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The Banneker History Project: Historic Investigation of a Once Segregated School

by Marilynnne Boyle-Baise and Paul Binford

Abstract

The Banneker History Project was a service learning project in which students investigated the history of the Benjamin Banneker School, a segregated school that operated from 1915–1951 in a Midwestern college community. This article discusses the research these students conducted and the perceptions they adopted as a result of their work.

The Banneker History Project (BHP) was a service learning effort that involved school, university, and community partners in reconstructing the history of the Benjamin Banneker School. In 2001, the director of the Banneker Community Center and the local president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People proposed a historical investigation of the Banneker School as part of an initiative to foster campus-community partnerships. The following year, a group of teachers, professors, and community members, including the authors of this paper, came together to help make the BHP happen.

The Benjamin Banneker School, located only a mile from a major research university in the Midwest, operated as a segregated school for African Americans from 1915 to 1951. At the height of its popularity, the school served 111 African-American students in grades 1–8. The Banneker School closed because of declining enrollment and the repeal of segregation at the state level. The school then became the Banneker Community Center, which functions to this day.

The perceptions of the high school students, who over a two-year period conducted the majority of the investigatory work for the BHP, are examined in this article. The first year, 30 students obtained 18 oral histories from Banneker School alumni. The second year, 25 students gathered information about the school from five different sources: teacher portraits, census studies, neighborhood mapping, photo searches, and newspa-

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per archives. They also added another oral history to the database. This group then developed and presented a museum-like exhibit of the Banneker School's history.

The students met almost every Friday for an hour during class time devoted to school clubs or special activities. Students worked collaboratively in inquiry teams, each directed by one or two project partners. At times, the school allowed them to

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take field trips to collect historic data from archives and community sites. Alumni from the Banneker School met with students during this time to answer questions that arose from their investigations, often retelling and clarifying stories gathered earlier as part of the oral histories. Students also worked off-campus with a university archivist and a photographer to develop the exhibit of their findings.

This case study focuses on how the 25 students who conducted the research in the second year of the project constructed new understandings as a result of their participation in this service learning effort. These include:

- understandings students formed about social justice;
- reactions students had to authentic, inquiry-based pedagogy; and
- views of citizenship students developed from involvement in a grassroots initiative.

Based on this data, the authors offer insights for teachers who use service learning in their classes.

Several questions guided this study:

- What understandings do students form about racism and segregation from doing service work related to social justice?
- How do students understand history from doing firsthand inquiry into a school's past?
- How do students think of themselves as citizens based on their participation in such a project?

Service Learning for Social Justice, Historic Understanding, and Empowerment

The BHP was primarily a social justice education project that used community service as its base. Adams (1997) and Bell (1997) suggested that social justice education should help students develop a sense of personal agency and social responsibility, analyze oppression at individual and institutional levels, and connect social understanding to civic action. Parker (2003) proposed that educators help students to become just indi-

viduals who work toward just societies by encouraging them to think from the perspectives of others and question underlying causes for systemic inequities. According to Adams (1997), activism is critical to social justice education; without it, awareness can lead to a sense of hopelessness.

Wade (2001) described eight characteristics of community service learning projects for social justice:

- student-centered learning;
- collaborative inquiry and partnership building;
- experiential learning;
- intellectual inquiry and perspective taking;
- analytical, social critique;
- multicultural emphasis;
- value-based consideration; and
- social activism focused on equity.

Boyle-Baise (2002) called this approach “multicultural service learning” or service work that affirms diversity, builds community, and questions inequality. Multicultural service learning should offer students opportunities to work with individuals who struggle with racism or live in poverty.

The BHP project also put students to work in the service of history. Gallman (2000) and Camarillo (2000) suggested that students make connections between current field experiences and past realities to enhance historic understanding. According to Camarillo (2000), service-learning projects can provide realistic experiences that encourage students to question how current problems are rooted in historical contexts. Students in secondary-level schools, particularly in western societies, tend to personalize history (Den Heyer 2003; Hallden 1998). Den Heyer (2003) suggested, therefore, that service-learning projects, like the BHP, emphasize social movements rather than individual heroism.

The BHP project gave students an opportunity to bring a forgotten tale of educational inequality to light, which resulted in these students believing that one can and should bring about community change. Service learning often is considered a vehicle for civic empowerment, helping develop a sense of agency and social responsibility (e.g., Barber 1992; Battistoni 1997). According to Schwerin (1997), service learning can empower students by increasing their political skills, developing their critical consciousness, and constructing relationships with community groups.

Several other service learning projects directly informed this project. Anand et al. (2002) helped seventh-grade students study the history of desegregation in their town. Those students, like the students who were involved in this study, conducted oral histories with people who participated in struggles for equity which, thereby, deepened their understandings of the politics of race. Joeden-Forgey and Puckett (2000) worked with college history majors in the historic study of an urban, African-American neighborhood. Similar to this study, students learned to conduct primary, historic inquiry and

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uncovered documents that revealed the past accomplishments of a minority group. Youniss and Yates (1997) studied the effect that working in a soup kitchen while taking a social justice course had on middle-class, urban African-American high school students. In their essays and discussions, students (quoted in Youniss and Yates 1997, 81) described themselves as willing to “fight for what is right” and to become “a force in the world.”

Data Collection and Analyses

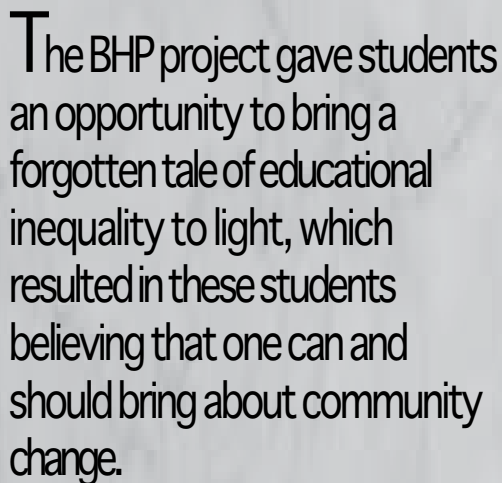
The BHP was a qualitative, naturalistic, and ethnographic study that sought opinions held by student participants using an interpretive lens (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; LeCompte, Preissle and Tesch 1993). Potential distinctions related to students’ race/ethnicity, prior community service, and home neighborhood were examined. Leaders of the BHP project, in conjunction with the project’s partners, observed the students, collected interview data, and took field notes.

The 25 students who participated voluntarily in the second year of the project received no course or service-learning credit or grade. Three students were male; two were biracial (African American and European American, and Hispanic and European American) and one was European American. The remaining 22 students were female; three were African American, two were Indian American, one was Latina (Brazilian American), one was Israeli American, and 14 were European American. There was a mix of juniors (12) and seniors (13). Four students were from the neighborhood in which the

Banneker School is located. Twenty students had prior experience with community service. Most considered themselves involved citizens, though their engagement ranged from volunteer stints at church or the community kitchen to intensive fund-raising and construction work for the school’s chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

A combination of interview, participant observation, and document collection methods was used to triangulate data (Denzin 1989). Three 30–45-minute interviews were conducted with students in small groups throughout the year. To ensure consistency, scheduled standardized formats were used (Denzin 1989). More

than 30 hours of field notes were taken during weekly seminars, project leaders’ meetings, and field trips. E-mail communications related to the BHP also became part of the data.



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In an effort to remain open to what students said and how they said it, multiple data sources (Strauss and Corbin 1998) were examined. The literature also heightened sensitivity to opinions that emerged from the data. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Line-by-line analysis and open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) identified major themes, noting the names of students next to their ideas and counting the frequency at which ideas were mentioned. Constant comparison analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) grasped distinctions in students' perceptions related to race, prior community service, or home neighborhood.

Observation data provided a general description of what happened in the field and served to clarify, corroborate, and question students' self-reports (i.e., interviews and reflective writings). Critical incidents cited in field notes were studied to learn more about students' perceptions of racism, segregation, or social justice. E-mails supported trends that emerged from observations and interviews.

Learning about Racism

Three themes about racism, segregation, and social justice emerged from the data collected about the Banneker School: (1) it's all new to me, (2) racism wasn't so bad, and (3) it's how people lived every day.

Students were overwhelmingly shocked to learn that their town once housed a segregated school. One student proclaimed, "Our town, once racially segregated? No way! I've lived here for 14 years and this never crossed my mind. Our town is very diverse today. Just by looking at my high school I can see how true this is." Many knew about slavery and Jim Crow activities, but considered racism a brutal condition found in Southern states. Most students had never heard of the Banneker Community Center or knew that it had once been a segregated school. "It's all new to me" was a phrase heard repeatedly among European American students. However, the African-American students who participated in the project said that they found stories of past discrimination to be "things I pretty much expected."

Banneker elders, or alumni of the school, described the neighborhood as integrated at that time. African-American and European-American families lived on the same block and often stuck together because they lacked material wealth and were ostracized by the well-heeled citizens affiliated with the university. On school days, African-American and European-American children walked together until they had to split up to go to separate schools. Some European-American students took these stories to mean that racism "really wasn't that bad," adding that people were not "killing one another or setting houses on fire," nor were the races "completely separate." Some students tried to figure out why "nobody seemed incensed" by racial separation. They began to realize that there were different kinds of racism, ranging from tacit to mentally degrading to physically brutal. One student said, "There are different levels of racism which I hadn't realized before." Another noted, "I had been aware that certain groups of people, whether by race or class, get the short end of the stick. Now I'm able to point out specific examples and recognize how those occur."

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Most students of color made more sophisticated distinctions and struggled to construct a broader social framework for racism. They recognized that though there was “a lot of love and friendship in the neighborhood,” no one said racism was “not so bad.”

A majority of students stated that hearing personal accounts of segregation was the highlight of the BHP. These accounts made racism personal—something that people lived every day. One participant said, “I am learning a lot about individual people instead of the history as a whole. It’s been cool to look into the life of one person affected by the Banneker School.” Elders told compelling stories about their lives as children in a segregated setting. As they told these personal stories, the elders often became emotional because they were considered different from—often inferior to—European-American students. Students listened in stunned, attentive silence, recognizing that racism was intensely personal and had a lifelong impact.

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Learning Through Firsthand Investigation

Most students found the personal research they did more interesting than textbook-oriented learning and seemed intrigued by creating a story instead of reading it secondhand. They talked a great deal about two themes: getting to write the stories and what makes history.

In the BHP, students constructed, questioned, documented, and presented knowl-

edge about racism in their community. When they compared abstract, anesthetized information in textbooks to real, personal narratives from elders, they found textbook-based study wanting. One student said, “All my other experiences with research have been looking it up in a book. But, we’re getting to write the story.” Doing firsthand research helped students connect. One student explained, “It helps you get attached to what you are doing. I can say I know the guy who lived in this house.” Many students realized that people are important sources of historic information. One student explained, “Getting to know people and listening to their actual stories instead of just reading about what happened helps you understand it more thoroughly.”

A third of the students said that they heard views rarely found in their textbooks. They added, “A lot you learn in textbooks is about the South. Personal accounts are something you don’t get in history classes.” Though students seemed to find personal histories compelling, they found situating these stories in context difficult. For example, when one elder recalled dressed-up African-American children riding to a university play in the back of a flatbed truck while European-American children rode on school buses, some students wondered why elders accepted this

treatment. They did not understand that the times supported acquiescence, not resistance, to racism.

Students discovered that conducting research was a difficult, yet interesting and worthwhile process. They realized that historical information was not readily available. The students also found that stories of racism can be lost because people either do not recognize their worth or are not proud to tell the stories. One student related, "It's very difficult to find the information you want because community members didn't think it was important to keep records of Banneker School."

Citizenship: Making a Difference

Spurred by their historic studies, students wondered how they could confront racism in their own lives. Though the goals of this service learning project—learning about racism and doing inquiry—were somewhat motivating, most students were drawn in by the chance to right a wrong in their community. Many had done prior community service and looked for ways to become better citizens. "The project made me aware of things I can do to become a better citizen. I already had this feeling that I should help and make people aware of problems. It opened my eyes to problems here, as well as in the world." The project reinforced students' commitments to give back to the community. One student explained, "I realized that if I didn't do the work, no one else would. I learned I can be as active as I want without limitations." In the future, the students planned to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. One student explained, "I don't like it when people don't take action and just stand back in their own little shell." For some students, making a difference meant challenging their own biases and then making an effort every day to talk to people of different ethnicities and races. At least half of the group felt more informed about and connected to the community.

Their comments suggested a coming of age: they felt more grown up, more in control of who they were, and more in touch with issues that impacted their community. Students wanted to learn more about segregation and to teach this information to others. Some took a more critical stance, talking more about becoming active, justice-oriented citizens.

Knowledge of local history made students feel more connected to their community. They defined informed citizens as better citizens and found themselves "becoming more aware" of racism in their town. Many students stated, "What is important is to get out there and make people aware of the problems with segregation and stereotypes." Students felt empowered by their work. One African-American student said that she was more comfortable talking about racism, while another felt that he had more pride in his background.

Project leaders arranged for local leaders actively engaged in social justice causes to speak with students. One panel member asked students to consider how often they interacted with groups other than their own, urging them to get to know someone different. Subsequent discussion focused on students' awareness of their own school cliques.

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In final interviews, students described the divisions they now saw in their schools. "When I walk through the hallways, I can see that people are divided up," said one student. Other students felt that nothing had really changed. "There was segregation in the past and there still is," said one student. "I'm more aware of it now." Students also said that as they learned about segregation, they gained an appreciation for going to school with students from all racial groups.

A few students, mostly those of color, talked explicitly about taking action for social justice and planned to be activists. This group defined social action as "acting against injustice," "supporting anti-racism," and "questioning oppression." These students thought they had gained leadership and organizational skills that would serve them well in those roles.

Patterns and Possibilities

This service learning project supports many of the aims mentioned in the literature for teaching social justice, developing historic understanding, and practicing citizen empowerment. As envisioned by Adams (1997), most students began to shift their views of racism, to see racism as a personal affront, and to develop more nuanced understandings of segregation. The elders' firsthand testimonies offered compelling stories that prompted conceptual shifts in students' thinking about racism. Direct contact with survivors of segregation seemed particularly powerful in helping the students see things

from others' perspectives and change their thinking as suggested by Parker (2003). Students did not back away from serious study of injustice or racism. Rather, they seemed ready to confront their misconceptions and inform their oversights. This service learning project helped students tackle thorny issues by learning about injustice from people who experienced it.

Most students found the personal research they did more interesting than textbook-oriented learning and seemed intrigued by creating a story instead of reading it secondhand.

Though the project initially did not involve studying social movements that impacted this era, as suggested by Den Heyer (2003), varying perceptions of segregation fostered some discussion of contexts. Past events were linked to present events and, as suggested by Camarillo (2000), previous instances of school segregation were related to present-day segregation cases. Discussion time was too limited, however, to explore these comparisons at length.

As evidenced by the BHP, service learning can empower students civically by helping them develop personal agency and social responsibility (e.g., Battistoni 1997). Students seemed to become more conscious of racism and more willing to act to reduce it (Schwerin 1997). They also left the BHP with a commitment to be a civic force in the world.

Implications for Teachers

The BHP connected students with a history of local racism that they did not know existed. For many, it was transformational to grasp the meaning of being marginalized in history. Students' desire to right the wrong of past racism kept them engaged for an entire year on a project for which they received no class credit. This suggests that teachers should look for ways for students to tap into histories of silence and bring untold stories of inequality to life.

Historical inquiry can be an engaging platform for service learning. Weary of staid textbooks, students eagerly embraced the challenge of forging their own historical narratives. BHP participants suggested that other teachers and students find worthy, local history projects—things that need to be done, but haven't been—and pursue them through primary research.

The BHP also supported the use of eyewitness accounts. Student discussions with the elders produced some of the project's most poignant moments. Firsthand experiences, however, need to be treated sensitively. Eyewitness accounts can differ substantially from the generic versions often found in classroom texts, offering more critical and complicated views.

The importance of the culminating event—in our case, the unveiling of the exhibit—cannot be overemphasized. The exhibit served as a motivator throughout the school year, with many students dedicating after-school hours to its completion.

Ideally, projects similar to the Banneker History Project would be offered as a course or incorporated into a course offering such as American History or American Government. Because the BHP was an extracurricular activity, scheduling sessions and communicating with students were problematic. Ample time was not available for BHP participants to reflect and discuss history and social justice issues. Teachers also should consider scheduling a review midway through the project to help resolve problems and maintain project momentum.

A critical factor in any service learning project is a vibrant teacher motivator. The BHP project was blessed with a dynamic, committed social studies teacher who believed in social justice, recruited students to participate, and promoted the project within the community.

An Invitation for More Discussion

A description and analysis of the Banneker History Project as perceived by high school students was presented in this paper. This study, along with those mentioned earlier, suggests that service learning can be a basis for social justice education and historic inquiry can be a tool for examining past injustice. Such examinations can transform how students perceive themselves as human beings and citizens.

At the end of the Banneker History Project, students were asked whether such a project should be tackled by others. They overwhelmingly said yes. Ideally, this study will spur similar learning projects.

Readers interested in obtaining detailed reference information for the quotations cited in this article or in-depth data are encouraged to contact the authors at boylebai@indiana.edu.

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