Chapter 5

Gaining Perspective:  
The Unintentional Outcomes of University–Middle School Service-Learning Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors discuss the outcomes of a program evaluation of a university-middle school service-learning partnership. The initial goal was to evaluate the extent to which three middle school teachers, our community partners, were satisfied with the volunteer experience their seventh grade students had with first-year university students. The evaluation came after a three-year partnership between undergraduates enrolled in a liberal studies course focused on citizenship and education and a team of middle school students and their teachers. Interviews revealed that this partnership enabled teachers to view their students through a different lens than they had prior to the partnership. Further, teachers suggested that the service-learning activities facilitated a deeper understanding of students’ funds-of-knowledge and talents. This research supports the possibility that there are valuable unintended outcomes of service-learning partnerships between universities and public schools.

INTRODUCTION

In an era where public schools are consistently underfunded and any “extras” are quickly cut from yearly school budgets, teachers, principals, and other stakeholders reach out to universities in surrounding areas to supply much-needed volunteers for test proctoring, after-school tutoring, and a host of other activities for which they cannot find help. Similarly, colleges and universities seek to form partnerships with community agencies and K-12 schools in order to provide undergraduates with a deeper under-
standing about issues related to public education. More specifically, teacher education programs pursue partnerships with schools so that teacher candidates develop a holistic and nuanced understanding of the responsibilities of teachers.

The authors teach in the College of Education at a large university in an urban area in the southeastern United States. Our proximity to at least eight area schools enables students enrolled in our courses to easily travel to these schools to volunteer their time. As a result, both authors have developed long-term partnerships with area elementary and middle schools, using service-learning as the common link. In this chapter, the authors discuss an evaluation of one such partnership that developed with an urban middle school over three years. Through this partnership, undergraduate teacher candidates fulfilled the need for after-school tutors, lunch buddies, and test proctoring, all the while learning more about the concerns of adolescents and the issues that make public school education such a contentious topic. Additionally, the middle school learners gained voice and agency through the service-learning project, while showing off their talents. However, the authors were curious if the participating teachers reaped any benefits from this partnership; after all, the authors took two hours of their instructional time each week and requested that they help plan and promote the community event. In this interpretive case study, the authors explore the perceived benefits, challenges, and limitations of this partnership from the perspective of these teachers.

Middle school has traditionally been viewed as the weak link between elementary and high school, the place where hormones rage and classroom management tactics provide teachers some type of order in the chaos. Yecke (2005) wrote that American middle schools are the place “where academic achievement goes to die.” Teaching early adolescents requires a special set of skills and talents and sometimes challenge middle school educators to wear a variety of hats in one school day. Teachers must find ways to engage adolescent curiosity, set high standards for learning and performance, and provide leadership that motivates middle level students to be successful. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, 2012) supports the foundational idea that teachers who hope to successfully educate early adolescents must both value their unique characteristics and be effectively prepared to teach them; further, development of an appreciation for their individuality can only serve to heighten ultimate success (Bailey, 2015; Faulkner, Howell, & Cook, 2013; NMSA, 2010).

In this chapter, the authors discuss findings from an evaluation of a service-learning research project in which middle grades educators explained that they developed these critical characteristics outlined by the AMLE for successfully responding to educational needs of middle grades learners. More specifically, the authors found that engaging in university partnership that supported a bullying prevention program helped these particular middle grades teachers to deepen appreciation of their students and become more supportive of their individual, academic, and personal development.

Since the mid-1980s, U.S. colleges and universities, with the help of Campus Compact, have attempted to fulfill their civic duty through participation in service projects within both the local and global community. Although there has been ample research that contributes to the development of strong service-learning partnerships between universities and community agencies (Cruz & Giles, 2000), there has been a dearth of research dedicated to in-depth perspectives of community partners involved in service-learning partnerships with colleges and universities (Edwards & Marullo, 2000; Miron & Moely, 2006; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Tinkler, Tinkler, Hausman, & Strouse, 2014). Research suggests that assessing perspectives of the community partner is as essential as learning the outcomes for service-learning participants, both from the university and within the community (Birdsall, 2005; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Although a few studies