When Volunteering Is Mandatory

A Call for Research About Service Learning

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Background Scene

Yesterday, my sixth-grade classroom was abuzz with excitement as students anticipated their departure for the annual outdoor education field trip. Kids were comparing cabin assignments and deciding which friend they hoped would be in the next bunk. They wondered aloud about the food that would be served. They sat in clumps making lists of what they would pack and how they would pack it. They talked about the games the seventh graders had told them they would play.

Today, my classroom is nearly empty with just six students; only Bianca, Sofia, Diana, Hector, Luis and Aldo are present. Everyone else has left for the trip. The mood is different than it was yesterday. Instead of excitement, there is an attitude of resignation as these students are presented with activities either intended for them to complete missing work or to engage them in some other manner for the class period.

Until questioned by me, their White teacher, on why they did not choose to attend, the trip is not mentioned. "Spanish parents are too strict," Sofia explains. "My dad said I couldn't go camping with boys," elaborates Diana. "I have to watch my sister after school," Hector replies while shrugging and then continues, "We didn't want to go, anyway." Luis and Aldo remain silent. They don't speak English.

A quick perusal of the day's memo indicates the next period will bring a similar group to the classroom; a handful of students who are primarily immigrants from Central America and who are still learning English. I begin thinking about the purposes of the field trip; the first being to spark an interest in science and the second to provide students an opportunity

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to earn mandated-for-graduation student service learning (SSL) hours. I think about the loss of the opportunity for these students to earn those required hours and wonder if their chances at high school graduation will be impacted.

Purpose

Stakeholders have long been concerned about high school drop-out rates and associated achievement gaps between groups, specifically racial, of high school students. While significant improvements have been made to these drop-out rates at the national level, the largest group of drop-out students continues to be those of Hispanic heritage (Fast Facts, n.d.). Research indicates nearly 28% of high school drop-outs make those decisions in the ninth or tenth grade and may do so as a result of already being behind in meeting graduation requirements (Shaw, 2015).

Including community service as part of high school graduation rates is the current trend. Maryland requires all students to earn 75 student service learning (SSL) hours to be eligible for graduation (Service-Learning, n.d.). While Maryland is the only state to currently have a blanket policy for the SSL graduation requirement, 19 other states, a significant increase from the nine in 2001, have allowed individual districts to include such a requirement for graduation (Sparks, 2013).

Sparks (2013) described an increase in middle school volunteering as students engaged in activities to meet the graduation requirement in their early high school years. However, Sparks (2013) also noted a decrease in volunteering for older high school students. This situation causes me to wonder whether ninth and tenth grade students are considered behind if they have not earned their required community service hours and, if so, what the impact of this is on decisions these students may make to drop out of school.

These considerations are a portion of

an on-going analysis intended to support a future study to explore non-participation rates of Hispanic and Latino students in an opportunity that is embedded in a middle school science curriculum which results in the awarding of student service learning hours. The perspective of this review is from a teacher who has served at both the middle and high school levels and who is concerned about potential issues of curriculum equity as they impact diverse groups through the SSL graduation requirement.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination theory, a macro theory that has been applied in many contexts, explains human motivation (Theory, n.d.). This theory identifies two types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic, and describes how learning can result from both (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, the theory proposes that the quality of learning may differ depending on type. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that humans have three intrinsic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others. Self-determination can be influenced by curriculum design and teacher behaviors (Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006). The potential exists for curriculum to be designed in response to self-determination theory (Huxley-Binns & Ferris, 2013).

Self-determination theory outlines a process where children tend to accept most extrinsically imposed beliefs, attitudes, and ideals as their own and as the result of self-determined choices (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014). Environments most conducive to increasing intrinsic motivation are those that allow for higher degrees of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students who are given choices regarding where and how they will participate in service learning and who are able to complete tasks they are good at, while connecting with others,

are likely to perceive value from service learning as a result of their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness being met (Kicker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) explained that the implication is students who were previously extrinsically motivated by service learning requirements, as they related to other goals such as graduation, will again become intrinsically motivated and these students may continue pursuing service related activities long after the extrinsic requirements have been met.

However, Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) warned that requiring service learning for students may impact students' perceptions of autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that intrinsic motivation decreases when individuals sense greater external control. Therefore, the practice of mandating service learning as a high school graduation requirement is questionable (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

Critical Theory

Critical theory was developed by a collection of activists who were concerned with issues of social justice (Witans-Solis, 2014). Critical theorists believe curriculum is typically developed to serve dominant groups while embedding mechanisms that invisibly withhold from marginalized groups by consistently attending to White, middle class values (Winans-Solis, 2014). The rewarding of students for possessing the desired values may lead students from minority groups to believe their own cultures and associated values must be rejected in order to experience academic success (Kincheloe, 2008).

Winans-Solis (2014) conducted a qualitative case study, using a critical theory framework, to explore how SSL might be a source of empowerment for minority students who presumably have only experienced education within a context of racial and socioeconomic oppression and struggle, a situation he described as "failing social arrangements."

Winans-Solis (2014) found participation in SSL activities created a larger lens for viewing intellectual activity for students who had been marginalized in traditional environments. SSL participation became meaningful to these students as they became more aware of their potential roles in social change and were able to positively define their identities apart from the confines of the dominant culture (Winans-Solis, 2014).

Latino Critical Race Theory

Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) is an off-shoot of critical theory which specifically addresses tactics of hidden racism employed by the dominant group towards Hispanics and Latinos in the United States (*Lat Crit*, n.d.). Development of this subset theory is in its infancy. It is presumed LatCrit would be a valid theory in study of determining how Hispanic and Latino students are impacted by curricular SSL graduation requirements.

History of Required Student Service Learning

The definition for SSL is broad and encompasses a variety of ideologies (*What Is Service Learning*, n.d.). At its most basic level, SSL is understood to mean activities that extend learning experientially, often out of the classrooms and into the community, through student volunteering. SSL can be seen at all levels of education. The perceived benefits to both students and their communities have resulted in curriculum developers including SSL, in some form or another, in public school programs around the country (*What Is Service Learning*, n.d.).

Maryland, in 1993, became the first state to enact legislation that requires all public-school students to earn 75 SSL hours in order to graduate from high school (Meyer, 1997). This new requirement was hotly debated and, in order to quell public outcry, the Maryland State Department of Education provided each of its 24 school districts the authority to design their own implementation plans (Megyeri, 1997). The result is that some school districts fully embed the SSL requirement into their curricula while others expect students to earn the majority of their SSL hours outside the school walls (Maryland Service-Learning, n.d.).

Montgomery County Public Schools, the largest school district in Maryland (2017 Largest School Districts, n.d.), has opted for a hybrid of both inside and outside the school walls opportunities for earning SSL hours (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.). State law mandated, again in 1993, that all Maryland middle schools must offer ten SSL hours, per grade level, through community service activities embedded in the curriculum (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.). Therefore, students who have earned 30 hours at the middle school level, through those curriculum embedded initiatives, will only need to earn 45 more hours during high school to meet the graduation requirement.

For example, the sixth-grade science curriculum provides for a voluntary outdoor education experience where students attend a nature center program for three days and two nights (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.). During their time at the center, students participate in some type of activity intended to benefit either the center or the environment and are awarded their ten SSL hours (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.).

Years after the law took effect in Maryland, debates on the efficacy of requiring students to participate in community service have continued to the present (Galley, 2003). While supporters of service learning argue even students who perform mundane acts of service are learning skills and contributing to their communities, opponents counter that the service is not of value unless it relates to recent learning (Galley, 2003). Since Maryland's legislation, similar debates have erupted around the country as other jurisdictions attempt to enact similar requirements (Loupe, 2000).

If the goal of the SSL graduation requirement was to develop citizens who valued community service, the results are not promising. Sparks (2013) reported a spike in eighth grade volunteering was seen directly after the law was passed. However, the increased rates of eighth grade volunteering have gradually decreased and leveled out by 2010 (Sparks, 2013). Prior to the SSL requirement, Maryland high school seniors were more likely to engage in community service than other high school seniors when compared nationally (Sparks, 2013). However, by 2011, high school seniors in Maryland were significantly less likely to participate in community service when compared nationally with same-aged students elsewhere (Sparks, 2013).

Goals of Service Learning

The goal of Maryland's then governor, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, when establishing the SSL graduation requirement was to develop good citizens by showing kids they could make a difference by engaging in service activities (Megyeri, 1997). However, Sparks (2013) later argued that the defining of what determines a good citizen is subjective and dependent on personal interpretations. Cipolle (2004) described SSL as a situation highly influenced by politics with resultant conflicting goals.

For example, Republicans view community service as a way of transferring to citizens tasks for which Democrats believe the government should bear responsibili-

ty (Cipolle, 2004). Cipolle (2004) argued values are a significant component in the SSL equation and asked "whose values are deemed important when determining community service activities for students?"

Models for Service Learning

A variety of models exist for SSL programs. Winans-Solis (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore social justice benefits for students participating in a highly-organized SSL opportunity that culminated in a trip to the Dominican Republic. Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) conducted a quantitative study intended to explore how emotional development was impacted by SSL which also described a highly-organized opportunity that culminated in a trip of significant distance. In contrast, not all SSL plan models are highly organized or rewards-based.

Quantitative measures were used by Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, and Benson (2006) to study ambiguous SSL involvement of students. In this study, data were collected through self-reporting by students who were only asked how much time they spent volunteering and not about what types of SSL experiences that were involved.

Some SSL opportunities are facilitated by religious organizations (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014). Other SSL opportunities may be designed to occur within the walls of classrooms (Richards, Sanderson, Celio, Grant, Choi, George, & Deane, 2013) while still other opportunities may be designed to occur outside of class time (Manko, 2010). Winans-Solis (2014) indicated the program he explored involved a high degree of adult-to-student mentorship by community members.

Benefits of Service Learning

Many benefits are associated with SSL. Improvements in self-esteem (Storm, 2010), critical thinking (Cipolle, 2004), school attendance (Cipolle, 2004; Scales, et al, 2006), grades (Scales, et al., 2006; Sparks, 2013), and other academic outcomes (Scales, et al., 2006) were noted. Both Richards et al. (2013) and Storm (2010) described an increased development of leadership skills.

Cipolle (2004), through her focus on determining whether using SSL to counter hegemonic practices was valid, indicated SSL provides students opportunities to explore their communities while struggling to determine their identities and ultimate roles in the greater society. This observa-

tion by Cipolle (2004) provided evidence to support Kackar-Cam and Schmidt's (2014) assertion that SSL has the potential to influence significant developmental tasks, such as searching for identity, that occur during adolescence.

Scales et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study to explore potential relationships between SSL and students who experience low socioeconomic status (LSES). Their (Scales et al., 2006) findings were that LSES students experienced higher levels of academic success when they also participated in SSL activities. Additionally, these researchers reported less of an achievement gap between students of higher and lower incomes. While this seems promising for schools with high LSES populations, Scales et al. (2006) warned that their study was purely correlational in a closed environment and more longitudinal studies are needed to validate their results.

Outcomes of Service Learning

The ultimate outcomes of SSL are mixed. Winans-Solis (2014) reported participants were resistant at the outset to engage in SSL, but, as they became more aware of oppressive social structures, they began to understand the need for and role their efforts could play. The formation of community and greater perceptions of accountability for at-risk students was also realized (Winans-Solis, 2014). Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) reported SSL may be an effective strategy for increasing feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness which could positively influence future volunteering.

Several negatives were also identified. When SSL was required as part of school programming, students were perceived as viewing it as homework instead of as an opportunity to make differences in their communities (Sparks, 2013). A decrease in feelings of autonomy was perceived when SSL was required instead of it being voluntary (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

Richards et al. (2013) reported no significant differences were seen in the area of diversity acceptance, but also explained that the participants in the study were primarily from a demographic who may have received more diversity training than is typical for other groups of youth.

Storm (2010) reported that participation in SSL did not influence student enrollment in post high school education. Requiring students to participate in SSL resulted in a decrease in volunteering at later ages (Sparks, 2013).

Problems with Service Learning

SSL program implementation is not without problems. Some of the most significant issues occur when the tasks are not incorporated in classroom environments (Manko, 2010). For example, students who must find their own tasks experience a lack of opportunities (Manko, 2010).

Definitions for what qualifies as an acceptable SSL task might be vague, which results in extreme variances in service activities and associated purposes to the point where some students may be awarded credit for questionable service (Sparks, 2013). A lack of time and planning by adults for SSL activities frequently results in students not perceiving those activities as meaningful (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014; Sparks, 2013). Tendencies for SSL projects to be short-term often do more harm than good (Cipolle, 2004).

Despite good intentions, SSL can lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes, exploitation, and the furthering of empowerment to privileged groups who may perceive those they serve as less than themselves because perceptions benefits are one-sided (Cipolle, 2004). The time, money, and administrative support necessary for quality SSL programs is not always available (Manko, 2010). Richards et al (2013) concluded that research about SSL has not caught up with the passion supporting it.

Recommendations for Service Learning Program Implementation

Recommendations have been offered by many to aid in the implementation of successful SSL programs. More opportunities for SSL should be incorporated in classroom environments (Manko, 2010). Students should be given SSL tasks that allow them to have some responsibility and that enables them to see how their actions are related to established goals (Winans-Solis, 2014).

Winans-Solis (2014) also recommended providing students opportunities to apply their academic knowledge towards efforts intended to create social change. SSL should be not be required, but should instead be voluntary (Storm, 2010). SSL program designers also need to consider multicultural issues (Cipolle, 2004).

Recommendations for Future Research

Scales et al. (2006) recommended that more longitudinal studies to determine relationships between variables, particularly in terms of perceived benefits, should be

conducted. For example, while their study (Scales et al., 2006) found higher levels of SSL participation were correlated with higher levels of academic achievement for LSES students, the researchers acknowledged that students who are motivated to participate in SSL might also be more motivated to achieve academically.

Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) acknowledged the homogeneous nature of their participant group and suggested that more studies are needed to explore the impacts of SSL on other demographics. Additionally, Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) recommended studying SSL participation both connected to and apart from religious influence to determine how the presence of religion impacts SSL outcomes.

More studies also need to be conducted to determine student perceptions of their own SSL experiences, since the quality of experiences has the potential to impact future volunteering (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

Gaps in the Literature Relative to Service Learning

Of specific interest to me is the observation that Hispanic students do not typically participate in the embedded outdoor education opportunity and therefore do not earn the SSL hours provided during the sixth grade curriculum in Maryland schools. Because the purpose of this literature review was to support a future study that will seek to explore issues of equity presented by a specific SSL program as it relates to Hispanic/Latino students, I hoped to find relevant information regarding how required SSL impacts diverse groups of students. Gaps in the literature were identified for three areas relevant to the future study.

Diversity and Graduation Rates

I was unable to locate data to explain whether Maryland's SSL graduation requirement has had negative impact on graduation rates as the result of students not earning the required hours. The literature does not address efforts and strategies used for high school students in danger of not meeting the requirement. Research was not found to address impacts, which may be specifically felt, on diverse groups. Because Maryland is the only state to have a mandated SSL graduation requirement (Sparks, 2013), data from other states that could potentially inform the research in this area does not exist.

Research to indicate current public perceptions of the Maryland SSL requirement

also was not found. While there is balance between quantitative and qualitative studies, nearly all the research on SSL has used small groups of participants from rather homogeneous groups.

Challenges to Participation

While challenges to student participation in SSL were identified, those challenges were presented only on a macro level. Manko (2010) identified a lack in SSL opportunities for students who must seek to earn hours outside of the classroom. Kackar-Cam and Schmidt (2014) described how organizational involvement, such as religious groups, impacts SSL opportunity.

However, the literature does not address how students who are new to this country or who come from families devoid of organizational association might find opportunities that will enable them to meet the graduation requirement. Research to indicate impacts on the academic futures of students who do not participate in the embedded middle school SSL opportunities was not located. While lack of SSL participation was acknowledged in other areas of the country (Scales et al., 2006), reasons for that lack of involvement were not provided.

Curriculum Equity

Cipolle (2004) presented issues of equity as being relational to SSL. However, I was unable to locate research that explored potential issues of equity created when required SSL is part of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The purpose of this discussion has been to gain an understanding of the history, goals, implementation, and outcomes of SSL relational to curriculum equity. Self-determination theory and critical theory were used in the theoretical framework. The findings of this review are somewhat mixed and beg two primary questions.

It seems that, although SSL is a popular strategy for engaging students, consistencies in the areas of definition, intended goals, and implementation are a problem. The fact that research does not support making SSL mandatory (Storm, 2010), combined with longitudinal research that has specifically reported that the results for Maryland's students (Sparks, 2013) are not in alignment with the defined goals of the established requirements, causes me to wonder what the intended objective

currently is for continuing to require SSL as a graduation requirement.

Hispanic students now comprise the largest group of students in Montgomery County Public Schools (St. George, 2016). It has been my observation that Hispanic students have lower participation rates in field trips, especially the outdoor education field trip, than other groups of students. Hispanic students also experience lower graduation rates than other groups in the largest school district in Maryland (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.).

Thus I must conclude that more research is needed to assess how the curricular requirement of SSL impacts these students relative to both their social development and academic achievement. To proceed with the current program requirements without such knowledge is not good educational policy.

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