

# Opinions of Pre-Service Teachers towards Community Service-Learning Experiences

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*This study examines the opinions of 41 teacher candidates taking a community service learning (CSL) course. The implementation of this course and its contributions to participants' personal, social and academic development were examined using qualitative methods. Data was collected using semi-structured interview questions, and an inductive coding technique and descriptive data analysis were employed. The findings suggest that the participating pre-service teachers believed that the CSL process met their expectations. Most of the teachers believed that the service-learning experience was beneficial and that they would be able to make use of the knowledge they gained during the CSL process in their social, academic and professional lives.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Service-Learning, Community Service Learning CSL, Pre-Service Teachers

## Introduction

In addition to their responsibility to educate teachers, schools of education are also expected to offer services to the entire country and to humanity in general, all while fulfilling their research and teacher-training functions (Karaca, 2008). While working to achieve those goals, schools of education should be implementing an educational approach that is sensitive to social needs, based on cooperation and volunteerism and supportive of critical and creative thinking (HEB, 2007).

When the Higher Education Board of Turkey (HEB) updated teacher-training programmes in 2006, it decided that a "Community Service Learning" (CSL) course should be added to the curriculum of schools of education in Turkey. The CSL course aims to encourage pre-service teachers to become aware of current community issues, prepare projects to solve these problems, and participate as an audience member, speaker or organiser in scientific events, such as panels, conferences and symposiums (HEB, 2007). The course is guided by an instructor who observes students' progress while the student takes a more active role (Yaşar, Gültekin & Kaya, 2008). The CSL course is composed of key activity stages: preparation, action, reflection/evaluation, and celebration/recognition (Kaye, 2010).

The concept of service learning has gone by several names and has been defined in many different ways (Wang & Jackson, 2005). The debate over what to call service learning is decades old. At present, there are those who favour "community service-learning" (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee, 2000; Smist, 2006).

The CSL course can be viewed as a model of experiential learning that combines voluntary community service with classroom learning (HEB, 2007); the most important contribution of service learning to democratic citizenship is related to "participation" (Erjem, 2004). Based on project-based learning activities, the objective of this CSL course is learning by serving the community. Within this CSL course, there is a wide range of activities for community service: general and vocational training, reading, art, sports, employment, globalisation, language, foreign language, assisting the disabled, free-time activities, industrialisation, housing, technology, health, information, immigration, urbanisation, transportation, climate protection, and energy sources (Coşgun, 2009).

The target group of service learning may belong to any socio-economic class; however, selecting disadvantaged groups (e.g. children with special needs, battered women, housewives, street children, prisoners, the illiterate, foreigners, unemployed youth) will contribute to fulfilling the activity's main objectives (Çuhadar, 2008).

## Previous research

Research studies on CSL show strong evidence that this approach offers great benefits for students, instructors and society. In 2000, Billig (2000) outlined four practical benefits of CSL activities: contribution to academic learning, increased social responsibility, personal development, and career planning.

Studies have established that when CSL activities are executed during training programmes and the students participating in these activities are assisted in understanding the meaning of their experiences, the students score higher on achievement tests (Furco, 2007).

Melchior and Bailis (2002) found that Learn and Serve involvement had strong impacts on school engagement and math scores. A review of research indicates that high-quality CSL, because of its utilisation of effective, experiential learning strategies, can enhance academic outcomes in such content areas as reading, writing, mathematics, and science (Furco & Granicher, 2007).

The number of studies related to the effect of service learning on citizenship and social responsibility has increased (Smist, 2006; Lin & Moore, 2009; Kaye, 2010). In addition, researchers underline that by taking on more responsibilities, these students become more willing to actively participate in social issues and they form the belief that they can create greater social awareness (O'Bannon, 1999; Melchior & Bailis, 2002).

Furthermore, research shows that students who participated in CSL activities not only gained a greater sense of responsibility, but also viewed responsibility as an essential value (Melchior, 1999). It has been observed that the students who considered themselves socially sufficient were more empathetic than students who did not participate in CSL (Morgan & Streb, 1999).

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, it has been recognised that CSL also positively contributes to students' career plans and future expectations (Astin *et al.*, 2000; Billig, 2000). Research indicates that, compared to their non-participating peers, students who actively take part in service learning obtain more information relevant to their chosen careers and develop better communication skills (Billig *et al.*, 1999; Melchior, 1999).

These findings indicate that CSL improves students' academic, social and personal skills; increases their consciousness of citizenship responsibilities; enables them to engage in team work; develops their problem-solving skills, and offers significant benefits for the school and community (Billig, 2000; Butin, 2006; Bonnette, 2006; Furco & Granicher, 2007; Bender, 2009; Melaville, Berg & Blank, 2009; Furco & Root, 2010).

Although there have been numerous studies regarding the CSL process in recent decades (Speck & Hoppe, 2004), the number of studies carried out in Turkey is rather low. The author of this paper found only two research studies (i.e. Erjem 2004 and Çuhadar, 2008) regarding service learning in Turkey. If Turkey intends to design a sound CSL programme, other successful programmes must be examined. South Africa is one example of a country that has made advancements in CSL applications. Although CSL is still in the initial stages, the first decade of the service learning movement in South Africa (1997-2007) has been examined (Bender, 2009). CSL as a strategy has moved into the forefront of higher education in South Africa (Lin & Moore, 2009). CSL is tasked with transforming higher education and generating opportunities for integrating theory and practice or work-based learning and academic learning to bring higher education into contact with knowledge created in other sites (Osman & Castle, 2004). Examining the CSL applications of countries such as South Africa may be useful for Turkey, which has not yet developed a model for CSL.

The main purpose of this study is to understand the problems encountered in the implementation process of a CSL course and to offer solutions, taking into consideration the opinions of the pre-service teachers taking the CSL course about the learning process related to the topic. With this general objective, the current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the opinions of pre-service teachers regarding the implementation process of the CSL course in Turkey?
2. What are the opinions of pre-service teachers in Turkey regarding the contributions of the CSL course to their social, psychological and academic development?

## Method

The present research was patterned as phenomenology, a qualitative research approach that focuses on phenomena of which we are aware, though we lack in-depth understanding (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Research data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Collected data were analysed using an inductive coding technique and a descriptive analysis method.

## Participants

The participants in the present study comprised 41 pre-service teachers who took the CSL course during the 2009 spring term at Ataturk University Faculty of Education, Pre-School Teaching Department. Participants spent a total of 84 hours in community-service projects, a six-hour day each week for 14 weeks. The demographic information for the 41 pre-service teachers was collected: 29 females and 12 males between the ages of 19 and 23, with an average age of 21, participated in the study.

The CSL research was conducted in an Elementary School for the Blind, an Elementary School for the Deaf and an Elementary School for the Disabled in the city of Erzurum, Turkey. The CSL activities were conducted mainly in private schools for children with special needs as these schools can provide valuable experiences for pre-service teachers during the CSL process.

Preschool education is mandatory in Turkey for children between the ages of 3 and 6 who have been diagnosed with special needs (Enactment-23011, 1997). Therefore, pre-service teachers are likely to encounter children with special needs during their careers. Within this context, the CSL course may help preschool teachers gain the necessary experience to develop their knowledge and skills concerning special education.

During the CSL process, many of the pre-service teachers provided a variety of activities: planning the process; tree planting; costume procurement; organising drama activities; food-beverage service; preparing a musical concert; organising a travel-observation programme, and making preparatory activities for a modelling lesson. In the same process, the responsibilities least taken included participating in seminars for parents and school, and preparing animations and puppet shows. In addition, during the CSL process pre-service teachers also had other responsibilities: supervising; organising place procurement; setting up a contest, and organising spirit- and motivation-increasing activities.

CSL course evaluation meetings were held weekly in the education department. During these meetings, the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to debate and share their experiences and the knowledge gained during the individual or group CSL course activities. Moreover, pre-service teachers filled out CSL evaluation forms weekly and kept individual journals. In addition, pre-service teachers prepared portfolios (photographs and videos), including activities from the semester following the CSL course, and gave them to the course coordinator.

The opinions and consent of the pre-service teachers were gathered for the study after informing them at every step of the research process. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study whenever they wanted; however, none of them dropped out of the study.

## Data gathering

Semi-structured interview questions were employed to collect data. A semi-structured interview is a method of research used in the social sciences (Russell, 2000). In the process of creating interview questions and probes, questions were first drafted by the researcher and, prior to this study, interview questions were discussed with other faculty members from the education department. Interview question analyses were performed for each question, and confusing or vague questions were rewritten before the test was used in the study. Prior to interviewing the participants, practice interviews were also conducted with three pre-service teachers; responses were analysed, and the interview questions were finalised. At the end of the pilot study, the required changes were made and the data-gathering tool was prepared for use. The data-gathering tool consisted of four questions designed to meet the objectives of the study.

The interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes. During the data-gathering process participants were asked the following four questions:

1. a) During the CSL process, in which situations did you feel you had failed?  
b) During the CSL process, in which situations did you feel successful?
2. What kind of effects do you think the CSL process has had on your knowledge, skills and values?
3. Do you think the activities of the projects you implemented during the CSL process are beneficial?
4. How do you think you can make use of the experiences gained during the CSL process?

## Data analysis

Inductive coding techniques and descriptive data analysis were employed during the qualitative data analysis. Inductive coding is a technique that is used to uncover the concepts underlying data and the relations between these concepts (Creswell, 2002). Descriptive analysis is a method whereby obtained data is summarised and interpreted with respect to pre-set themes, where direct references are frequently made to reflect the opinions of interviewees, and the results obtained are analysed within the framework of cause-effect relations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006).

Initially, semi-structured interview data were transcribed and recorded on interview forms. The researcher read all the data and identified question-based themes together. Observed themes were transformed into an “Interview Coding Key”. Later, the researcher individually read data forms within the research context and coded the themes observed in the answers using the Interview Coding Key. After completing coding keys for each interviewee, the consistency of the coding key was checked. Reliability was checked using the Miles and Huberman method: “Reliability=number of agreements/total number of agreements+disagreements” (Miles & Huberman, 1994:64). The values were 89.8% for the first question, 92.3% for the second, 86.5% for the third, 94.6% for the fourth, 90.7% for the fifth, and the mean 90.8%. Thus, the data can be considered sufficiently reliable.

## Findings

In this section, the 41 pre-service teachers’ opinions regarding the CSL course process were analysed and the principal issues are summarised in tables.

### *Pre-service teachers’ opinions towards the CSL process*

As shown in Table 1, the pre-service teachers were of the opinion that they had failed at the following tasks: arranging transportation; time management, and providing financial support. In addition, the pre-service teachers noted that they had difficulties receiving institutional support; communicating with the disabled, and working in cooperation. During the CSL process, the pre-service teachers were of the opinion that they were successful at communicating with children; developing cooperative working skills, and receiving teachers’ support.

**Table 1: Opinions of failed and successful situations during the CSL process**

<b>During the CSL process, in which situations did you feel you failed?</b>	
Arranging transportation	11
Time management	7
Providing financial support	6
Communication with children	4
Communication with teachers	3
Overcoming my prejudice against the disabled	3
Getting the disabled to perform hand skills	3
Preparing material and equipment for the activity	2
Getting the children's attention	2
Developing a project	2
Working with a group	1
<b>During the CSL process, in which situations did you feel successful?</b>	
Communication with children	7
Cooperative working	6
Receiving teachers' support	4
Preparing activity project	4
Organising modelling activity	4
Developing activities that are parallel to what I learnt at school	3
Fostering enthusiasm for the activities	3
Organising a concert	3
Getting the children's attention	2
Acquiring new information about the disabled	1
Self-motivating	1

*Pre-service teachers' opinions towards the contributions of the CSL process on their social, psychological and academic development*

Table 2 reveals the pre-service teachers' observations regarding the improvements and changes in their emotional features at the end of the CSL process. The pre-service teachers stated their opinions of their own skills, attitudes and values after the CSL process: *I can approach the disabled without any fear; I felt psychologically satisfied; I can communicate with people more comfortably (9); I learnt to be patient; my self-trust is elevated; I learnt that I should not be prejudiced.* These statements from pre-service teachers are important because they indicate that within the contexts of social responsibility and awareness. On the other hand, a common statement among the pre-service teachers was *I think this is not just a course; I am starting to think that I must serve the community in real life as well.* This finding fulfils one of the main objectives of CSL: becoming more conscious of humanitarian and environmental issues. These findings are critical because they suggest that emotional expectations, which are structural components of CSL, have been met.

**Table 2: Opinions of the effect of the CSL process on skills, attitudes and values**

I can approach the disabled without any fear	13
I felt psychologically satisfied	11
I can communicate with people more comfortably	9
I learnt to be more patient	8
I am starting to think that I must serve the community in real life as well	7
My self-trust is elevated	7
I learnt that I should not be prejudiced	6
I got a chance to develop empathetic thinking skills	6
I found peace	5
I remembered to be grateful for what I already have	3
I am more tolerant	3
I gained group working skills	3
I learnt to be patient with others	3
I realised I should take care of people's problems	3
I realised I have responsibilities	3
I realised I should never lose hope	3
Project-developing skills	3
I realised I should not be a mere observer of what is happening	2
My way of thinking about the disabled has changed	2
My belief in the possibility of working in a school for the disabled has increased	2
My own attitude towards myself is improving	2
I now feel that I could become a disabled person at any time	2
I regained my ambition	1
Now I do not say "I cannot"	1
I realised I should do something for the community	1
I started to read more about the disabled	1

As shown in Table 3, the pre-service teachers stated that the projects submitted at the end of the CSL process created positive outcomes for the students, parents and themselves. Some of the pre-service teachers answered the question, *Do you think the activities you implemented during the CSL process were actually beneficial?* with the response: *Yes, children not only gained social skills through activities, but they also had a lot of fun. So did we.* This statement can be taken as an example that the mutual-benefit expectation of CSL, which requires volunteer participation, has been met. Again, many pre-service teachers emphasised the practical benefits of the process in a similar way: *I believe we created at least a little awareness among parents.*

**Table 3: Opinions of the outcomes of the CSL process**

<b>Do you think the projects you developed have been beneficial? If yes, how?</b>	
Yes, children not only gained social skills through activities, but they also had a lot of fun. So did we.	12
I believe we created at least a little awareness among parents.	9
Because unless we ensure continuity, the things we achieved will not last long. This course on its own is not enough.	8
We received some great feedback during parent meetings.	7
I believe we refreshed the school; they have asked us to visit sometimes, not just for lectures.	4

I believe it has been useful in transferring the attention of parents of the disabled to the school.	3
We organised activities both for children and families; we learnt and had fun together.	2
I believe we made the children feel precious.	2
We helped the children improve their psycho-motor skills.	2
Compared to the first days, the children became more self-confident.	2
This course has been a unique opportunity for me.	2
We followed up with parents, called and informed them. They were more involved than in the past.	2
We contributed to the knowledge of families about the disabled.	1
We assisted the disabled children in feeling more valuable.	1

Table 4 presents the opinions of the pre-service teachers regarding their experiences during the CSL process. Pre-service teachers answered the question, *How do you think you can make use of the experiences gained during CSL process?* with these responses: *I can use the experiences I gained during the activities with disabled children in my own class; I will be able to do something for the disabled nearby; I will be more affectionate and empathetic towards the disabled. I gained experience on how to overcome legal procedures, which might be helpful for me in the future.* These answers may justify CSL's main expectation: to create social awareness and responsibility.

**Table 4: Opinions related to experiences in the CSL process**

<b>How do you think you can make use of the experiences gained during the CSL?</b>	
I can use the experiences I gained via activities with disabled children in my own class.	10
I will be able to do something for the disabled around and nearby.	8
I will be more affectionate and empathetic towards the disabled.	6
I am not scared that I may have disabled children in my class. Helping them will be a source of happiness.	5
Now I try to understand every disabled person I meet.	5
I will continue to work in schools for the disabled as a volunteer.	3
I no longer find disabled people odd.	3
I gained experience on how to overcome legal procedures, which might be helpful for me in the future.	3
The sign language I learnt will be quite useful for me in the future.	3
I will be volunteering in activities for the disabled.	2
I am planning a public training (for parents) activity on the disabled.	2
I will be able to help families of the disabled.	2
I am now starting to think of working in rehabilitation centres after graduation, which I had never considered.	2
CSL led me to receive further pedagogical training on the disabled.	1
I can work at a school for the disabled.	1

These findings show that the CSL course provided some benefits for the pre-service teachers. These acquisitions facilitated active participation and social responsibility, and led to psychological satisfaction. Furthermore, by contributing to academic development, the CSL process simultaneously created a positive value in future plans for pre-service teachers.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study intended to gain information about the CSL course process, which was applied for the first time in a school of education in Turkey. In this study, the opinions of pre-service teachers regarding the CSL process and the contributions of the experience were discussed.

The pre-service teachers stated that the CSL course enabled them to support the students in and outside the course processes and that they gained experience with the education of students with special needs. Based on the opinions of pre-service teachers regarding the CSL course, they gained awareness about children with special needs. They expressed their awareness with these words: *"I became aware of children with special needs"*. This result can be considered a successful gain in terms of CSL.

As explained earlier, it is essential for pre-service teachers to experience students with special needs. The pre-service teachers had the opportunity to take the theoretical knowledge of the development, care and learning of children with special needs they gained in the CSL course and put it into practice in the schools for children with special needs, thus gaining valuable experience that they could not gain elsewhere. No other courses provide this kind of opportunity. In this regard, the CSL course contributed to creating a connection between theory and practice.

The gains of pre-service teachers are not limited to academic development. The CSL process is beneficial in helping pre-service teachers to become aware of and develop their affective attributes (Morgan & Streb, 1999; O'Bannon, 1999). The pre-service teachers stated these opinions as follows: *I started to think of others; I became more affectionate; I realised their presence; I realised I should do something for them; I became more empathetic*. The pre-service teachers also organised music, dance, drama, painting and art activities to be carried out with the students with special needs, which parents, teachers and local managers attended. In addition, three of the pre-service teachers taking the CSL course in the school for the deaf stated that they learnt some sign language.

Meetings on the training of the disabled were organised and given by pre-service teachers to the public. Visual art projects made by disabled students were exhibited and sold, and the money was donated to schools for the disabled. The pre-service teachers expressed that this organisation helped them increase their self-confidence. Moreover, they stated that the activities related to the CSL course that they carried out during the semester met their psychological needs. The contributions that the CSL course made to participants' affective development can be considered significant.

The CSL experience allowed the pre-service teachers to notice the realities of the world outside the classroom (O'Bannon, 1999; Melchior, 1999). The pre-service teachers in the CSL process believed that external problems (weather conditions, transportation, financial support, time limits, etc.) were challenging and that they failed to overcome these obstacles. In addition, the pre-service teachers stated that the hardest situations in the practice process were establishing communication with disabled children; establishing communication with employed teachers at school; overcoming one's former prejudice against the disabled, and getting the blind students to perform hand skills. On the other hand, the pre-service teachers stated that they were successful at establishing communication and intimacy with children; working in cooperation; receiving the support of other teachers, and producing an activity project.

Pre-service teachers believed that they would be able to use the knowledge they gained during the CSL process in their social, academic or professional lives (Billig *et al.*, 1999; Melchior, 1999). The majority of the pre-service teachers described the skills, attitudes and values they gained in the CSL process: *Now I can approach the disabled without any fear; I felt psychologically satisfied; I can communicate with people more comfortably, and I learnt to be patient*. Almost all of the pre-service teachers (40) indicated that they would be able to use this new knowledge in various ways: *I can use the experiences I gained via activities with disabled children in my own class; I will be able to do something for the disabled nearby; I will be more affectionate and empathetic towards the disabled; I am not scared that I may have disabled children in my class*. These findings fulfil the objectives of creating social awareness and encouraging volunteering, which are among the main aims of a CSL course (Çuhadar, 2008).

The pre-service teachers did not carry out activities only for the students. They held informative meetings for the parents, and prepared and distributed brochures about children with special needs.



Moreover, they prepared books written in Braille and donated them to the school library. The pre-service teachers also contributed to the school landscapes by planting trees and flowers with the children to make the environment liveable. These types of activities, carried out within the scope of the CSL course, are related to social responsibility.

The pre-service teachers believed that the CSL course affected their career plans in addition to contributing to their academic, social and affective development. Some of the pre-service teachers stated that they could voluntarily take part in organisations for the disabled and that they could see themselves working in rehabilitation centres for children with special needs. These new alternatives in the career plans of pre-service teachers are positive contributions of the CSL course.

Research studies show that CSL increases social responsibilities, academic skills and collaboration among pre-service teachers, and helps students create positive opinions towards themselves and their friends (Osman & Castle, 2004; Wang & Jackson, 2005; Butin, 2006; Bonnette, 2006; Smist, 2006; Furco & Granicher, 2007; Bender, 2009; Melaville, Berg & Blank, 2009; Kaye, 2010; Kielsmeier, 2010; Furco & Root, 2010). Likewise, this research shows that the CSL course may help pre-service teachers gain individual, social, and academic skills. Furthermore, this research found that pre-service teachers believe that the CSL course affords them the opportunities to collaborate, and encourages them to collaborate in solving problems. Pre-service teachers also reported that they realised the importance of their social responsibilities towards their environment. All of these findings may suggest that this CSL course provides pre-service teachers with unique and valuable gains. The findings of this study are similar to other findings mentioned earlier.

The present results suggest that CSL has the potential to meet expectations in teacher education. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that (a) education programmes integrated with the CSL process be prepared; (b) legal guidelines, currently missing, be created for CSL courses; (c) financial resources that are required during the CSL process be clearly determined, and (d) CSL courses be extended over the entire training process, and not be limited to a term. This study shows that the CSL course improves pre-service teachers' social, academic and emotional development.

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