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Community Service Learning: A First Year Transition Tool for Teacher Education

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Abstract: Community Service Learning (CSL) as a first year transition strategy into teacher education is a new concept not previously identified in either the CSL literature or the First Year in Higher Education literature. This paper reports on a study that investigated how first year preservice teachers experienced CSL and how this impacted on their current and future professional sense of self. The study showed that the students benefitted professionally, personally, and academically from undertaking community service. We argue that given these results and the similar framing discourses of both CSL and first year transition into Higher Education, that CSL can be readily reconceptualised as a transition strategy for first year in teacher education.

Introduction

Community Service Learning (CSL) is a relatively new concept in teacher education in western countries, although it is gaining popularity as a valuable pedagogical tool for preservice teacher's professional identity formation (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thom, 2005). However, CSL as a first year transition strategy into teacher education is a new concept not previously identified in either the CSL literature or the transition literature. This paper reports on a study that investigated how first year preservice teachers experienced CSL and how this impacted on their current understandings of themselves and their future professional selves. It argues that, given these results and the similar discourses that underpin both CSL and first year transition, CSL can be readily reconceptualised as an enabling transition strategy for first year in teacher education.

This study is informed by international, national, and state concerns for improving the provision and relevance of pre-service teacher education (Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, & Yager, 2009). Community Service Learning is a possible means of achieving those goals. Our paper is also underpinned by concerns for enhancing the first year experience in higher education as a means of improved engagement, transition, and ultimately retention (Kift, 2004). Given these two emphases, the following background to the study focuses firstly on first year transition in higher education and then on Community Service Learning.

Background to the Study

Transition into First Year in Higher Education

Transition into and retention in the first year of higher education has been an institutional, national, and international concern and thus a research focus for many decades. Students' reasons for leaving in their first year of study are complex, diverse, and varied and Tinto (1993) observes:

[it would appear] to be more situational in character than patterned by broad attributes of either individuals or institutions. . . there does not appear to be any easy or simple way of characterizing student departure from higher education . . . (p.33)

However, even given Tinto's observations, many have sought to explain early departure in terms of the student and their specific circumstances, abilities, and/or attributes. For example, research has highlighted issues to do with gender, age, finances, work commitments, socialisation, parental and family support, course workloads, geographic isolation, poor entry scores, and inadequate tertiary preparation and academic skills (Harrison, 2006; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Wilson, 2005-2006; Wintre & Bowers, 2007; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006).

Tinto (1993) argues that identifying isolated student attributes as indicators for withdrawal is limiting and that it is more helpful to investigate the relationship between student and institutional forces and how these influence student dissatisfaction and withdrawal. Institutions of higher education know that early withdrawal can be a symptom of clashing discourses and have thus instituted measures to address this in basically one of two ways: by creating an environment that integrates the student into the existing discourse and culture of the institution or adapting institutional practices to align with student cultural diversity and learning styles (Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

While Zepke, Leach, and Prebble (2006) argue that adaptation is a preferable approach, being more learner-centred and equitable, the majority of measures have been of an integrative nature, where institutions, faculties, and programs of study have provided various and numerous support measures to assist students in successfully adopting and enacting institutional discourses in their first year of study. Such measures have generally focused on supporting students in three main areas of perceived need: the institution; academics; and psychosocial welfare (Duff, Quinn, Johnston, & Lock, 2007).

Measures to assist students settle into the discourses of the institution include, for example, orientation days, information sessions, and/or leaflets on university services, enrolment procedures, and student rights. Assisting students with their academic needs includes such things as workshops on developing academic literacies, assignment preparation and completion, information literacy skills, academic counselling, and study skills. Approaches that address the students' psychosocial needs focus on supporting students to make social connections with peers and staff, providing information and training on work life balance, time management, and developing leaderships skills (Duff et al., 2007; Krause, 2006; McInnis, 2001; White & Carr, 2005; Wilson, 2005-2006; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Potentially, these support measures provide the means whereby students' experiences are positive and successful thereby reinforcing engagement, persistence, and commitment (Tinto, 1993).

It is important for institutions of higher education and society in general to graduate successful and well educated individuals. Arguably, while this interest for universities and society is largely motivated by economic rationalist imperatives (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008) it is also motivated by an appreciation of the long term costs to the students themselves in terms of career prospects and life chances

(Watson, Johnson, & Billett, 2002; Wilson, 2005-2006). Given this, is it critical that students are well-integrated into the life of the university and their academic studies from year one. The benefits for successfully integrated students are well documented. They have a strong sense of belonging and identity (Moss, Pittaway, & McCarthy 2006; Tinto, 1993; Zepke et al., 2006), are more engaged and involved with university life and their studies (Duff et al., 2007; Kift, 2004; Moss et al., 2006), have a stronger sense of commitment to the goals of education and to lifelong learning, persist to graduation (Wintre & Bowers, 2007) and have heightened intellectual and social development and thus earning potential (Tinto, 1993).

Kift (2004) argues that engagement with the institution and especially with learning is critical to transition and persistence (see also Duff et al., 2007; Kuh, 2002). The Australian Council of Educational Research [ACER] (2008) agree and notes that while student engagement is dependent on student participatory practices, it is also dependent on “institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement” (p. 30). They identify six areas for potential student engagement. These are academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environment, and work integrated learning (p. vii). Institutions of higher education recognise this and have implemented various strategies to promote student engagement in learning. These most often take the form of the institutional and faculty based support such as those mentioned above. It is less common for programs of study as a whole to be specifically designed around engagement/transition discourses although some will incorporate specific strategies for transition, such as having a common first year across the degree and imbedding essential academic skills in individual first year subjects (Donnison et al., 2009). It is even less common for individual subjects to be viewed as transitional first year strategies. Such subjects are most often introductory subjects specifically targeted at developing academic discourses and academic literacies (Devereux & Wilson, 2008; Guise, Goosney, Gordon, & Pretty, 2008; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, & Kjellgren, 2008). It is also uncommon for transition strategies to be explicated in terms of a particular learning approach, despite the fact that strategies such as applied learning, experiential learning, and service learning are all recognised as effective ways to engage students in their classroom learning and their future professional roles. In the following section we explore some of the literature that is concerned with Community Service Learning as a learning approach, with a particular emphasis on the use of this approach in teacher education.

Community Service Learning

Service Learning is a term used to describe learning that results from some form of community-based activity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Prentice & Garcia, 2000; Weglarz & Seybert, 2004). Community is central to Service Learning. Butcher et al., (2003) recognise this and prefer the term *Community Service Learning* (CSL) as this acknowledges the integral role that community plays in the learning process. They also make the distinction between CSL and community service or volunteer work by emphasising the significant learning that occurs as a consequence of the service to the community. The reciprocal nature of the relationship between the community service and the learning is effectively articulated by Prentice and Garcia (2000, p. 20), who note that ‘the service reinforces and strengthens the learning and the learning reinforces and strengthens the service’. However, for such learning to occur, reflection is critical. Indeed, Vickers, Harris, and McCarthy (2004) argue that without reflection, students will not make links between their experiences and curriculum content and their service involvement will become a simple “feel-good” exercise.

Community Service Learning is becoming increasingly integral to preservice teacher education (Ball & Geleta, 2009; Butcher et al., 2005; McKinnon, Walker, & Davis, 1999) and is recognised as having the potential to develop students' academic, cognitive, interpersonal, and human relationship skills (Closson & Mullins Nelson, 2009; Prentice & Garcia, 2000; Strage, 2004). Butcher et al. (2003) argue that CSL addresses student teachers' need to become engaged citizens who have developed notions of social justice, citizenship, and social responsibility. Likewise, Eyler and Giles (1999) argue that it has the capacity to develop informed, culturally sensitive and empathetic educators, who are aware of social justice issues and community and cultural diversity (see also Boyle Boise, 2005; Closson & Mullins Nelson, 2009). Community Service Learning also affords students opportunities to apply their classroom learning to real-life contexts, develop an appreciation of the 'interrelated aspects of all learning and life experiences' (Prentice & Garcia, 2000, p. 22) and of the relevance of classroom learning. Indeed, Weglarz and Seybert (2004) found that a major benefit of CSL was the opportunity for practical application of theory/course content, and Eyler and Giles (1999) noted how CSL can promote knowledge construction from experience and reflection and develop lifelong learners with a capacity for critical analysis.

Importantly, CSL also provides opportunities for students to explore career options and can be instrumental in affirming students' career choices (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). This encourages engagement in course work as students become more committed to their chosen career. Furthermore, CSL that involves some form of educational element (such as coaching, tutoring, or some other supervisory role with children) can provide student teachers with an opportunity to "act out" being a teacher. Such experiences are valuable for socialising preservice teachers into the teaching profession as they potentially shift students' perception of themselves as a student to that of a teacher; a shift that is particularly complex, yet vital (Britzman, 2003). Indeed, Moss et al. (2006) note that students who are unable to develop their "identity" as students *and* as teachers, and bridge the gap between novice and expert, may become disoriented and disengaged from one or more of these roles. Thus CSL is one approach that has the potential not only to enhance student teachers' cognitive development, self concept, and cultural awareness, but also the capacity to help student teachers appreciate the links between their learning and their experiences and develop their identities as both students and future teaching professionals. In the following, we initially describe the study from which this paper is drawn and explain how data was collected and analysed. We follow this with a description of the findings as they relate to the effects of CSL on the personal and professional development of 100 preservice teachers.

Method

In 2008, a revised first year program of study for pre-service teachers was implemented at a regional campus of La Trobe University. It was informed by concerns for improving the provision of pre-service teacher education and for providing a foundational year that would enhance and support the first year of transition. It incorporates two new subjects designed to provide an holistic approach to the preparation of future teaching professionals: Concepts of Wellbeing in Semester 1 and Concepts of Communities in Semester 2. The Concepts of Wellbeing subject focuses on education about healthy lifestyle choices and provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to act on their own wellbeing. Complimenting this focus, the second semester subject, Concepts of Communities, prepares the students for their roles as professionals and leaders in their local communities. This subject incorporates teaching on aspects of community participation and engagement. It also has a sociocultural dimension that focuses on issues to do with social and cultural diversity such as class, race,

gender, and social justice (Donnison et al., 2009). A requirement of this subject is that the students complete some form of community service during the semester.

As the first year program was new in 2008, various research projects were undertaken to determine student and staff satisfaction with its design and implementation. A global ethics approval was obtained to use student data originating from individual subjects and from the program as a whole. 100 of the 205 students or 49% of the cohort agreed to have their online reflections used for research purposes. The data for this study is drawn from those 100 students, 21 of whom were male and 79 of whom were female. The ratio of male to female respondents is representative of teacher education students where commonly, females outnumber males 4 to 1.

During the semester students were required, as part of their subject assessment, to engage in some form of community service. The parameters for this assessment were quite flexible allowing students to choose from a wide variety of community service options. The minimum requirement for this activity was 20 hours. Students were required to electronically submit reflections on their community service experiences as part of an e-portfolio. The guidelines for the personal reflections were also broad, allowing students to reflect on any aspect of the experience that they thought appropriate.

The online reflections were analysed using a simple collation of data and grounded theory processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially, the different types of community service undertaken by the students were tallied. This was followed by an analysis of the data using a constant comparative method where sections of data were compared against each other and categorised into themes. This approach yielded a coding framework (see Table 1). Three major themes emerged: the student teachers' personal benefits and development; professional development; and community understandings and connections. These themes with their associated subthemes are outlined in the following section.

Theme	Subtheme
Personal benefits and personal development	Enjoyment and personal reward Motivation for future involvement
Professional development	Development of skills and attitudes for teaching Understanding of teacher's work Affirmation of career choice
Community understandings and Connections	Sociocultural understandings Understanding role of community groups and volunteers Developing community connections

Table 1: Coding Framework for Analysis of Student Reflections

Findings

The findings from the study are organised into two sections. The first section tallies the various types of community service undertaken by the students. Section two presents the students' reflections on their community service experiences under three themes of personal benefits and personal development, professional development, and community understandings and connections.

Types of Community Service

In the initial weeks of the unit, a volunteer from the local Volunteer Centre spoke to the students about the range of opportunities within the local community and how the service could assist the students in placement. While some students chose to access this service, many chose to source their own opportunities through their social networks and prior connections with local schools and places of employment. While most students chose to volunteer in one organisation or group, there were a small number of students who volunteered in a number of organisations or groups. This is reflected in Table 2 where 104 community service experiences are reported. These can be categorised into seven major groups: schools; government and state organisations or groups; church funded organisations, groups or events; community groups targeted at special needs; community groups or organisations; sports; and other (see Table 2).

Organisation and Type of Work		Number of Students	Total	%
Schools	Classroom assistance	18	26	25%
	Special event assistance	4		
	Administrative assistance	2		
	Other	2		
Government or State organisations	Red Cross	6	19	18%
	Aged care	5		
	YMCA	3		
	RSPCA	2		
	Other	3		
Church funded organisations or events	Opportunity shop assistance	8	17	16%
	Church events	3		
	Meals service	3		
	Support group leader	3		
Community Groups (special needs)	Righteous Pups	10	17	16%
	Able Learners program	2		
	Assistance to disabled/recent immigrants	5		
Community Groups	Local community carnival/show	6	9	9%
	Tourist Information Bureau	2		
	Senior Citizens bingo night	1		
Sports	Coaching	7	9	9%
	Other	2		
Other	Individual academic tuition	3	7	7%
	Domestic or gardening duties	2		
	Farmhand	2		

Table 2: Organisation and Type of Work

It is evident that the range of experiences was extensive and encompassed a wide variety of community related services, events, and/or organisations. The students' reactions to their volunteering experiences were consistently positive. Not one student reported any negative experience or reservations about their experience. The following section details the students' growth and development under the three identified themes.

Personal Benefits and Personal Development *Enjoyment and Personal Reward*

Many of the students chose to reflect on their community service experiences in terms of personal benefits. For some students, community service was highly enjoyable, fun, enlightening, and in some instances, the most valuable aspect of their entire course:

I loved doing my volunteering there and am still being involved in it for the rest of the year and most probably next year too.

Volunteering is an experience that I highly enjoyed. I am very grateful for the subject that required me to get involved within my own local community.

For some students their experiences were not only enjoyable but also emotionally fulfilling and rewarding. In the first comment, the student's use of the term "relationship" attests to the personally rewarding value of her experience:

I really enjoy the work and the company, in turn, I hope that the facility is just as pleased with this relationship as I am. I hope they are.

I will endeavour to continue my volunteering as I thoroughly enjoy it and find it very fulfilling.

Overall I believe my volunteering has only just begun. The opportunities are endless and the reward is priceless.

Motivation for Future Involvement

The students' motivation to continue their community service into the future was particularly gratifying in terms of the rationale and expected outcomes of the subject. The previous two comments suggest that the students were intrinsically motivated to continue their community involvement. It is also apparent in the following where the students acknowledge the personal benefits gained from the experience and the likelihood of further gains:

After university has finished I plan to return to the school to help out further as I enjoyed the time I had there and I gained a lot out of it and hope to gain more.

All in all I believe that this volunteering experience has benefited me as a person. I have gained many new learning curves and will hopefully continue not only this type of volunteering but also other types of volunteering.

The following final reflection is an excellent example of the personal growth and resulting attitude and behaviour change of one student as a result of volunteering in a senior citizens' care facility:

I learnt so much at [the nursing home], but most of what I did learn was about myself. I found that I can be very selfish (I already knew that) and I am quite lazy. Working at [the nursing home] made these two traits much more obvious to me and so I have begun to work on them. I am trying to be more considerate of others and other's wellbeing . .

While it is critical that CSL benefited the students personally and thus were motivated to continue, it is also important that the community service experience contributed to their future professional selves.

Professional Benefits

In terms of their future professional roles the students thought that their experiences helped them develop skills and attitudes for teaching and a greater understanding of the work of teachers. The data also reveal that the volunteering experiences cemented their decision to undertake a career in teaching.

Development of Skills and Attitudes for Teaching

The following reflections show the insights that the students gained about teacher attitudes and skills for teaching. These skills include pedagogical skills, classroom management, interpersonal, and communication skills:

As Multimedia is my prior qualification I believe volunteering in this area was ideal, as I gained skills which will assist me in my future role as a teacher, such as how to explain visual concepts to children and how to deliver information via technology so the children can learn in a virtual world and become avid IT users.

The skills I am developing at [the nursing home] are very similar to the ones required for teaching. There must be no favouritism or spending more time with one resident than the other and you must ensure that you manage your group effectively and that they are always placed in a safe and happy living environment.

Furthermore, being at [the nursing home] enhanced my people skills, my communication skills and my leadership abilities as I was able to assist with the running of activities and I was constantly talking with the residents and staff.

Understanding of Teachers' Work

The students also believed that their experiences gave them insights into the work of teachers. The following comments explicate this. The second reflection, in particular, indicates an understanding of teachers as community leaders and agents of change:

This experience was amazing and most developmentally fundamental to my learning what is involved in being a full time teacher. This opportunity has taught me to hold the teachers that I worked with in a higher respect than previously given.

In the future there are high possibilities that I will teach in a farming district, or at least have students who come from a farming background, and will need to consider the extra work and strain the farms have on these families. As my role as a teacher I will need to consider these students' and their families' needs, and give them support. As a teacher I will also push for more forms of support from the community and school, such as afterschool programs, school based fundraising for the farming community, and community based

sports programs which bring the community together and can provide a break and some relief for families with financial hardship.

Affirmation of Career Choice

Finally, the reflections also reveal that the students' experiences reinforced their commitment to a career in teaching. While it was particularly apparent for those students who had volunteered in a school capacity, it was also the case for those students who had volunteered in a diverse range of settings:

Overall my experiences at Violet Street and St. Josephs Primary School were both an enlightening and empowering learning experience which will benefit me in my future career path. They have sustained my interest in becoming a teacher and improving the life of Australia's future generations.

The benefits to me have been numerous; I find working with children with special needs extremely gratifying and really celebrate the student's achievements, no matter how small. I have had insight into teaching in a special education environment which I now know is where I want to teach when I qualify in four years time.

The students also developed their connections with and appreciation of the broader community. These benefits were primarily in terms of their understanding of sociocultural concepts, the value of community groups and volunteers and reinforcing their sense of belonging to their local communities.

Community Understanding and Connections

The subject Concepts of Communities, not only incorporates a community service component, but also focuses on sociocultural understanding. As such students in the subject investigate issues to do with social justice, such as inclusivity, diversity, and difference. The following section details how the students were able to realise their classroom learning through their community service.

Sociocultural Understandings

Some students were better able to understand and apply complex concepts such as diversity, difference, and cultural inclusion; concepts discussed at length within the subject Concepts of Communities. The following reflections are indicative of this development:

I have come to realise how social and cultural capital influences how we perceive the world around us and this realisation has helped me appreciate more and accept difference as a positive element in society which can be built on both in the classroom and wider community. I feel the learning I have experienced through my volunteering role and Concepts of Community will help me to develop an inclusive classroom which celebrates diversity.

Volunteering is an experience that I highly enjoyed, I am very grateful for the subject that required me to get involved within my

own local community. It opened my eyes to the different struggles that people face and how I am able to do such simple things to help them. My experience of volunteering has allowed to me to become involved within my community and there is no way that I would trade my experience for anything in the world!

Understanding the Role of Community Groups and Volunteers

For many students their community service experiences provided the stimulus for a greater understanding of the valuable role that community groups and volunteers play in the life and wellbeing of a community and a society:

I have gained a better understanding of the wider community through my volunteering and believe that volunteering is definitely a key concept that helps keep the gears of society moving, without volunteers the working class of society would have trouble functioning effectively

The experience reinforced my thoughts on the important role volunteers play in the community. The time volunteers give to the community enable organisations and services, such as this one to function. I have learnt much from fellow volunteers; a wide variety of people, mainly from the older generation, have a wealth of personal and professional experience to share and are ready, willing and able to give of their time and support.

Developing Community Connections

Finally, for some students, their experiences have given them a sense of belonging to their local communities and a desire to continue to foster those connections:

I really enjoy assisting and developing great friendships with the residents. Everyone is so friendly and welcoming, I feel as if this role is suited for me. I also feel as if my ties with Swan Hill as a community have been once again strengthened; it is difficult to define where you belong when you yoyo between two towns constantly, and so my volunteering has really developed my personal sense of belonging to my local community.

This volunteering experience got me actively involved in my local community as well as also allowing me to be a part of the school community. I chose to be involved in both of these school communities as a part of my volunteering commitment because it helped me create a sense of belonging to a community group where I live.

Now that I have completed this volunteering I would love to try and get more involved within the local community and the future communities that I will reside in the future. It is a great way to become a part of the community and join people who do it for the one purpose of helping others.

The previous section has highlighted the range of experiences undertaken by the students and also the manifest benefits. These ranged from developing personal and professional skills, developing a greater awareness and insight into the role of teachers, the immediate community, their place in that community and their academic studies. In what follows, we discuss these findings by explicating the link between CSL and the student teachers' realisation of their professional selves. We also argue for a reconceptualisation of CSL as a transition tool for first year teacher education students.

Discussion

During their teacher training, preservice teachers transition through various stages in their professional development (Britzman 2003). This study was conducted at a time when the students had just begun actively constructing themselves as future teaching professionals and in the process negotiating an appropriate teacher discourse. Britzman (2003) argues that in constructing themselves as teachers, those in preservice education partially draw on their previous twelve years experience and observations as a classroom student. Arguably, they may also draw upon their practicum experiences and to a more limited extent their tertiary studies. This study shows that CSL can also be a very positive start to enabling students to realise their future professional selves and identities.

Moss et al. (2006) argue that it is critical for student teachers to have opportunities to develop, not only their identities as students, but also as teachers. Failure to do so can result in disorientation and disengagement. The data reveal that the students' interactions assisting community members, organisations, and groups was overwhelmingly a positive experience in that their community service was enjoyable and fulfilling. However, more importantly, their community service provided a context whereby they could begin to conceptualise themselves as future teaching professionals. While this was particularly evident for those who volunteered in education settings, it was also apparent for those whose community service was directed elsewhere. Their conceptualisations highlighted a greater understanding of the discourse of teaching, of teacher and teacher as community member and leader. For some, this meant having a better understanding of the work of teachers, for others the skills, attitudes and behaviours required for teaching, and for some others, a realisation of the integral role that teachers play in the community. For a few, their conceptualisation extended to a neophyte understanding of teacher as change agent.

Teacher change agency begins with an understanding of and passion for social justice. Sachs (2003) refers to it as valuing inclusivity, being socially critical, ethical and responsible. Howard and Butcher (2007) argue that CSL is an appropriate pedagogical context for preservice teachers to develop cultural awareness and empathy and to acquire an orientation for, and have an opportunity to enact social justice principles. Butcher et al. (2005, p. 6) refer to this as acquiring a 'pedagogy of liberation'. The findings of this study appear to support these authors' claims. For some students volunteering their time to assist welfare recipients, senior citizens and/or children in need provided the context to experience 'eureka' moments when classroom learning on social justice principles and active citizenship suddenly became real and meaningful. This was also especially gratifying for those teaching into the subject to witness this transformation in the students.

That CSL can enable a 'pedagogy of liberation' (Butcher et al., 2005, p. 6) is especially critical given the arguments of Donnison (2007) who noted that preservice teachers possess conflicting conceptions about themselves as teaching professionals and as social activists, 'while they profess to be educational and social change agents they also profess discourses of educational conservatism and social disengagement' (Donnison, 2007, p. 1).

Arguably, the community service undertaken by the students for this subject went some way towards addressing this concern by providing a context where teacher appropriate social justice values could be experienced and expressed.

The data from this study also reveals that CSL can and does play a critical role in first year transition. This function of CSL is rarely recognised or reported in the literature on CSL or the first year in higher education.

Community Service Learning and First Year Transition

Student engagement is common to both transition and CSL bodies of literature. The transition literature emphasizes the importance of student engagement in learning and in the life of the university. ACER (2008, p. 3) defines student engagement as ‘students’ involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning’ and, as previously noted, has identified six areas of student engagement. Of particular importance to this study is the emphasis that ACER (2008) places on work integrated learning where student engagement is not only measured in terms of students’ involvement in their learning, but also in terms of how they make use of educational opportunities beyond the classroom (ACER, 2008; see also Harper & Quaye, 2009).

The CSL literature also emphasizes engagement. This literature suggests that as a pedagogical tool, CSL improves academic and psychosocial development, provides opportunities for students to make connections between classroom theory and practice and importantly provides a focus and purpose for the students’ studies. It also offers opportunities for student teachers to develop their identities as students and as future teachers providing a reason for continuation to graduation.

The students’ reflections highlighted that their community service experiences were successful in engaging them in their studies and their communities. They were able to see the relevance of their classroom learning to their future identities as education professionals and community leaders and builders, they were able to make connections between the role of a teaching professional and the wider community and they developed a sense of purpose in completing their studies and exiting into the profession. Arguably, as an engagement and transition tool, CSL was successful for this cohort of students. Not only did it foster engagement in learning, provide motivation and purpose for that learning, and helped the students develop a sense of belonging, it also fostered engagement with and belonging to their future professional lives.

While there is some limited reference to the relationship between transition and the student’s future lives in the literature on first year transition and engagement, transition is mostly conceptualised in terms of students identifying and succeeding as tertiary students as opposed to future responsible citizens, community members, and activist professionals. Undoubtedly, it is important for transition that students successfully adopt student and university discourses; however, it is also critical that they are able to project themselves into their future citizenship roles. Given the findings of this study, we argue that CSL provides the means whereby students can successfully achieve both and that CSL as a transitioning strategy into teacher education and into the profession is best positioned in first year and first semester of their studies. While this is specifically appropriate for transitioning preservice teachers given their future role as potential community builders, it is also applicable to all other fields of study where applied learning is integral to the discipline.

Limitations of the Study

The initial design of Concepts of Communities incorporated CSL as a learning and assessment focus. As such, it could be argued that the overwhelming positive nature of the data is influenced by assessment requirements. However, it should be noted that the students were at liberty to discuss any aspect of their experience and in any manner. Furthermore, the literature on CSL also indicates that students' experiences of community service, exclusive of assessment, are also predominantly positive. Although our data supports this literature, we submit that further research into CSL outcomes is warranted especially when CSL is conceptualised as a learning strategy per se, rather than as an assessment tool.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study support the CSL literature in that the students experienced academic, personal, and professional growth. They were able to realise and enact their future professional roles as well as develop a stronger understanding of active citizenship and social responsibility (Butcher et al., 2003; Closson & Mullins Nelson, 2009; Prentice & Garcia, 2000).

We did not originally conceptualise Community Service Learning as a transition strategy for engagement into the discourses of teacher education or indeed into the teaching profession. However, the findings of this study alert us to the possibility that CSL could be reconceptualised as a transition strategy in both regards. As such we suggest that it is appropriate to rethink first year transition into teacher education and indeed, higher education. Our serendipitous findings suggest that current teaching and learning practices might also be beneficial to student's transition into higher education and future careers. We recommend that those teaching into first year programs of study re-examine their teaching and learning practices and pedagogies through a transition and engagement lens with a view to examining and reconceptualising their practices and product as transition strategies.

Our findings also lead us to recommend that the purposes of first year transition be reassessed. First year transition has historically been quite narrowly focused on students' immediate academic and institutional needs and those futures discourses pertaining to careers and active citizenship have been largely ignored. We suggest that the conversations around first year transition broaden and deepen to encompass discourses of the future such as lifelong, lifewide, and lifedeeep learning, and active and socially just citizenship.

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