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Using the Service-Learning approach to bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher education

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ABSTRACT

Service-Learning stands out as a teaching approach that connects theory and practice by giving students the opportunity both to participate in a service that meets community needs and to reflect on the experience in class in order to gain a deeper understanding of the course content and an enhanced sense of civic engagement. The advantages of Service-Learning for inclusive education have recently been underpinned by studies, in which pre-service teachers are exposed to diverse population groups in schools or communities. Our study explores how Service-Learning is applied in teacher education in Austria. It is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 13 teacher educators who apply this form of teaching in cooperative projects with schools. Our findings suggest that teacher educators distinguish between five orientations in Service-Learning (connecting theory and practice, engagement, community needs, job-related skills, learning outside the classroom), take on distinct expert and support roles, and see multiple benefits in Service-Learning. Our study underlines the importance of Service-Learning for inclusive education and the value of preparing pre-service teachers for dealing with diverse groups of pupils by allowing them to experience the real-world problems that confront schools.

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Service-Learning; teacher education; inclusive education; teacher educator attitudes; diversity

Introduction

Pre-service teachers urgently need to be prepared for teaching heterogeneous classes and feel ill equipped to do so at present (Amaro-Jiménez 2012; Hascher and Hagenauer 2016). A recent study by López-Azuaga and Suárez Riveiro (2020) suggests that schools are only prepared for the pupils they currently teach (e.g. with an immigrant background) and do not take preventive action to train teachers in managing other aspects of diversity (e.g. special educational needs). Managing classroom diversity, teaching a diverse pupil body and developing knowledge and attitudes that support inclusive education – a process that involves the transformation of schools to cater for all pupils – have thus become important elements of teacher professionalisation and education (Tatebe 2013).

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To provide them with the best possible training in inclusive education practices, pre-service teachers need both theoretical knowledge and practical experience with diverse groups of pupils (Allen and Wright 2014). We view diversity as a broad concept that includes various dimensions of heterogeneity. Accordingly, pupil diversity can be reflected in many different aspects, including gender, special needs, interests, talents, socio-cultural background or first language. In recent years, ‘awareness of diversity has steadily increased in schools since the integration of the students with special educational needs’ (López-Azuaga and Suárez Riveiro 2020, 1019). In Austria, the number of newly arrived refugee children entering the state education system is another contributing factor. Many of the pupils who attend state schools in Austria are thus not native speakers of German, the official language of instruction. In 2018, 51.2% of pupils in the capital, Vienna, fell into this category (ÖIF 2018, 4).

Pre-service teachers are now required to complete internships worth a total of 40 credits (Bachelor’s degree: 25 credits; Master’s degree: 15 credits). Teacher education is still frequently accused of being distant from practice, however, the same cannot be said for its relationship to theory (Hascher and Hagenauer 2016). The term ‘theory’ in this context relates to the education theories taught in teacher education courses (Hascher and Hagenauer 2016, 17), while ‘practice’ refers to the (social) reality of teaching in a school. Despite the fact that the recently reformed curricula of teacher education in Austria reflect attempts to bridge the claimed gap between theory and practice, it remains a challenge, as studies in teacher education underpin (Darling-Hammond 2006; Allen and Wright 2014). The reasons for this might be systemic (e.g. attributable to the curricula or the strategic and political frameworks) or – more importantly for our study – the result of teacher educators’ own preferences and attitudes when it comes to practical teaching methods, applied coursework and the level of reflective practice they offer to students. It is thus essential to understand what motivates teacher educators to use practice-based methods in their courses or what hinders them in doing so. Pre-service teachers, in turn, want to gain practical experience of teaching as soon as possible (Allen 2009). Consequently, they may become frustrated if they receive too little practical input on teaching inclusive classes and too much input without an applied focus. Indeed, pre-service teachers tend to assess the amount of practice included in teacher education as inadequate (Yada and Savolainen 2017) and the theory as too distant from their practical experiences in schools. They thus feel inadequately prepared for the social reality in school and have only limited experience with inclusive teaching. Yada and Savolainen (2017) even conclude that teachers lack confidence in using inclusive teaching practices due to a lack of corresponding experience.

In recent years, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) and IEA (International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement) commissioned a series of studies on the effectiveness of teacher education. These include the ‘Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers: Teachers Matter’ (OECD 2005) report, the ‘OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey’ (TALIS; OECD 2018) and the 17-country ‘Teacher Education and Development Study in Mathematics’ (TEDS-M) (Blömeke et al. 2014). The majority of the findings and resulting desiderata of these studies ultimately suggest that the effectiveness of teacher education cannot be clearly determined and that the evidence obtained cannot be generalised. However, one conclusion can be drawn: the design of the interface between theory

and school practice is particularly important when it comes to providing pre-service teachers with meaningful learning opportunities. Consequently, the individual components of a teacher education programme – theory, applied coursework and internships in schools – must be carefully coordinated in stable partnerships established with schools (Terhart 2004; Darling-Hammond 2006).

As Berliner (2004) points out, even extensive practical experience does not necessarily make someone an excellent teacher: such experience is only meaningful for professional development if it is reflected upon and evaluated. Becoming an excellent teacher is the result of ‘deliberate practice’ (Ericsson 2006) on the part of a ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schön 1983). The ‘Service-Learning approach’ as a practice-oriented teaching method has therefore been increasingly applied in teacher education in recent years (Tatebe 2013). Indeed, there is empirical evidence to support the claim that only systematically designed practical experiences with elements of reflective practice lead to increased professionalisation and are useful for establishing a sustained relationship between theory and practice (Prenzel and Mandl 1993).

The Service-Learning approach

Service-Learning stands out as a form of teaching which connects theory and practice by giving students the opportunity both to participate in an organised service activity that meets community needs and to reflect on the experience in class in order to gain a deeper understanding of the course content and an enhanced sense of civic engagement (Bringle, Hatcher, and McIntosh 2006). This may include services in schools, social initiatives, public institutions, non-profit organisations or facilities for the disabled. Service-Learning aims to strengthen students’ relationships with the community and to provide impetus for their personal development and civic engagement (Waldstein and Reiher 2001) by allowing them to actively engage in solving real-world needs and to take time for critical reflection (Leming 2001; Schön 1983). While there is a growing body of research into Service-Learning as a transformative pedagogy from the student perspective (Mergler et al. 2017) – including that of pre-service teachers (Stewart, Allen, and Bai 2011) – none of this research was conducted in Austria or looks at the topic from the perspective of teacher educators. Yet understanding how teacher educators perceive their role in Service-Learning and explain their willingness to use it in their courses is clearly also of great importance.

In essence, Service-Learning encompasses the provision of one of the following: a direct service for people in need, an indirect service for broader issues in the community without personal contact to people in need, advocacy for people in need or community-based research (Chambers and Lavery 2017). According to the US-based National Youth Leadership Council, all forms of Service-Learning should meet certain quality criteria (National Youth Leadership Council 2008; Reinders 2016, 23), in particular with regard to the meaningfulness of the service, link to the curriculum, reflection, partnerships and diversity. It should promote understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants in a community and include both ‘service’ and ‘learning’ elements (Chambers and Lavery 2012). Yada and Savolainen (2017, 224) note that ‘in order to more positively develop pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education, more work is required to ensure that pre-service teachers gain a better understanding

of inclusion and that they are presented with opportunities to explore their feelings'. From an inclusive classroom perspective, Service-Learning as a pedagogical option in teacher education can contribute to reaching these objectives. It affords opportunities to strengthen partnerships on a project-by-project basis, opens up fertile learning experiences for pre-service teachers and in a best-case scenario provides impetus for school development.

While the Service-Learning approach is already widely used and accepted in the Anglo-American, Canadian and Australian higher education contexts, it has yet to establish itself fully in their counterparts in the German-speaking world (Reinders 2016). It first appeared there in Germany (in Mannheim in 2003 and Duisburg-Essen in 2005) and subsequently migrated to Austria (in Vienna in 2015) and Switzerland (in 2016). While networks and practical initiatives at the university level have followed (e.g. the '*Lernen durch Engagement*'¹ network in Germany or the 'ben:edu students engaged in society'² network in Switzerland), published findings on Service-Learning in these countries remain rare. Since little is known about its effects in teacher education, researchers in this field thus draw on evidence obtained from evaluating internships in teacher education, whose effects can be deemed similar (Schritteser et al. 2014). Of the few studies that have emerged for the German-speaking region, Reinders (2016) was the first to examine the concrete effects of Service-Learning in German universities, and other German studies have since followed (Schulze, Kanwischer, and Wolff 2018; Klopsch and Sliwka 2019). One study in Austria looks at Service-Learning from a student perspective (Resch 2018), while another examines it from a teacher educator perspective (Kohlmaier and Miklautsch 2019).

Teacher education curricula in Austria are built on the three knowledge domains categorised by Shulman (1987) as content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge. These knowledge domains are taught in theoretical courses, applied courses and school-based internships. In order to link theory and practical experience beyond regular internships, the University of Vienna (88,000 students) launched a 'University Cooperation Schools' programme in 2002 to establish and deepen the required interface between theory and school practice. In this programme, schools communicate their needs to the university, and students work under the guidance of a teacher educator to address them using applied research methods, practical measures, services or other creative solutions. If a cooperation between the university and a school is successfully established and completed, the latter becomes an officially certified 'Cooperation School of the University of Vienna'. The topics raised include issues like performance assessment criteria, school quality standards or absenteeism. The programme enables the university to develop a viable link to practice in the context of which pre-service teachers can access and reflect on school reality (Schritteser 2008).

Exploring the connection between inclusive education and Service-Learning

Carrington (2011) was the first researcher to investigate the connection between inclusive education and Service-Learning. She and subsequent researchers have found that there are a considerable number of advantages to be gained from applying the Service-Learning approach with (pre-service) teachers (Chambers and Lavery 2017): assisting others,

building relationships with the invisible and voiceless (Chambers and Lavery 2012), heightened awareness of diversity and difference (Mergler et al. 2017), being able to better understand the realities of culturally and linguistically diverse children (Amaro-Jiménez 2012) and a sense of preparedness to teach diverse pupil groups (Mergler et al. 2017).

Service-Learning can take pre-service teachers out of their comfort zones: they frequently come from middle-class backgrounds (Tatebe 2013) and thus might not have encountered diverse pupil groups and their families in the community (Mergler et al. 2017; Chambers and Lavery 2017). Service-Learning encourages them to understand the diverse needs and backgrounds of their future pupils. Mergler et al. (2017) found that pre-service teachers were far more willing to embrace inclusive teaching and teach diverse pupils after Service-Learning than they were before the experience. They note that *'[t]he pre-service teachers felt they had the skills and knowledge to respond appropriately to diversity and could manage different students with different needs in their classroom, and indicated that they felt confident in differentiating assessment and planning for diversity'* (Mergler et al. 2017, 76). Service-Learning can thus contribute to creating a smooth transition from theory to practice in inclusive education.

This present study underlines the importance of incorporating Service-Learning in teacher education and the value of up-skilling teachers in this area, as supported by Chambers and Lavery (2012) or Tatebe (2013). It is the first study to explore the attitudes of teacher educators in Austria towards Service-Learning, their understanding of this approach, the roles they play there in and their perceptions of its benefits in teacher education.

Method

The main purpose of the study was to determine why and how teacher educators in Austria offer Service-Learning courses in their degree programmes.

Data collection

To obtain the data required to answer these questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019) with teacher educators and applied a convenience sampling strategy using the guidelines proposed by Schreier (2018). Our interview guideline consisted of eight open-ended questions regarding the teacher educators' opinions, experiences and understanding of Service-Learning, their attitudes towards this approach, their roles in Service-Learning and their perceptions of its benefits.

Context and selection procedure

We selected the Service-Learning courses for our study using the University of Vienna's official course guide and by searching for the keywords 'Service-Learning in the description of teacher education courses. The result was disillusioning: only three of the current courses explicitly mentioned Service-Learning as a didactic approach in their course descriptions. We invited the lecturers teaching these courses by e-mail to participate in the study. In a second step, we searched for teacher educators who applied methods

similar to Service-Learning, namely those who explicitly mentioned a theory-practice-gap in their course descriptions, and also invited them to take part in the study. We thus contacted a total of 15 teacher educators (two of whom declined to participate in the study).

Participants in the study

In total, $n = 13$ teacher educators were interviewed in German using the aforementioned interview guideline about their attitudes towards Service-Learning, their use of this approach and its specific benefits for their particular courses. These included courses at both Bachelor's and Master's levels and were worth five credits each, the equivalent of 125 h of total workload. With only two exceptions (Chemistry, Biology), the interviewees all taught subjects in the humanities and social sciences (Education Science, Sociology, Social Work, Gender Studies). Seven of them had long-term teaching experience (more than ten years); the others all had less than ten years of teaching experience. Two of the participants were male, and eleven were female. They were all employed by the university in a teaching capacity, some on a full-time basis, and others as external lecturers. Seven of the participants (B, C, D, E, J, K, M) taught applied research courses in the context of the 'Cooperation School Programme'. Two of them served both as teacher educators and administrative staff (G, H); three taught Service-Learning in an inclusive education context (A, F, L) and one in a Biology context (I). All the participants selected the Service-Learning placements for their students: a school setting in eleven cases and a university setting supporting students with special needs in the other two.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 21 to 71 min. Twelve of the 13 interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via telephone. All of the interviews took place between April and June 2019 and were transcribed in full (in German). For the purposes of this article, the first author has translated some of the key quotes into English. All study participants gave their written consent.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using thematic coding (Flick 2018), starting with a short description of each case that contained information about the teacher educator and the 'motto' for their particular case. Central topics discussed in the interview were summarised. A thematic structure was then developed using minimal and maximum contrasting and was subsequently used to conduct a thorough comparison of the different cases.

Findings

The study investigated teacher educators' understanding of, attitudes towards, roles in, and perception of the benefits of Service-Learning in teacher education. The main findings are presented below.

Teacher educators' understanding of Service-Learning

Teacher educators benchmark the Service-Learning approach with other applied teaching methods. Five of the interviewees describe it more by what 'it is not' than by what it actually comprises (B, C, E, F, J): it does not involve payment (E, F), it is not an internship (F), it is not initiated by students but by the community (C) and it is not merely theory (F). Three of them suggest placing it in a broader concept, for example, the 'Third Mission' – or social responsibility – of universities (E, L) (Resch 2018; Gerholz and Losch 2015) or the 'professionalisation of teachers' (K).

The summaries of the reasons given by teacher educators for applying Service-Learning reveal five different orientations:

Orientation towards

- the connecting elements of theory and practice (B, C, E, F, G, H, J, L): Teacher educators consider it important that Service-Learning bridges the gap between the academic study programme and the students' future careers as teachers. They feel that it bridges the gap in skills development by applying those already included in the curriculum and augmenting them with the practical skills needed for the job. They also refer to the connecting element of 'service' and 'learning', which one interviewee describes as 'bringing pupils and students together in learning partnerships where mutual learning takes place'. Teacher educators, thus, believe that the Service-Learning approach promotes the (institutional) transfer of knowledge between schools and universities.
- student engagement outside the university (F, G, H, K): Those teacher educators who assess Service-Learning to be more relevant outside the university than inside correspondingly emphasise the importance of engaging in activities outside the university while studying and taking over tasks and responsibilities for community partners.
- community needs (B, D, E, H): Teacher educators link the Service-Learning concept with public welfare and societal benefits, volunteering in the community, social participation and responsible citizenship. On the student level, they mention the general objective of education to produce responsible, democratic, and active citizens. On the university level, they consider it important to take on tasks that communities cannot perform for themselves, thus creating a lasting impact on community development.
- job-related experiences (A, B, L, K): Some teacher educators view the Service-Learning approach as a means of focusing on their future job-related skills (i.e. providing a reality check on the job of being a teacher or insights into practice). In their understanding, students benefit from being able to take on job-related tasks while in training and thus acquiring skills that they can apply in their future careers. They consider Service-Learning to be a learning process for the job.
- learning (A, F, J): Three of the teacher educators we interviewed focus on the learning experience for students: learning outside the classroom, cyclical learning (learning, applying, reflecting) (F), gaining practical experience and reflecting on it in class (J) and learning about diverse groups such as young people with special needs (and thus contributing to social inclusion) (A).

The empirical orientations identified in our study are similar to the ‘typology of orientations’ for Service-Learning proposed by Boland (2014, 186): personal orientation, student orientation, civic orientation and higher education orientation. However, the connection between theory and practice is a new element uncovered in our study that does not feature in Boland’s empirical categories.

Teacher educators’ attitudes towards Service-Learning

All of the teacher educators interviewed have a positive attitude towards teaching practical courses. As one of them notes ‘[...] *I find it much more fun. I don’t teach theory classes at university for a reason. This contact is important to me, and I enjoy it much more*’ (J 229). Those who use the Service-Learning approach describe themselves as open-minded, keen to try out new methods and enthusiastic about applied course work.

Our analysis of the autobiographical accounts provided by the study participants show that personal experience shapes teaching decisions: seven of the 13 teacher educators had a direct connection to practical fields of work before they began using the Service-Learning approach in their teaching. Three of them had worked with people with special needs (A, C, F), two with vulnerable groups such as female victims of violence or refugees (G, J), and two had been schoolteachers (D, L). Of the remaining six, four had indirect links to inclusive education via research (E, H, I, M), while two had no such connections (B, K). The majority of those with some form of personal connection feel that this enables them to understand the precise needs and demands and makes it more likely that they will successfully bridge the gap between theory and practice in their Service-Learning courses. As one former schoolteacher explains: ‘*I know what teachers need*’ (L 131).

Nonetheless, the teacher educators we interviewed also have ambivalent views on the appropriateness of Service-Learning in the higher education context. The more critical among them reflect, for example, on the overlaps between Service-Learning and volunteering and on whether or not students should be ‘forced’ to do Service-Learning as part of their degree. They believe that Service-Learning and getting involved with different groups in the community should be intrinsically motivated and not simply a compulsory module in a degree programme. Moreover, those of them who had previously worked with vulnerable groups and/or the disabled, are sceptical about students providing what should be a paid service and see an element of risk for workforce exploitation – an attitude that can perhaps be attributed to their knowledge and awareness of the high demands of such work (C, F, G).

The teacher educators perceive that Service-Learning will have an impact for students when they are confronted with real-life problems in later life (C, J), manage projects (C, H) and start to acquire social capital and maintain contacts with people from the community after their service activity (F, G, L, J). From an institutional perspective, they feel it contributes to reducing the stereotyping of universities as ‘too theoretical’ or ‘unreachable’ for real needs and allows them to be perceived as socially responsible institutions that are embedded in their communities (B, E, H, K). As one of the interviewees notes: ‘*I think it [Service-Learning] is an important step in bringing the university closer to society and perhaps even escaping from the stereotypical question – what does sitting in an ivory tower at a university have to do with real life?*’ (B 273–276). The study participants also believe that institutional requirements are changing and that universities are

increasingly being asked to offer opportunities for students to engage in practical services in their fields of study.

Roles in Service-Learning

When studying Service-Learning, it is vital to understand how teacher educators perceive their own willingness to include this approach in their courses. The evidence and findings that are currently available still tend to focus on the experiences of students with Service-Learning (Bringle, Hatcher, and McIntosh 2006; Carrington 2011). Despite its central relevance, the ‘role of the academic in this endeavour, however, is rarely explored or problematised’ (Boland 2014, 183).

When applying Service-Learning in class, teacher educators switch from an instructive to a different role. As one study participant explains: *‘Well, on the one hand, I’m the expert, so I teach, also about my expert knowledge. And on the other hand, I’m a supporter [...] because my role as an expert is no longer needed’* (D 329–335).

We identified three categories of roles, namely expert, supporting, and communicator roles.³ Roles in Service-Learning are generally less hierarchical than in other courses since students usually work in teams on real-world problems. Moreover, teachers may give more instructions at the beginning of the course and then increasingly withdraw from this instructive role in order to promote autonomous learning on the part of the students during the service experience.

While students learn to work in teams in Service-Learning courses, this is not necessarily the case for teacher educators: only four of the 13 teacher educators in our sample teach in teams (A, C, E, F); the other nine teach alone. The four educators who work as a team explained that they had teamed up voluntarily: they share the responsibility but also the pay. They view teaching with the Service-Learning approach as challenging, time-consuming work that would be too strenuous for one person alone.

Perceptions of the benefits of Service-Learning

When we asked the teacher educators in our sample why they used Service-Learning with pre-service teachers, they gave us various answers. Of these, we identified three categories which contribute to inclusive teacher education: (a) getting to know diverse population groups, (b) viewing teaching as a socially responsible profession, and (c) helping pre-service teachers in the transition to their professional role.

The teacher educators describe Service-Learning as a means of introducing pre-service teachers to diverse population groups (C, D, F) and giving them the opportunity to work with people with special needs and/or from different age groups, thus gaining practical experience in inclusive education:

Supporting someone with special needs, perceiving the barriers for the first time and learning about the solutions – the quality of learning is different when you’re confronted with a different age group. When you’re not in a classroom context and deal with people who are perhaps your own age or even older – I think you talk to them differently than you would to a 6 or 7-year-old. (F 202–208)

They also view teaching as a socially responsible profession which affects children, parents and others in the community and society as a whole (E, H, K). *'I think it [Service-Learning] is very suitable because teaching is relevant for society as a whole. I mean the teaching profession as such. It's great when students already recognise during their studies that they have an impact'* (H 89–92).

Service-Learning is considered to help pre-service teachers in accomplishing and reflecting on their own multiple role shifts (B, J) – from school pupil to university student and from pre-service teacher to (full) teacher. From the teacher educators' perspective, it is the process of 'becoming' a teacher and how it is reflected upon in the Service-Learning experience which is imperative. To turn Service-Learning into a meaningful learning experience, they must attempt to achieve the 'interweaving of different worlds' (Oser 2004, 202), e.g. of university and school practice. One objective of the Service-Learning approach is to override the stereotypical images and internalised patterns that pre-service teachers developed over the course of their own school careers with methodologically guided insights into the vocational field of the school in order to open up new perspectives for analysis and action.

According to our study participants, Service-Learning also exposes pre-service teachers to different (theoretical and practical) elements of inclusive education like linguistic and social diversity or the spatial factors of inclusion and exclusion and allows them to interact with vulnerable groups in a school, university or personal context. On a social diversity level, for example, it introduces them to pupils with different academic ambitions (such as high achievers who want to finish high school or low achievers with no such goals). It likewise gives them the opportunity to interact with pupils in difficult life situations (e.g. transitions, dropouts) or with negative experiences of education. *'Children who have only managed to more or less complete compulsory schooling [...]. Getting to know these different groups and how difficult it is as a teacher to acknowledge their needs, that's what they learn'* (C 265–275). It also provides them with first-hand experience of linguistic diversity and the challenges of teaching children with a migrant background, who might not fully understand the teaching language (in our case, German). As one teacher educator notes, pre-service teachers come face-to-face in-service learning with realities that differ from their own and first need to acknowledge that these are not always 'compatible' with those of the child. The learning effect lies in finding solutions to bridge this social gap (J 206–209).

From a spatial segregation and diversity perspective, Service-Learning offers pre-service teachers a chance to experience new spaces (Schulze, Kanwischer, and Wolff 2018) like districts they are unfamiliar with or which have a high share of migrant or disadvantaged groups. According to the teacher educators in our study, there are often clear differences (e.g. in school infrastructure, school culture) between different districts in one and the same city, and this is another lesson that has to be learned in inclusive education:

We also worked in a school in Vienna's 15th district with a very high share of children who did not speak German and where we had to help them transit smoothly from primary to secondary school bearing in mind that German was not their first language. (C 293–297)

Discussion

All the teacher educators we interviewed view Service-Learning as a useful concept for overcoming the divide between theory and practice in inclusive teacher education. The five main orientations towards Service-Learning identified in our study – (1) connecting theory and practice, (2) engagement, (3) community needs, (4) job-related skills, and (5) learning outside the classroom – reflect the multi-faceted benefits of Service-Learning and the important role of teacher educators in the implementation process. The expert, support and communicator roles likewise identified indicate that teacher educators need to shift their focus, adapt their teaching style and assume a less hierarchical role when implementing applied courses. Our study reveals why and how teacher educators use applied coursework and provides insights into their didactic decision processes: their attitudes towards Service-Learning are influenced by their personal experiences of working in the community and with vulnerable target groups as well as their perceived (positive) beliefs regarding its benefits. We concur here with Boland (2014) and maintain that these motivational factors are central to the willingness of teacher educators to embed Service-Learning in their coursework. Regardless of whether the objectives of theory and practice are too different to be bridged, the Service-Learning approach has strong potential to contribute at least to narrowing the gap. Connecting with a school in a Service-Learning context is, therefore, more than just a ‘regular’ school-based internship, it is an engagement in a real-life project based on school or community needs. We argue that by participating in Service-Learning and taking on a role that differs to that of a regular intern, pre-service teachers are empowered to develop a sense of professionalism as ‘practitioner researchers’ (Schrittesser et al. 2014; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).

Bringing pre-service teachers into contact with community needs and diverse population groups at an early stage in their training is clearly useful for strengthening their ability to act with confidence when confronted with heterogeneous classes. Students cannot simply reproduce knowledge in Service-Learning coursework (Carrington 2011), they work at the interface between theory and practice instead. It is thus essential for the future of Service-Learning that it is implemented not only in ‘privileged’ schools with high shares of pupils from upper- or middle-class households: teacher educators must also plan Service-Learning placements in other types of schools (e.g. polytechnics, vocational schools, middle schools) which are often unfamiliar to teacher education students and are located, for instance, in disadvantaged areas with diverse pupil populations – thus connecting social and spatial diversity. Spreading the Service-Learning approach across school types and areas would further increase its value for inclusive education and provide students with valuable experience in unfamiliar settings to which they would otherwise not have access (Tatebe 2013), thereby widening their own academic space (Carrington 2011).

Limitations of our study: the study provides insights into Service-Learning as a direct service for people in need and does not cover other Service-Learning formats such as indirect services for broader issues in the community, advocacy for people in need and community-based research (Chambers and Lavery 2017). It uses a convenience sampling method with a sample of mainly female, well-established teacher educators in the humanities and social sciences and does not consider the different types of study programmes or institutional contexts in other public or private universities in Austria. Thus, our findings cannot be generalised to all teacher educators in Austria.

The study does, however, provide insight into disrupting binaries of academic and practical learning in teacher education (Carrington 2011).

Conclusions

This was the first study of its kind to investigate teacher educators' perceptions of and attitudes towards Service-Learning in Austria. Our findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges that teacher educators face and will need to be considered in the future. It would be desirable to replicate this study with other teacher educators who are using the Service-Learning approach in Austria and thus gain insights into the attitudes and beliefs of a broader group. More research into Service-Learning in general should be conducted in German-speaking countries in order to determine how prepared pre-service teachers are for inclusion in schools. We therefore encourage other researchers in this area to explore this topic using qualitative and quantitative study designs. A study into the differences in views and attitudes between those teacher educators who use Service-Learning in their courses and those who do not would likewise be useful for teacher education in Austria.

Notes

1. <https://www.servicelearning.de/>.
2. <https://www.benedu.ch/>.
3. The communicator role – which Boland (2014, 188) refers to as that of a 'link person', is a distinct role with a specific function in this context, namely establishing and maintaining contact to community partners, handling communication during the Service-Learning process and completing the final report and communicating it to the school.

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Data availability statement

Raw data were generated at the University of Vienna. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [KR] on request.

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