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AUTHOR   Batenburg, Mark P.
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ABSTRACT
        Agency-school collaborations are examined from the
point of view of the agency. The data for the analysis were gathered
through interviews with staff people from six different
community-based organizations in California, all of whom have
experience working with schools and youth volunteers. The study found
that there often are culture clashes between agencies and schools
because they inhabit different worlds. Some obstacles agencies
experience in working with schools include the following:
inflexibility of school schedules, controlling attitudes of schools,
bureaucracy, school administrators' attitudes, teachers who fail to
listen, internal problems within the agency, and the inability of
agencies to work with more than one volunteer at a time. However,
agencies often continue to work with schools for several reasons:
agency personnel are idealistic and want to enhance learning; they
hope that the relationship will help their clients; and that the
schools will increase the diversity of volunteers. (KC)

Community Agency and School Collaboration:
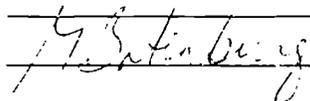## Going in with Your Eyes Open

This paper examines agency/school collaborations from the point of view of the agency. It enumerates common problems agencies encounter in their work with schools, as well as reasons why agencies persist in these partnerships. The paper ends by making recommendations for successful partnerships.

Mark P. Batenburg

Service Learning 2000 Center
50 Embarcadero Road
Palo Alto, CA 94301
415-322-7271

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Introduction

"You could provide a real service by helping school people understand what drives an agency to work with youth and schools. They're so different than we are; when they come to us they're totally clueless about our world. Maybe you could help them learn how to approach us more effectively." So said the Executive Director of a local non-profit agency[1] while she was being interviewed for this paper,[2] and it seems fitting to let her words set the direction for what follows.

The voice that is heard least often in discussions of service learning is that of the non-profit agencies where students are sent to do the service part of service learning. This underrepresentation seems a bit odd, since the rhetoric of service learning is filled with paeans to collaboration, partnership, and expanding the walls of the classroom to include the community. The reality of the movement, however, is that it is almost entirely school-driven, and as would-be community partners soon discover, schools tend not to make very good partners. It's not in their nature, at least not yet. Since most service learning is school-driven and school-centered, the community-based organizations which provide the opportunities for student service tend to be an afterthought in discussions about the service learning movement.

This paper aims to give agencies their voice in the service learning discussion. It is based on interviews with staff people from six different community-based organizations in California, all of whom have experience working with schools and youth volunteers. There is no pretense here of scientific validity or random samples or control groups. These are simply the voices of community-based organization staff who feel they have not been heard on the subject of working with schools and who have plenty to say. Their hope is that their comments will enable

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[1] The terms "non-profits," "community-based organizations," and "agencies" are used interchangeably here.

[2] Everyone interviewed for this paper wished to remain anonymous. I have respected their wishes.

teachers to approach potential partnerships more realistically, and that such partner-ships will therefore be more fruitful for all sides. Since their comments tend to have a bit of an edge to them, perhaps it is helpful to say from the outset that all of the agency personnel interviewed for this paper are enthusiastic about working with young people as volunteers. They are frustrated with schools and teachers, not students.

Before approaching the specifics of school/agency partnerships, there is a contextual comment that Susan[3], the Executive Director of a non-profit agency, wanted made clear: the entity known as "the community" does not exist. Service learning is often touted as getting students out into "the community." Teachers often speak of their students doing work in "the community." "The community," when used this way, is an abstraction from reality. Its repeated use can blind us to the fact that this abstract community is made up of very concrete and specific buildings, parks, streets and people. Students do not go out to work in some abstract "community." They go to work in Agency X, which is located in a falling-down warehouse, which has the task of feeding 600 homeless people a week, and has four staff people who get low pay and no benefits and whose funding has just been decimated by budget cuts in Washington and the whole operation just barely survived the floods last month. That is part of the reality behind the word "community." The first piece of advice from agency staff to teachers is not to romanticize the reality by calling it "the community." "Your students are not working in 'the community.' They're working in our agency," says Susan.

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[3] All names of community agency representatives are pseudonyms.

Culture Clash

An underlying and unexamined problem in school/agency partnerships is that the two partners exist in radically different worlds. When neither side takes the time and trouble to inhabit the other's world, culture clashes are inevitable.

To an agency person, teachers seem to work in a very hierarchical and rigid world. Schools have chains of command, bell schedules, discipline procedures, bureaucracy, judging, grading, credentials, unions, and proper channels and procedures for everything. It looks like (and is) a highly bureaucratized system. What agency people encounter when they approach this rigid system is rigid people. The system seems to have taught teachers, administrators and staff to say, "No, I can't do that; there are too many constraints," which is not a helpful approach to partnership-building.

Agency people, by contrast, work in environments that are or were grassroots coalitions and community efforts. Things tend to be done by consensus rather than by fiat from above. Agencies tend to be democratic organizations. Action is taken only after *lots* of talking with everyone imaginable. Agencies live to find solutions to problems, so they tend to be highly flexible and creative. They tend to say "Yes" first and then figure out how later. Since most agencies are under-staffed and under-funded, there is not enough fat to produce a bureaucracy.

When a person from a relatively freewheeling problem-solving agency walks up to a school, s/he is entering an alien culture. Agency people don't know much about bureaucracies and proper channels. They don't know how to negotiate the byzantine structures erected by public education. They often give up in frustration.

Similarly, when a teacher walks into a social service agency, s/he may as well be walking on another planet. There may be no apparent order, and everyone may be doing six tasks simultaneously. No one may pay much attention to this visitor, at least not right away. In initial conversations there may be no clarity about who

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s/he should talk to; each staff member has several functions, and in some ways they are all interchangeable. The teacher may find that phone calls go unanswered and that the person whom s/he tried to call last week doesn't even work there this week. An agency can seem a chaotic and confusing place to work with (and it often is).

The culture clash between school and agency is real. People from one side can easily be intimidated and frustrated when dealing with people from the other side. The key to smoother relations is not only to be aware of the cultural differences, but to be aware of the specific details of the clash, the daily places where misunderstand-ings occur and frustrations mount. Agency personnel were not shy about enumer-ating those places. An introductory list follows.

Obstacles Agencies Experience in Working with Schools

The inflexibility of school schedules is perhaps the most persistent and frustrating problem between schools and agencies. Here is a recent example. A teacher and the Activities Director at a local nursing home have been talking about the possibility of students working with the home's residents. After an amicable discussion in which both are becoming enthusiastic about the possibilities, the teacher says, "But it will have to be between 10:50 and 11:35 on Thursdays. That's when my students are free." The Activities Director is flabbergasted at the narrow-ness and specificity of this time frame. She also knows that the daily period between 10 and 11:30 is the worst possible time: residents are being bathed and given their medications. It is a very private time in the nursing home; students would have nothing to do.

At moments like these, attitudes often begin to harden. The Activities Direc-tor thinks, "Wa'. a minute! You want to bring thirty kids into my nursing home, and you also want to dictate the schedule? I don't think so." The teacher thinks, "Here I am offering all this great volunteer help -- thirty volunteers! -- and all she

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can think about is that it's inconvenient? How ungrateful!" Leaving aside for the moment the underlying assumptions that both parties are making, the main obstacle here is the inflexibility of the school schedule. In all fairness, it should be added that almost every teacher the Service Learning 2000 Center has worked with is also enormously frustrated by the rigidity of the bell schedule. This is not just an obstacle for agencies.

The attitude of the teacher in the above example illustrates another problem agencies run into. Several agency representatives said they find schools to be controlling. When agency and school representatives sit down to discuss a real or potential collaboration, the approach of the school people is often, "We'll run this program. That's what we do: run programs. You provide us with these services for our students, and we'll be in charge." Actual collaboration, give-and-take, real partnership does not see to come naturally to people who work in schools. This type of domineering attitude on the part of school personnel is a real disincentive for agency personnel to remain involved in partnerships with schools. No one likes to get pushed around or feel like they're being used or taken advantage of. Sooner rather than later, the agency decides that being in relationship with this school is not worth it, and the collaboration (which it never really was) is over.

A related experience occurs when agency representatives encounter what seems to be the patronizing attitude of some school administrators. Dorothy, the Volunteer Coordinator for a social services agency, says, "I often get this kind of reaction when I'm introduced to Principals: 'Oh, you work with the homeless? How nice.' Their tone implies 'How cute' or 'How quaint.' As we continue talking it becomes clear that to these guys [administrators] nothing is really important that doesn't happen within the school walls. They make a stab at talking about how important 'the community' is, but their heart's not in it. We're extraneous. They

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treat us like 'the little people.' It's sad—they're the ones who are so isolated in their own little world."

Charlene, Volunteer Coordinator for local branch of a national nonprofit dedicated to the eradication of a major disease, tells a story that illustrates another common difficulty obstacle faced by agencies: bureaucracy. "I had this great idea for a project that would help us get the word out about [the disease]. I wanted to find maybe two or three classes who wanted to work with us. I was going to have doctors and nurses go into the classes and do some basic science education around [the disease], and then I was hoping the students would help us think of an educational campaign that would appeal to their peers. They'd maybe even design the literature for us.

"So I figured there had to be a couple teachers out there somewhere who would see this as an opportunity for their students. I called the Principals of the two high schools closest to here. They never returned my calls. Someone here in the office suggested I call the County Office of Education, so I did that. Whoever answered the phone had no idea who to route my call to. I finally talked with someone who seemed interested in the idea and said he'd get back to me, but he never did. So then I made up some flyers telling teachers about this program, and I actually brought them to the high schools and asked the secretaries in the office if they could give them to teachers. They were very polite, but I have no idea what they did with those flyers. I never heard from any teachers.

"Eventually I gave up the whole idea. It wasn't worth spending any more time on. A while after that I talked with a woman I know who's a retired teacher, and I told her this whole story. She laughed at the part about bringing the flyers to the school. She said that the secretaries probably put them right in the trash, and that even if they were put in teachers' mailboxes it wouldn't matter because teachers

get so many flyers and papers that they throw most of them away without reading them. Who knows? I was young and naive in those days!"

Another agency staffer called this the "balkanization of the school world." She says, "Administrators have their own world, and that world doesn't necessarily include teachers and students. An administrator promises you things that never happen because he never bothers to check with a teacher. Papers you give an administrator never reach a teacher. Or a teacher agrees to something and then weeks later the administrator finds out and blows a gasket. Don't these people talk to each other? It's extremely difficult to develop a partnership with them when they're so divided among themselves."

While most of the frustration expressed by non-profit staff was directed at schools, a small amount was reserved for teachers. The most consistent criticism was that teachers don't listen. "Teachers call up with some plan they've cooked up, and they never once ask what our needs here are, or whether their plan fits what we need done," says Dorothy, the Volunteer Coordinator. "When I try to get them to alter their plan so it's a little more appropriate for us, they just steamroll right over me and keep on going. They seem well-intentioned, but they just won't listen!" An Executive Director told of a teacher who was persistent in her demands that her students come in and decorate the walls of the agency with pictures and posters made by the students. "But we didn't *want* our walls decorated," the Director said, "and [the teacher] just couldn't seem to hear that. What we really needed was some help sorting the mountain of clothes we have here, but she wasn't interested in that."

Some of the problems an agency faces when trying to form partnerships with schools come not from the school side, but from within the agency itself. Agency representatives interviewed for this paper thought it might be helpful for teachers

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to understand some of the internal problems that agencies can face when trying to collaborate with schools.

An agency's Board of Directors often raises serious questions: What are the benefits to us of having all these kids around here? What are our liability issues? Are these kids scaring off our adult volunteers? Boards of Directors tend, by their very nature, to be somewhat conservative and therefore often put the brakes on innovative programming. In the long-run this can be valuable for the stability of the agency, but in the short run Board and staff can and do come into conflict. The role of youth within an agency is often such a point of conflict.

Agencies sometimes have staff, clients and adult volunteers who are neither accustomed to nor comfortable working with young people. When a high school student comes through the door wearing spiked hair and sporting numerous body piercings, older volunteers (for example) in the agency may be taken aback. This is the kind of kid they avoid on the street, and now here he is in their own space. It is another form of culture clash, and calls for education on both sides.

Many if not most agencies are more accustomed to working with one volunteer at a time, rather than groups of volunteers. A typical volunteer might work every Thursday from noon until three o'clock. When a teacher calls and wants to involve her whole class in the work of the agency, it might require a radical shift in the way the agency thinks about volunteers and conceptualizes its own work. Such shifts are not easy and usually do not happen quickly. Agency personnel advise teachers to be patient in these circumstances. "It's not that we can't work with you, says a Volunteer Coordinator, "it's that we haven't figured out how yet."

Why Agencies Persist in School Collaborations

In spite of the difficulties and frustrations of working with schools, all the agency personnel interviewed for this paper remain enthusiastic about working with young people as volunteers in their agencies. Why? What makes it worthwhile to persist in these partnerships in spite of the obstacles? The agency staff were unanimous in wanting teachers to understand the factors that motivate agencies to continue to be a part of school collaborations. "If teachers understood our motives, then I think our working relationships would be smoother," said one.

Most non-profit agencies where students might be working have three purposes: (1) direct provision of service to their clients; (2) education and outreach in their field of expertise; and (3) generating friends and resources. For example, a social service agency's primary purpose might be to provide food, clothing and shelter for people in need. In addition, it helps educate the local population about issues of hunger and homeless. In order to fulfill its primary and secondary purposes it needs to generate support in the form of goodwill, volunteers, and money.

It is crucial to understand that the primary purpose of an agency is to provide service to its clients. If a teacher cannot show that a proposed service learning project will aid the agency in providing this service, then s/he will have a more difficult time persuading the agency to get involved.

The primary purpose of a food bank, for example, is to provide bags of groceries to people who cannot afford to buy them. In order for this to happen, food donations need to be solicited, food needs to be collected from grocery stores and other suppliers, vast amounts of cans and boxes need to be sorted, grocery bags need to be filled with a variety of goods, and the bags need to be distributed to people who come to the food bank in need. If a teacher offers to bring thirty students to help sort the cans as part of a service learning project, that offer has very high value to the

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food bank, and the food bank staff is likely to go out of its way to accommodate the students and their school schedule. The teacher is proposing a project that directly helps the agency fulfill its primary purpose: provision of food to those who need it.

If the teacher cannot make an offer that contributes to service provision, all is not lost, for the agency still has its other two purposes: to educate the public and to generate friends and resources. To continue the food bank example, if our teacher does not want her students to sort food, but is proposing that they come to the food bank for a tour and to have the staff talk to the students about homelessness and hunger in their city, the response to this proposal will depend on how strong an educational mission the food bank has. If education is a major part of the agency's mission statement, and its Board of Directors is encouraging the staff in that direction, then the teacher's proposal will likely meet with a friendly response. If community education is merely a dream the agency has, then it is not likely to take time away from its primary task in order to help this teacher.

The weakest reason an agency has for working with students is generation of friends and resources. In working with students, an agency also, by extension, works with their families. This can be an important way to introduce the families to the work of the agency, to build a base of future donors, adult volunteers and collabora-tors. Every agency is usually looking for ways to expand its donor and volunteer base. Whether or not this is a sufficient reason to take on a classroom full of kids depends on, among other realities, the staffing level at the agency.

In addition to contributing toward one of an agency's three purposes, there are other reasons why youth volunteers can be appealing to the agency. Sometimes the agency is looking to diversify its volunteer pool ethnically, racially, and accord-ing to age. Funders and agency staff look at the demographics of their volunteers and ask questions such as, "Why is the vast majority of our volunteers white women 65 and older?" Schools, as a microcosm of the communities in which they

are located, provide a diverse pool of volunteers. Diversifying its volunteer pool in terms of age also makes sense. Every agency needs to think about its own sustainability. If all its volunteers are 50-65, what does that say about the vitality and future of the agency?

A closely related reason for an agency to try working with young people is the demographics of local volunteerism. If the local Volunteer Center issues a report saying that 25% of all volunteers in the County are under nineteen year old, and Agency Y has *no* volunteers under nineteen, then it might say yes to a youth project in order to test the waters in this unutilized volunteer pool.

It is also important to keep in mind that non-profit agencies tend to attract employees who are idealistic and who want to make the world a better place. Most agencies are interested in (but do not have the time to pursue) systemic change. Working with young people often appeals to this idealistic, visionary side of agency staff. Engaging young people in their communities, boosting their self-esteem through service to others, and preparing them for life after school is seen as an investment in the future. Working with young people today may also mean that the agency will have fewer clients needing its services in the long run. That kind of systemic change would make most agencies very happy.

As part of their idealism and commitment, agency personnel also tend to be committed to promoting the life-long habit of service and volunteerism. It is widely believed that nurturing that habit in the young will enrich society and individual lives in the future.

Finally, there is a very simple reason why agencies like working with youth: young people bring energy and liveliness and hope to social service organizations. These are often in short supply at agencies these days. With budget cuts and rescissions all around, the future can look awfully grim. Young people can remind agencies to laugh again.

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Toward Successful Partnerships

Interviewees were asked for practical suggestion that would, if implemented, help school/community partnerships become smoother more productive. If given the chance to speak directly to teachers and administrators, here is what they would say.[4]

• Always keep in mind the three tasks of an agency: to provide direct service, to educate, and to generate friends and resources. Ask yourself: how much and what kind of good will the agency get out of a relationship with my school? Be creative, clear and realistic about what you have to offer. Whenever possible, offer work that will help the agency implement its primary purpose of service delivery.

If you are not offering to help the agency fulfill its primary purpose, then be cognizant of the fact that a relationship with you is less valuable to the agency. This means that you will need to be more flexible in terms of schedules, preparation, supervision, etc., and more open to possibilities proposed by the agency. Fulfillment of secondary and tertiary needs is a less compelling reason for the agency to be involved with you than direct service provision would be. You are providing a soft benefit rather than a hard one, and the agency is likely to be more exacting about the terms of the its partnership with you.

• The savvy teacher will make a strong case for agency involvement right from the start, but this means that the teacher must first take the time to understand the agency's mission and its needs. Do your homework.

• The key to school/community relationships is communication, negotiation, and mutual respect between school and agency. The best school/community matches involve careful listening on both sides about the needs of the other.

• The more flexible you are, and the more you can negotiate about timing, schedules, the actual work to be done, etc., the more successful the partnership will

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[4] Bulleted items in this section are composite statements from interviewees.

be. The least productive partnerships are the ones where the schools act like dicta-tors.

• Continually examine your own attitudes about your agency partner. Are you being controlling? Patronizing? Do you think of the agency as an actual part-ner, or as a necessary nuisance? Attitudes communicate themselves.

• The best partnerships usually work because of the right chemistry between the teacher and someone at the agency. Success is often personnel-specific. The primary relationship in partnerships is between the teacher and agency contact. Treat the relationship as you would any other that is important to you.

• Successful placements and projects for kids tend to be ones that have highly physical, tangible tasks to be accomplished. Building bird houses, cleaning cages, hammering crates together, sorting food or clothes, painting out graffiti are some examples. Kids can look back at their work and say, "Look what we did!" These jobs tend work better than office settings, for example. Before you get too far into your own planning, let us give you the benefit of our experience. Collaborate with us right from the start, not after most of the planning is finished.

• Successful placements and projects are also developmentally appropriate for students. In a nursing home, a high school students is more likely than an elemen-tary student to be able to successfully visit residents' rooms. The elementary student will be more successful at singing songs with classmates than would the high school student. Planning developmentally appropriate tasks for students can only be done when the teacher and agency representative collaborate together.

• Many agencies have programs which are committed to an intergenerational approach, and these programs tend to welcome youth volunteers. The two most common examples are programs for little kids, which use older youth as tutors, coaches, mentors, big brothers/sisters; and programs for senior citizens which use young people as companions, aides, friendly visitors, pet caretakers, physical labor,

etc. For all these programs, having young people as volunteers is an important way of fulfilling their mission. If a teacher is looking for an agency partner, those programs are good places to start.

• Most agencies are understaffed, underfunded, and in mild to acute perpetual crisis. Don't take it personally when you're not the most important item on their agenda.

• Very few agencies have heard of service learning. They are coming from a community service orientation. Once they've caught on, most agencies are full of ideas for enhancing the learning side of service learning. Encourage them to brainstorm with you.

• It is appropriate for an agency to turn down prospective volunteers. It is a myth that every agency can or should take every volunteer who comes to its door. Sometimes the skills, talents or temperament of the volunteer are mismatched with the work or needs of the agency. Other times, the agency simply doesn't need what the volunteer is offering. The same can be true with a class-sized group of volunteers. The agency may simply not be able to use thirty volunteers at one time, and has the obligation to say so when approached. This can cause misunderstandings with a teacher who presumes any agency will automatically welcome her students.

• Finally, remember our idealism. We work for non-profits because we want to make the world a better place, we want to solve local problems and we want to address pressing local issues. No matter what agency we work for, we know that young people have it rough these days. We'd like to help, and we think we can make a difference in their lives. We know you're committed to the same thing. We hope our suggestions here can make our partnership with you more beneficial to all of us.

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