaped interactions, progress reports, writing samples, field notes and interviews. The results showed that pre-service teachers had benefited from participating in community experiences in terms of both personal and academic development.

Kesten (2012) aimed to examine prospective teachers' opinions about a CSL course in terms of professional development, human relations and leadership as well as problems originating from the university and institutes. Five prospective teachers from different departments participated the study. Interviews with each participant were coded and analyzed using NVivo 7.0. The results showed that the CSL course positively affected prospective teachers' professional development, contributed to socialization with the community, and developed their organization skills. However, prospective teachers were complaining about transportation, bureaucracy and financial support. There were also problems with institutions such as the negative attitude of people in these institutions.

Kucukoglu (2011) examined the opinions of 41 teacher candidates taking a CSL course. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that the CSL course was beneficial for helping pre-service teachers to develop their social, academic and professional lives.

Even though there are many studies documented on CSL in the USA and other countries very limited research has been done on CSL courses in Turkey, because the concept is new to Turkey. The importance of the present study is to fill the gap in the Turkish literature and to contribute to international studies on service-learning. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of Turkish pre-service elementary teachers regarding the Community Service-Learning (CSL) course and to determine their satisfaction level of socialization, personal development, the course, course advisor, and institutions involved.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants enrolled in the Community Service Learning course during spring 2012 and 2013 in the elementary education department in a university located in the western part of Turkey. The study group involved 102 juniors (60 female, 42 male).

Community Service is a compulsory 5-ECTS course offered to pre-service elementary teachers in the third year of the program. Students in the course were involved in different experiences based on their interest areas. Some students tutored elementary and middle school students in different subjects. Some students volunteered to work in a university library to read books for visually impaired students. Others preferred to work in childcare centers, homes for senior residents, different clinics in the university hospital, and volunteered in non-profit government organizations like TEGV (Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey), TEMA (The Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, for Reforestation and the Protection of Natural Habitats, Bilgievleri (Information homes), Darulaceze (Hospice), The child Protection Agency, KIZILAY (Turkish Red Crescent), and ISMEK (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Art and

Vocational Training Courses).

2.2. Data Sources

Three different data sources were used. First data source is a Students' Perceptions of Community Service Practice Survey (Cronbach's alpha = .88) (Elma et al., 2010), referred to by the acronym SPCSPS. It includes 28 items. The item responses have a five point Likert-type scale from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The SPCSPS has five subscales: (1) Student socialization, (2) Personal development, (3) Perceptions of the course, (4) Perceptions of institutions, and (5) Perceptions about the CSP advisor. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester.

Second data source is personal journals collected from students' portfolios. Last data source was the open-ended questions to learn about their opinions about the course content and the service learning experiences.

2.3. Analyzing of Data

The data for the SPCSPS were analyzed using SPSS 17.0 (Statistical Program for Social Sciences). Descriptive data were examined using one-way ANOVA to ascertain the differences in pre-service teachers' perceptions by gender. The data from the open-ended questionnaire and the personal journals were coded and descriptively analyzed. Quotes from the questionnaire and the journal were described as 'F' for female and 'M' for male after each quote. Each participant had a number to protect his/her personal information. For example "M11" represents Male participant with code 11.

3. Results

The pre-service teachers' responses to the SPCSPS items were analyzed and items mean scores were summarised in Table 1.

The pre-service elementary teachers agreed more on the item "I think this course will contribute to social solidarity"

($\bar{x} = 4.9$) from the "Student socialization" sub-dimension, while they had a low mean score on the item "Through this course, I realized that I was so far from social life" ($\bar{x} = 2.9$). Results from the student socialization subscale showed overall high mean scores.

In the 'Personal development' sub-scale pre-service elementary teachers had a high mean score on the item "I think this course would be useful to me during my professional life" ($\bar{x} = 4.6$) while the lowest mean score belonged to the item "I realized my leadership trait through the course" ($\bar{x} = 3.7$). Based on the mean scores results showed that pre-service teachers had a high mean scores for the 'Personal development' subscale.

The pre-service elementary teachers' 'Perceptions of the course' subscale had high mean score for the items "I think that students should determine their application groups for projects" ($\bar{x} = 4.4$) and "Students' opinions should be given priority in the selection of projects" ($\bar{x} = 4.4$). The lowest mean scores were for the items "I think the course instructor should decide the institutions for the student's projects" ($\bar{x} = 2.3$), "I think the course has reached its purpose" ($\bar{x} = 2.3$), and "I think, there is not enough information given about the course" ($\bar{x} = 2.3$).

The 'Perceptions of the institutions' subscale had a high mean score for the item "I had opportunity to learn about different social institutions" ($\bar{x} = 4.5$) and a low mean score for the item "I had problems in institutions while working on my project because I couldn't explain in detail the course objectives and the content" ($\bar{x} = 1.8$).

The pre-service teachers' views on the 'Perceptions of the advisor' subscale had a high mean score for the item "I think the course advisor fulfill the requirements of the course" ($\bar{x} = 4.4$) and the low mean score for the item "I think it would be more convenient to choose course advisor among our department's instructors" ($\bar{x} = 1.8$).

Table 1. Items Mean Scores Based on Sub-Dimension of the Elementary Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Community Service Practice Survey.

Sub-dimensions	Items	\bar{x}	Sd
Student Socialization	I found opportunity to communicate with people from different age groups	4.6	0.8
	I think this course will contribute to social solidarity	4.7	0.6
	This course provides the opportunity to meet with different sectors of society	4.6	0.7
	I realized my responsibilities as a member of society	4.5	0.6
	I realized that I can bring solutions to social problems	4.5	0.7
	Through this course, I have come to realize the importance of being a member of a civil society organizations	4.5	0.9
	I extend my social circle because of this course	4.2	0.9
	Through this course, I realized that I was so far from social life	2.9	1.3
	I think my human relationships strengthen because of this course	4.4	0.8
Personal Development	I think this course would be useful to me during my professional life	4.6	0.7
	I realized my leadership trait through the course	3.7	1.2
	Through this course my self-confidence has increased	4.3	0.9
	This course has changed my life perspective	3.9	1.1
	I think I've developed empathy skills during the course	4.3	0.9

Sub-dimensions	Items	\bar{x}	Sd
Perception of The Course	Students' opinions should be given priority in the selection of projects	4.4	0.7
	I think that students should determine their application groups for projects	4.4	0.6
	I like the course	4.5	0.7
	I think this course should not be limited to one semester	3.9	1.1
	I think, there is not enough information given about the course	2.3	1.1
	I think the course has reached its purpose	2.3	1.3
	I think the course instructor should decide the institutions for the student's projects	2.3	1.2
Perception of Institution	I think the course is unnecessary*	1.5	0.8
	I had opportunity to learn about different social institutions	4.5	0.6
	I learned that how things work in institutions	4.3	0.7
	I think people work in social institutions have positive point of view	4.1	0.9
Perception of The Advisor	I had problems in institutions while working on my project because I couldn't explain in detail the course objectives and the content	1.8	1.0
	I think it would be more convenient to choose course advisor among our department's instructors	1.8	1.0
	I think the course advisor fulfill the requirements of the course	4.4	0.9

*reverse item

The pre-service elementary teachers' responses to the SPCSPS sub-scales including 'Perceptions of student socialization', 'Personal development', 'Perceptions of the course', 'Perceptions of the institutions' and 'Perceptions of the advisor' were analyzed using one-way ANOVA based on gender (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of Pre-service Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Community Service Practice Survey' sub-scales Based on Gender Variable

Column1	Gender	N	Mean	Sd	F	p
Student Socialization	M	42	4.34	.35	5.162	.025*
	F	60	4.12	.55		
Personal Development	M	42	4.17	.79	.063	.802
	F	60	4.21	.66		
Perception of the Course	M	42	3.63	.44	1.756	.188
	F	60	3.53	.36		
Perception of the Institutions	M	42	3.63	.50	.442	.508
	F	60	3.70	.44		
Perception of the Advisor	M	42	3.05	.75	1.652	.202
	F	60	2.89	.56		

*p<.05

The results showed a statistical significant difference at 0.05 level for the 'Students socialization' subscale. The mean score of male participants ($\bar{x} = 4.34$) was higher than that for the female participants ($\bar{x} = 4.12$). Male students had more positive experience on socialization than the female participants. There weren't any statistical differences in the 'Personal development', 'Perceptions of the course', 'Perceptions of the institutions' and 'Perceptions of the advisor' subscales.

Students' responses to the open-ended questions were overwhelmingly favorable as indicated by 89% of pre-service elementary teachers. The community service learning increased their personal competence. An example of a student's response was:

"Before this course I had a social anxiety in which I was afraid to talk in front of people. After taking this course I have changed; now I can express myself very easily. It also increased my self-esteem." (F12)

More than 90% of pre-service teachers explained how this course gave them an opportunity to be more sociable and made them feel that they are part of the community. An example of a student's response was:

"The CSL course allows students to socialize. It teaches you to be intertwined with society and enables different segments of society to come together. Service to societyhelps us to recognize that we actually serve others." (M 12)

All the students chose to work in different institutions. They mostly had a positive experience in these institutions (86%) and had more insight about the importance of these organizations for the community (81%). One example of a student's response was:

"I realize the importance of this course from the institution that I volunteered to work in. I worked at KIZILAY. My friends and I were responsible for explaining the importance of donating blood to people..... We actually see that its works" (M 13).

Some students also had suggestions after they saw the value of the course, with the response:

"I think, this course should be part of the curriculum of all faculties, not only the education faculty because this course not only provides academic learning, it also promotes service experience in real life situations." (F 40).

Data from students' personal journals support the data obtained from the survey and the open-ended questions. In the journals, students who volunteered in elementary school as a tutor explained that their professional skills increased during the project in terms of understanding students' needs (56%), increased their management skills (67%) and academic performance (80%). Some students noted in their journals that they learned to be happy about small things after they had worked in senior centers and hospitals (41%). One student quoted: "I learned to look from a broader

perspective about life, people, events, and situations”.

In their journals, students who volunteered in elementary school as a tutor explained that “My professional skills increased during the project in terms of understanding students’ needs, increased my management skills and academic performance.” (M 35)

Some students noted in their journals that they learned to be happy about small things after they had worked in senior centers and hospitals. One quoted: “I learned to look from a broader perspective about life, people, events, and situations.” (F 13)

However, 25% of students said that they would prefer to spend their time in different courses instead of spending time in the CSL course. A total of 60% of students thought that this course should be an elective course instead of being compulsory. Only 12% of students found the course to be pointless and unnecessary. Only 45% of them wanted to continue to work on their project after the course. A low 10% of students said that this course taught them to be empathetic to others needs.

4. Discussion

The majority of pre-service elementary teachers’ perceptions of the CSL course were positive. Results from the survey demonstrated that participants gained favorable learning experience during the course. Analyses of the survey responses showed that the CSL course increased students’ sensitivity, responsibility and awareness of current societal issues, communication skills, self-assessments, self-confidence and team work skills.

Findings of this study support the results obtained by Potthoff et.al. (2012) in that the CSL course increases pre-service teachers’ skills, knowledge and attitudes. Pre-service teachers developed communication skills with people of different background as well as they learned to work as a team and how to deal with problems in social contexts.

The results showed that the CSL course improved pre-service teachers’ social, academic and professional skills. These results parallel the findings of the Shumer, Lam and Laabs (2012), Kucukoğlu (2011) and Gallego (2012) studies.

Pre-service elementary teachers’ perceptions of socialization were significant compared to the other sub-scales as in the Elma et. al. (2010) study. However Elma et al. (2010) argued that female participants had more positive perceptions than the male participants. In this study, the results showed the opposite as male participants had more positive attitudes than female participants.

The findings of the study are also different from the study by Kesten (2012) in terms of having negative relations and attitudes about people who worked in the institutions. In this study pre-service teachers had positive experiences with people in the institutions.

The CSL course encouraged mutual relationship between the university, community and students. It gave pre-service

elementary students an opportunity to critically think and solve real-life problems. They had opportunities to meet different people from different occupational groups as well as work cooperatively with them and with their peers. They had meaningful relationships with local communities. They were able to use their academic skills outside of the classroom. They increased their awareness of local and national problems.

The results of the study showed that the course had a positive on pre-service teachers’ academic professional and social skills. It would be beneficial to make a follow up study after the pre-service teachers had graduated to determine how the CSL course affected their academic, professional and social skills while they were teaching.

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