Positioning SLP Graduate Students to Meet the Needs of Vulnerable Children Virtually: Lessons from a Service Learning Project Implemented in the Fall of 2020

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of a service learning assignment that involved SLP graduate students tutoring K-12 students at risk for school failure.

Farrugia-Bernard (2018) found that new SLP graduates felt unprepared to make a meaningful impact in urban schools with diverse populations. Research has found that providing teachers with experience in these settings as part of their training has led to increased confidence levels working in underserved communities (Wronowski, 2018).

Course Content / Student Learning / Meaningful Service / Critical Reflection

Service learning is a promising pedagogical approach to facilitate this experience (Tinkler et al., 2014).
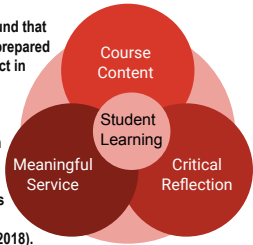
2. Tutoring Students At Risk for School Failure

Key Question:
How can classes in SLP graduate programs adapt quickly to provide graduate students with relevant experiences to prepare them to support K-12 children, especially those negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Assignment:
A graduate professor partnered with the non-profit organization Succeed2gether.

Succeed2gether has a stated mission of helping public school students at risk for school failure. They were transitioning all tutoring sessions into a virtual environment.
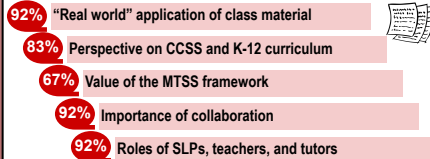
Twelve students in a school-age language disorders course each tutored one K-12 student for one hour a week via Zoom for 10 weeks.

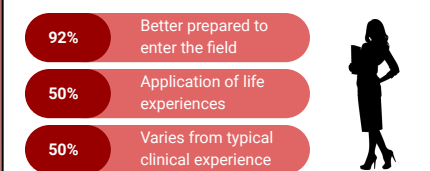Detailed analysis of student reflection papers is presented in this poster.

3. Direct Application of Course Material

- **92%** "Real world" application of class material
- **83%** Perspective on CCSS and K-12 curriculum
- **67%** Value of the MTSS framework
- **92%** Importance of collaboration
- **92%** Roles of SLPs, teachers, and tutors

- "Being a part of this volunteer experience allowed me to apply the material I read and discussed on discussion boards and during class to a real-life situation. While [this course] afforded me a wealth of knowledge...my volunteer experience with [community organization] was the bridge between that great information we read about and the application of those promising strategies we discussed."
- "Through this experience, I have learned the importance of collaboration of all members of a child's academic team to succeed in supporting vulnerable populations and students at risk for failure."

4. Helped Students Prepare for Careers

- **92%** Better prepared to enter the field
- **50%** Application of life experiences
- **50%** Varies from typical clinical experience

- "I feel better equipped to enter a school district someday both ready and willing to offer my services and support wherever possible."
- "Preparing for this tutoring opportunity was different than preparing for speech-therapy sessions because there was a lot less planning and paperwork (lesson plans, SOAP notes, progress reports, etc.) involved."
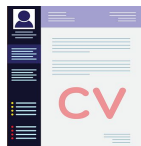
5. Commitment to Underserved Populations

83%	Strong bonds with students	"It was very encouraging to see J remember and repeat bits of my counseling during his frustrating moments."
83%	Value of community involvement	"I feel that I positively impacted my local community during an extremely challenging time."
67%	Supporting underserved populations	"Limitations set by his lower SES and bilingual/multicultural background have negatively impacted his learning opportunities."
50%	Challenges of virtual learning	"My student had lots of distractions at home...which sometimes had an impact on how she performed during our sessions."

6. Positive Student Perceptions

83%

Of students provided feedback on how they felt about the assignment, which was primarily positive.

"Collaborating with Succeed2gether was such a delightful way to serve our community of school-aged children who need extra support in meeting their academic demands."

7. Implications and Conclusions

This project appeared to be meaningful to students and stood out to them in a novel way from other experiences. The tutor role provided a new perspective and allowed students to directly apply and actively engage with course content.

This study provided preliminary evidence that service learning has potential to meaningfully engage graduate students even during a stressful and disconnected time. Many student reflection papers mentioned this assignment kept them motivated through an unprecedented semester.

These findings suggest that it is feasible for graduate-level instructors to use service learning assignments, even within an environment reliant on virtual interactions.

Graduate classes in speech-language pathology can simultaneously focus on meeting the needs of local communities as well as educating students.

8. References

Farrugia-Bernard, A. M. (2018). Unprepared: A qualitative exploration of the preparation practices of SLPs practicing in urban schools. *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences & Disorders, 2*(3), 1-17.

Tinkler, A., Tinkler, B., Gerstl-Pepin, C., & Mugisha, V. M. (2014). The promise of a community-based, participatory approach to service-learning in education. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 18*(2), 209-232.

Wronowski, M. L. (2018). Filling the void: A grounded theory approach to addressing teacher recruitment and retention in urban schools. *Education and Urban Society, 50*(6), 548-574.