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# Service-learning: Promoting the development of the graduate professional standards in pre-service secondary teachers

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Service-learning has not been a common feature of tertiary courses and this is no less the case in initial teacher education programs. Where service-learning has been included the motivation has been to broaden the experience of students with respect to the development of their personal and professional skills. The *National Professional Standards for Teachers*, introduced in Australia in 2012, defines the range of competencies that pre-service teachers must demonstrate by graduation. This research investigated two aspects of a service-learning program within a secondary teacher education course. The first was the extent to which a service-learning program could promote the development of the graduate professional standards in pre-service teachers. The second was the manner in which the personal and professional skills of pre-service teachers can be enhanced through a service-learning experience. The results suggested that service-learning can impact pre-service teacher development towards the graduate standards. The results also indicated that for the vast majority of pre-service teachers, their personal and professional skills were enhanced through participation in a service-learning program.

## Introduction

The origins of service-learning grew out of the concerns and activism of the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty provided the impetus for community involvement in a range of outreach programs. By the 1980s, service-learning had emerged on the educational setting in the United States as a viable means of bridging the gap between academic achievement and the merit of service and volunteerism (Los Angeles County Office of Education, n.d.). Service-learning within the Australian context is more a twenty-first century phenomenon (Caspersz, Oлару & Smith, 2012) where initially universities and then secondary and primary schools have used service-learning as a means of actively engaging students in a meaningful way in the community. This article explores the experiences and perceptions of pre-service secondary teachers who completed a social justice service-learning unit as part of their teacher qualification.

The theoretical perspective for this study entailed an interpretive epistemology incorporating a symbolic interactionist lens. The goal of interpretive social science is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it. Interpretive inquiry strives to discover what is meaningful or relevant to people being studied and attempts to gain a feel for their social reality (Newman, 2006). Essential to the notion of symbolic interactionism, a specific theoretical perspective within interpretive social science, is the positioning of oneself in the setting of those being studied, of considering situations from the viewpoint of “the actor”. Methodologically, symbolic interactionism directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with this perspective, the current study allowed the researchers initially to explore the service-learning experiences of the pre-service secondary teachers. Subsequently, the researchers examined the pre-service teachers’ opinions concerning ways their service-learning experience impacted on their personal and professional development, with special reference to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) graduate professional standards.

## **Service-learning**

Definitions of service-learning vary somewhat among those who embrace it. However, at its core, service-learning is a learning experience that combines service in the community with structured preparation and reflection opportunities. Service is linked to academic coursework and addresses concerns identified and expressed by the community (University of Washington, 2015). Most service falls into the categories of welfare, empowerment and advocacy and can include community involvement in such areas as AIDS education, the elderly, the environment, animal protection, poverty, special needs and disabilities, immigrants, literacy and social change (Kaye, 2010). As a teaching pedagogy, service-learning is used in primary and secondary schools, and in universities, to enhance traditional modes of teaching.

## **Service-learning and pre-service teacher education**

Service-learning programs have been used within teacher education since the 1990s as a means of developing skills and providing real-life experiences for pre-service teachers (Anderson, 1998; Bates, 2009). Examples include the use of service-learning programs in the development of active citizenship (James & Iverson, 2009), values education (Carrington, Mercer & Kimber, 2010), social awareness (Lavery, 2007), diversity (Glazier, Charpentier & Boone, 2011), multicultural education (Boyle-Baise, 2006), critical inquiry and reflection (Anderson, 2000) as well as social justice and special needs education (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Such service-learning programs within teacher education usually aim to provide pre-service teachers with hands-on experiences in areas that are potentially outside their comfort zone (Colby, Bercau, Clark & Galiardi, 2009).

As a teaching pedagogy, service learning has the potential to challenge pre-service teacher assumptions concerning traditional approaches to schooling, to serve as a method for education reform and to involve pre-service teachers in projects centred on the needs of young people (Root, 1994; Boyle-Baise, 2006; Lavery, Cain & Hampton, 2014). Service-learning experiences can help pre-service teachers prioritise and understand the intricacies of student learning as opposed to a perception of teaching as “a simple and mechanistic process that entails little more than a one-way transfer of information from teacher to student” (Lawrence & Butler, 2010, p. 156). Service-learning can develop pre-service teachers professionally, personally and academically where they develop skills and attributes for teaching as well as a commitment to teaching as a career (Donninson & Itter, 2010). Undertaking a service-learning program can provide valuable learning experiences upon which pre-service teachers can draw during the school experience components of their course (Coffey & Lavery, 2015). Moreover, many pre-service teachers find service-learning meaningful and worthwhile (Glazier, Charpentier & Boone, 2011), where their experiences help to put a human face on things learnt in class (Boyle-Baise, 2006).

## **Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Graduate Professional Standards**

In Australia, graduate teachers complete a qualification which meets the requirements of a nationally accredited program of initial teacher education. Hence accredited teacher education programs meet specified program standards set by AITSL for the various entry pathways into teaching, i.e. Bachelor degree, Master of Teaching and Graduate Diploma of Education. The award of this qualification means that graduate teachers have met the seven Graduate Standards as specified by AITSL. The Graduate Standards define the range of competencies that graduate teachers must meet in order to gain registration to teach. Ingvarson and Kleinhenz (2006, p.4) point out that “the development of standards is a way of setting boundaries and identifying the unique and essential components of teachers’ work.” In Western Australia the Professional Standards for Teachers were developed by the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA). Approval of the standards by the Minister for Education occurred in 2012 under section 20 of the *Teacher Registration Act 2012* (Act).

The standards encompass three domains: professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement. Within these domains seven standards are described. These standards are:

1. Know students and how they learn
2. Know the content and how to teach it
3. Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning
4. Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments
5. Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning;
6. Engage in professional learning
7. Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community (AITSL, 2014).

The graduate standards therefore outline the abilities, knowledge and skills required by graduate teachers in order to gain teacher registration.

## **Purpose and research question**

The purpose for the study was to ascertain the potential of a service-learning program to contribute to the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers with particular reference to the AITSL graduate standards. Specifically, this research focused on the experiences and perceptions of pre-service secondary teachers who completed a 12-hour service-learning commitment as part of a service-learning and social justice unit. In the light of the purpose of the research there was one primary research question: In what ways does a service-learning experience promote the development of the AITSL graduate standards in pre-service teachers?

## **Context**

The University offers a social justice service-learning unit entitled *Education, Service and Community Engagement* for pre-service secondary teachers. The unit is run in semester one. It is compulsory for pre-service teachers undertaking the Bachelor of Education degree and occurs in the second year of their degree. It is an elective for pre-service teachers studying the Graduate Diploma of Education or Master of Teaching courses and forms part of the first year of these courses. Pre-service teachers studying the Bachelor of Education or Master of Teaching undertake their first teaching placement immediately following the completion of this unit. Pre-service teachers studying the Graduate Diploma of Education course undertake their first teaching practicum at the beginning of second semester.

There are two elements to the unit: workshops and community placement. The workshops provide a theoretical understanding of social justice. Topics include poverty, third world debt, ecology, Indigenous Australians, and refugees. Community placement involves pre-service teachers undertaking 12 hours of service-learning. Placements accessed by pre-service teachers include learning support centres (Primary and Secondary), aged care, working with the homeless, Blind Association, drug rehabilitation, refugees, prison inmates, pregnancy support (for teenage mothers), horse riding for the disabled, Oxfam community aid, St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army, Red Cross, soup vans, and hospitals.

Time is allocated at the beginning of the unit to prepare pre-service teachers for their twelve hours of service. During this time the notion of service-learning is explored and possible placements discussed. Reflection is undertaken in the form of group discussion, formal classroom presentations and journal writing. Examples of past reflections are also provided for the pre-service teachers to demonstrate the depth of reflection expected. There are three designated sessions in the program to monitor the progress of the pre-service teachers where they share experiences, successes and challenges. At the final workshop pre-service teachers deliver an oral presentation on their service-learning experiences and submit a detailed reflective journal. The unit is founded on the notion of integrating personal values, beliefs and service by providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to consider and contribute to the common good. The unit aims to develop a culture of serving others, to prepare young

people for service leadership, and to promote values by attending to specific needs of the community, especially those of the underprivileged (Lavery, 2007).

## Method

There were two components to the data collection. The first component was a 25-30 minute anonymous questionnaire that pre-service teachers completed at the conclusion of the service-learning unit (See Appendix). Seventy-one pre-service secondary teachers completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in April 2015 to the Bachelor of Education and Master of Teaching pre-service teachers and in May 2015 to the Graduate Diploma of Education pre-service teachers. The questionnaire afforded the opportunity for pre-service teachers to respond to a set of structured questions (both qualitative and quantitative) that explored their experiences when undertaking the service-learning program. The qualitative questions invited pre-service teachers to comment on memorable aspects and challenges relating to the service-learning experience. Further, pre-service teachers were asked what they would have liked to have known prior to the service-learning experience as well as what aspects of the service-learning experience had prepared them for their school placement. The two quantitative questions provided pre-service teachers with a closed list of choices as to what ways the service-learning experience had impacted on their personal and professional development. These questions invited participants to choose whichever options they felt applied to their situation. No specific reference to the AITSL professional standards was made in the questionnaire. This was a deliberate choice by the researchers to avoid prompting the participants into false or contrived responses.

The second component involved a review of pre-service teachers' reflective journals completed as part of the requirement for the unit. Journals were submitted as hardcopy. Extracts from 37 journals were copied (with permission) and the data de-identified other than for calendar year and the gender of the writer. In these journals, pre-service teachers were encouraged to reflect on both positive and negative elements of their service experience, what they were discovering about society, and what they were learning about themselves. Pre-service teachers were asked to consider how they had been influenced, challenged, and stimulated by their experiences.

Content analysis was the process used to explore the secondary pre-service teachers' responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and to the reflective journals. Berg (2007) describes content analysis as "a careful, detailed systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings" (p. 303). Specifically, the researchers used an interpretative approach to analyse the data where social action and human activity can be treated as text (Berg). Both sets of qualitative data were analysed separately using the format described by Miles and Huberman (1994): data collection, data reduction, and data display and conclusion drawing/verification. That is, the researchers selected segments of language that reflected particular AITSL professional standards. These segments were displayed under appropriate headings. The quantitative data from the multiple response questions in the questionnaire were displayed in two frequency column graphs.

## Results of the research

The results of the research are reported in three sections. Sections One and Two examine the ways undertaking a service-learning program had addressed the AITSL professional standards in pre-service teachers. Specifically, Section One presents qualitative data from the pre-service teachers' responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire (Questions 3-7). Section Two presents qualitative data from the pre-service teachers' journal writings. Finally, Section Three details quantitative data which highlights those ways pre-service teachers believed undertaking a service-learning program impacted on them personally and professionally.

## Section One (AITSL professional standards in pre-service teachers: Questionnaire)

The pre-service teachers were not asked specifically in the questionnaire to state how, or if, they believed that their service-learning experience had impacted their development with respect to the AITSL Graduate Standards. Instead they were asked to comment on aspects of their service-learning placement that had assisted in their preparation for their first school practicum. From their comments it was then possible to extrapolate whether their service-learning had impacted their development in terms of the graduate standards. Some comments contained elements of several graduate standards. Irrespective of where the pre-service teachers had undertaken their service-learning their responses clearly indicated that this experience had indeed assisted in their preparation as a teacher.

Standard One (Know students and how they learn) was evident in many of the respondents' comments. In particular, pre-service teachers made mention of the manner in which their service-learning experience had increased their awareness of the diversity of students within a typical classroom and how this diversity might be accommodated by a teacher. Indeed one pre-service teacher commented that service-learning had "reinforced the AITSL standard of knowing students and how they learn – being able to cater for diversity." Another pre-service teacher, who completed the service-learning experience in a refugee centre, commented:

Teaching students with a range of different English levels and from a range of different cultures. I got a lot of excellent information on teaching materials, methods and organisational techniques.

Pre-service teachers, whose service-learning had been undertaken in an environment where they worked with people with special needs, also expressed the value of this experience in terms of their preparation for a school experience. They commented on the degree to which they had learned how to 'work with', 'modify' and 'communicate' with students with special needs as well as with Educational Assistants. One pre-service teacher stated that the experience had led to "learning so much more about autism and various techniques for communicating with people with autism."

Also related to Standard One, a number of pre-service teachers made mention of the manner in which their service-learning experience had deepened their understanding of, and confidence in, working with Indigenous students. A pre-service teacher who had completed her service-learning placement at a college for Indigenous students stated that she would "certainly understand the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students in my classrooms in future." Finally, another aspect of student diversity that some pre-service teachers encountered involved students who were disengaged from school. One pre-service teacher commented: "Engaging with students who don't want an education or are disinterested is one end of the spectrum that I now have exposure to."

The range of the service-learning placements enabled the pre-service teachers to develop an appreciation of the many different backgrounds from which students came. Graduate Standard One demands that teachers can have the capacity to plan their teaching and learning programs around the requirements of their students. Service-learning provided the opportunity for pre-service teachers to broaden their insight into the potential needs that they may need to address when teaching. Perhaps this fact is best summarised by the following statement by a pre-service teacher who had completed her service-learning at an organisation for disabled surfers. She stated that the experience had helped her to "recognise the diversity of people and yet acknowledge their common needs."

Standard Two (Know the content and how to teach it) was less evident in pre-service teachers' responses. As the title of this standard suggests, it is focused largely on classroom practice. Nevertheless several pre-service teachers made mention of the fact that their service-learning experience had assisted their development in terms of Standard Two. Those pre-service teachers who had been in a school-based environment more frequently made comments in relation to classroom practice. For example, one pre-service teacher noted that the service-learning experience had helped her to

...teach better... understanding the basics of language conventions and writing. Students often forgot to sound out a word so this reminded me to do this.

Another student who had completed his service learning placement in an aged care facility made the following comment.

Knowing how creative you can be to teach something.... practising scaffolding techniques and working with people who are less predictable and having to modify how I communicate.

The above comment, in particular, exemplifies the benefit that pre-service teachers gained from having to develop relationships with different people and to hone their communication skills.

Communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal) are a key component of Standard Three (Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning). Figure 1 indicates that the pre-service teachers believed that their service-learning experience had improved their communication skills. One pre-service teacher commented that her service-learning placement had enhanced her capacity to “know how to talk to young students and develop a professional relationship.” Another pre-service teacher who worked at a community centre stated that “Emotional maturity has been the big change for me. I’m more accommodating and accepting of student diversity.” The promotion of such a mindset is critical in order for pre-service teachers to develop teaching and learning programs that exemplify an understanding of how their students learn best. As alluded to above, many of the pre-service teachers commented that they had developed an appreciation for the diverse range of students present in a typical classroom. Hence it is possible to assume that this aspect of their service-learning experience also impacted their development in terms of Standard Three.

A number of pre-service teachers made mention of the manner in which service-learning had impacted their understanding of the difficult life circumstances that others confronted on a daily basis. Such an understanding facilitated their development in terms of Standard Four (Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments). Developing an appreciation for student wellbeing and safety is a key component of this standard. One pre-service teacher, who undertook service-learning with an aged care and community services provider, noted that her service-learning placement had led to an “understanding that some children within the classroom may not be receiving adequate care and having basic needs such as food and sleep met, all of which hinder their ability to learn.” Another pre-service teacher who had completed his placement with a cancer support agency stated: “It is a reminder that all individuals have a story and that their performance and behaviour at school can be heavily impacted by this.” Such comments are indicative of the manner in which a service-learning experience had broadened the pre-service teachers’ capacity to take into account a student’s background in creating a positive learning environment. Figure 1 shows that ‘empathy’ was a skill that students indicated had been improved by their service-learning experience. Indeed one pre-service teacher stated that her ‘power of active listening and empathy’, developed through service-learning, had assisted in her preparation for her first school practicum. These skills are integral to the development of nurturing learning environments.

Standards Three and Four are in the Professional Practice domain, and from the above discussion, it is clear that a service-learning placement has the potential to develop pre-service teachers’ capacities to meet these standards. Standard Five (Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning) is also in the Professional Practice Domain but was not, as might be expected, apparent in any of the student responses. Standards Six (Engage in professional learning) and Standard Seven (Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/caregivers and the community) are in the domain of Professional Engagement. Neither of these standards was particularly evident in the responses given by the pre-service teachers. However it might be extrapolated that given the pre-service teachers reported that their professional skills (Figure 2) had been enhanced by their service-learning placement this type of experience had helped to develop their competencies in Standard Seven.



## **Section Two (AITSL professional standards in pre-service teachers: Reflective Journals)**

The trends apparent in the pre-service teachers' responses to the questionnaire were also mirrored in their journal writing. That is, there was evidence in the pre-service teachers' journals of observations and reflections linked with AITSL Professional Standards One through Four. Standard One (Know students and how they learn) was most evident in the pre-service teachers' journal remarks. Examples include: "I do not know how I would act in future towards students with low learning ability had I not seen the benefits of the slower learning pace and individual programs at ..."; "I was able to see how special needs theory was put into practice, and got ideas as to how I could incorporate this theory into my own teaching"; "I have learnt a huge amount about adapting teaching techniques to students and appreciating their diversity".

Standard Two requires teachers to know the content and how to teach it. Examples from the pre-service teachers' journals include: "I believe I serviced the College in an effective way, and in return I received knowledge and skills for teaching Indigenous students." This pre-service teacher commented further: "The experience ... has encouraged me to develop authentic and relevant literacy and numeracy lessons." A second pre-service teacher wrote: "I learned that just because they were low achievers didn't mean they could not comprehend difficult concepts, just that they perhaps have to be led through the process of reaching these difficult concepts." In addition, he noted: "To remember this fact would be a worthwhile exercise for when I work with low achieving kids in the future, or really anyone."

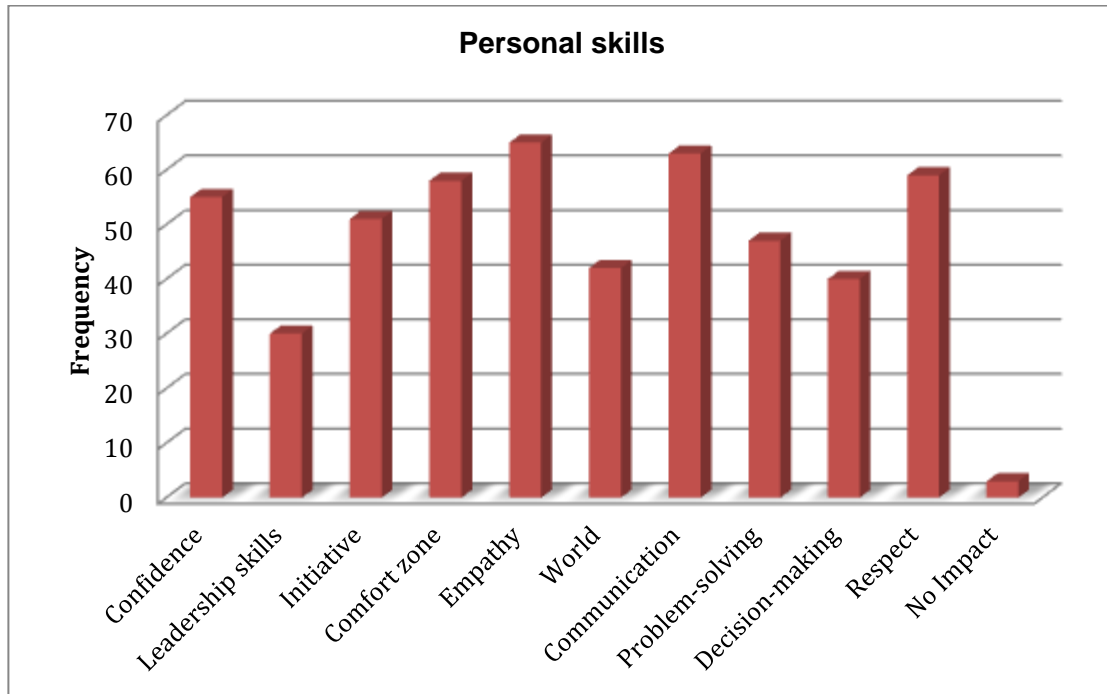
Standard Three demands of teachers that they plan for and implement effective teaching and learning. One pre-service teacher recorded in his journal "Chris' was a reminder to me not to forget to give time to the children and youth in my life and of the profound impact that a relatively simple thing can have on children's lives". He went on to observe, "as a teacher, building appropriate relationships with students is something that I would like to focus energy on and something that I believe is important to being a good teacher." A second pre-service teacher wrote: "One key learning that I have taken away from my time at the Learning Centre is the importance of building relationships with students, staff members and parents." He remarked, moreover, "I found it much easier to work with individual students at the Centre once I had started to know them as people." His final comments are telling: "If education is viewed as a community service, then I definitely felt as though I played a small part in making a difference to these adolescents' lives."

Finally, two examples are advanced as indicative of Standard Four (Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments). The first is by a pre-service teacher who undertook her service-learning at a school for girls at risk. She wrote in her journal that this school "works for these girls as it uses individual learning programs to help the students." She went on to note: "It is a safe contained environment, with staff members who legitimately care and build strong relationships with their students." Commenting on the high staff to student ratio, she concluded: "The students can form incredibly strong and focused relationships with the staff who have the students' best interests at heart – it is not only a school, but a haven." The second example comes from a pre-service teacher who also undertook her service-learning at this school. This pre-service teacher remarked: "My experience has strengthened the importance of education for everyone and the impact that teachers can make on students' lives in not only providing them with education but guiding them and offering advice and support wherever they can." She reflected further: "Overall, my experience ... has deepened my desire and enthusiasm to become a teacher and it has highlighted the significance that I can make for my future students."

## **Section Three (Personal and professional development: Questionnaire)**

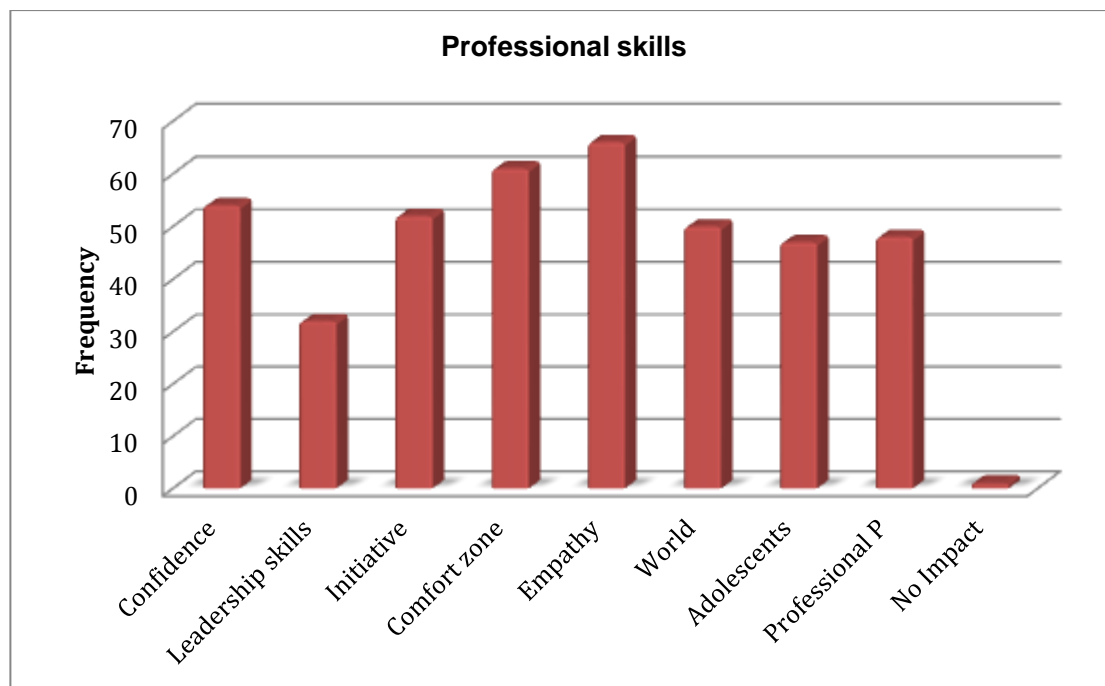
Figure 1 provides an overview of ways undertaking a service-learning program had impacted on pre-service teachers' personal development. Key areas identified were greater empathy and compassion (n=65), communication skills (n=63), respect for others (n=59), working outside of one's comfort zone (n=58) and enhanced confidence (n=55). Three pre-service teachers felt that their service-

learning experiences had not impacted on their personal development. Such findings are reflective of an earlier study undertaken by the authors of a similar pre-service teacher cohort (Coffey & Lavery, 2015). Moreover, research by Donnison and Itter (2010) and Miller and Gonzalez (2010) also indicated that pre-service teachers believed that service-learning experiences had influenced their personal skills.



**Figure 1: Personal skills developed through service-learning**

Figure 2 provides an overview of ways pre-service teachers believed undertaking a service-learning program had impacted on their professional development. Key areas identified were greater empathy (n=65), working outside of their comfort zone (n=61), enhanced confidence (n=54) and showing initiative (n=52). One pre-service teacher believed that the service-learning experience had had no influence on his professional development. Again, such results are indicative of earlier research by the authors (Coffey & Lavery, 2015) with a similar pre-service cohort. Further, researchers such as Daniels, Patterson and Dunston (2010) and Stewart, Allen and Bai (2011) have also highlighted the impact of service-learning on the professional development of pre-service teachers.



**Figure 2: Professional skills developed through service-learning**

## Conclusion and recommendations

In a similar vein to an earlier investigation conducted by the researchers (Coffey & Lavery, 2015), this study has again supported the finding that participation in a service-learning program by pre-service secondary teachers can positively impact the development of their personal and professional skills. Furthermore, in terms of preparation for a first practicum, participation in a service-learning context leads to the provision of experiences from which pre-service teachers can draw when in a real classroom context. At a time when initial teacher education programs are focused on ensuring that graduates meet the AITSL graduate standards, this research points to the manner in which skills developed in a non-school-based environment can be readily transferred into a school context by pre-service teachers. In this research the respondents were not asked to comment specifically on the manner in which their service-learning experience had assisted their development in terms of the AITSL graduate standards. Yet, their responses clearly indicated that, irrespective of the setting for their service-learning placement, the experience had facilitated their development most particularly in Standards One, Two, Three and Four. Furthermore, the nature of the responses to the quantitative questions support the notion that the professional skills fostered from service-learning could be extrapolated to Standard Seven.

Given the nature of these findings three recommendations can be drawn from this research. Firstly, the results from this research support the proposition that service-learning form a component within an initial teacher education program. Secondly, the requirement for pre-service teachers to meet a defined set of standards in order to graduate may prompt a tendency to limit the practical experiences within an initial teacher education course to ones based purely in a classroom setting. The results of this research support the recommendation that, in the Australian context, the rich and disparate experiences offered through a service-learning placement can equally enable students to develop the competencies required to meet the current AITSL Graduate standards. Thirdly, it is recommended that further research investigate the potential of service-learning programs in early childhood and primary teacher education courses to facilitate the development of competencies to meet the AITSL Graduate standards.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

### 1. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

### 2. Which pre-service teacher course are you undertaking?

- Bachelor of Education (secondary)
- Master of Teaching (secondary)
- Graduate Diploma of Education (secondary)

### 3. Where did you undertake your service-learning?

### 4. What were the most memorable aspects of this service-learning experience?

### 5. What were the challenges that you faced on your service-learning experience?

### 6. What would you like to have known prior to commencing your service-learning experience?

**7. What aspects of the service-learning experience do you believe have prepared you for your school placement?**

**8. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program impacted on your professional development? (Tick the applicable options)**

- Enhanced confidence
- Developing leadership skills
- Showing initiative
- Working outside of one's comfort zone
- Greater empathy and compassion
- Appreciation of the world outside the classroom
- Developing skills working with adolescents
- Professional practice
- No impact

**9. In what ways has undertaking a service-learning program impacted on your personal development? (Tick the applicable options)**

- Enhanced confidence
- Developing leadership skills
- Showing initiative
- Working outside of one's comfort zone
- Greater empathy and compassion
- Appreciation of the world outside the classroom
- Developing communication skills
- Developing problem-solving skills
- Developing decision-making skills
- Respect for others
- No impact

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