Building Community Partnerships: Learning to Serve While Learning to Teach

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Abstract

Service learning is a well researched pedagogical approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning. This essay describes two special education teacher preparation approaches that successfully linked candidate learning outcomes together with service to the community. One approach attached undergraduate teacher candidates in special education with an elementary school to facilitate the delivery of an afterschool learning program for students in need of additional skill development. The other approach connected graduate candidates with community partners in support of the development and implementation of specific projects of value to the community agency. Each of these collaborative learning opportunities created a win for the community partner and a win for the teacher candidates, as each of these opportunities better prepared these candidates to build a strong sense of community from within their school and also by reaching beyond the walls of their own setting.

Key Words: service learning, special education, teachers, preparation, collaboration, community, engagement, partnerships, serve, teaching, collaboration, agencies, organizations, afterschool, after-school, programs, needs, university, students, candidates, preservice, inservice

Introduction

Service learning is built on the foundation of inquiry, continuous learning, and discovery, which has been identified as the scholarship of teaching and

learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service learning in teacher education is a vehicle that provides teacher candidates with an opportunity to construct meaning while engaging in a service activity that emerges from and informs classroom context. It is imperative that the service learning experience relies on reflection and ties the service experience back to specific learning goals (Gonsier-Gerdin & Royce-Davis, 2005). Reserach literature suggests that universities are not adequately preparing educators to collaborate with parents and the community (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008; Prater & Sileo, 2004; Washburn-Moses, 2005) even though such engagement is critical for success with all students (Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Service learning has been touted as a pedagogical approach to provide candidates with real world experiences in partnering with parents and community agencies (Gonsier-Gerdin & Royce-Davis, 2005; Mayhew & Welch, 2001). There are numerous definitions of service learning found throughout the literature, yet Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition has been adopted by several universities and is applied in this essay; they define service learning as

> a credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

While effective collaboration among professionals can result in improved services and enhanced quality of life for children with disabilities (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006), collaboration has become an essential skill for serving all children within schools and beyond (Friend & Cook, 2009). Through the service learning experience, university students engage in genuine collaboration activities that are valuable not only to their educational process but also to the community partner. The community may include businesses, health care facilities, and not-for-profit organizations, as well as individuals (Hands, 2005; Sanders, 2001). For the purpose of this essay we define community as a group of people who reside in a specific locality. Hands (2005) describes the need for a "win-win situation" for successful school–community partnerships. While teacher candidate development is a central component of the process, the community partner must also benefit from the relationship. The specified candidate activities relate directly to the accomplishment of the candidates' identified learning outcomes, which are related to the specific academic curriculum. Through this process university students develop an understanding of the relationship between their service project and the academic curriculum. Such understanding is demonstrated through, but not limited to, ongoing

reflection, analysis, discussion, and/or oral presentation. Candidates are able to connect the specific activities involved in the service project with the concepts, values, beliefs, principles, and theoretical framework learned throughout the course. By participating in the service learning experience, candidates discover how they can engage in their civic responsibility and contribute to the welfare of a diverse society (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Jacoby & Associates, 2003).

According to Novak, Murray, Scheuermann, and Curran (2009), three essential characteristics are present in authentic service learning experiences, including: (a) a reciprocal relationship in which a specific community-based need is met, (b) the integration of academic content within the service learning experience, and (c) ongoing reflection connecting the content and the experience to personal growth. In this essay, we describe two service learning experiences within the special education teacher preparation programs at two Midwestern universities. One program is for undergraduates at a small private university, and the other is for graduate students at a large state university; both programs continue to be available for current teacher candidates. The two opportunities represent diverse approaches to service learning as a component of teacher preparation because the university students were at different developmental levels. The three characteristics of service learning were integral to the delivery of both experiences. Teacher preparation for special educators has long included training in collaboration, since these teachers are charged with teaming to develop individualized support programs for students with special needs. Even though the two examples shared are from the special education arena, today's general educators and community support personnel are facing the prospect of serving learners and clients with diverse needs that go well beyond disability. Community partners, including our schools, and the individuals who serve children and their families need to recognize the need to work together to obtain lasting positive impacts (Friend & Cook, 2009). These experiential service learning programs offer specific ideas to help.

Afterschool Learning Program for Undergraduates

The undergraduate opportunity consisted of a block of two courses and a field experience taught by one faculty member during the candidates' junior year (typically). A methods course, *Assessing and Teaching Children with Educational Needs*, was paired with a collaboration course titled *Communication, Consultation, and Teaming*. The intent was to create an academic realization for the teacher candidates that a special educator does not operate in a vacuum. When one needs to assess a learner, one also needs to communicate with parents and other teachers to maximize what is learned. When one wants to

employ a specific intervention, one also needs to consult with colleagues so that all adults in the child's environment are aware of the methods being utilized. When one documents that a child has made progress, then one needs to celebrate success with the entire team. The academic content of these two courses was different and yet complementary. Teacher candidate objectives for the block of courses included the following:

1. Recognize the role of assessment in curriculum development and implementation.
2. Integrate a variety of methods and intervention strategies to address content and behavior simultaneously.
3. Work as a cooperative, collaborative member of a team to plan and implement instruction.
4. Evaluate, interpret, and communicate results of candidate assessment to students, parents, and colleagues in both written and conference formats.
5. Utilize various communication techniques to enhance interactions and manage conflict.

In addition to the six credit hours of academic content, the teacher candidates were required to commit to a field-based lab in order to gain real-life experience in a school. For most teacher candidates this was the first time they would move beyond simple observation or tutoring into the realm of actually teaching real learners. They would be placed into teams of two or three to work together to plan and deliver the program. They would become responsible for all aspects of providing an afterschool learning program for teacher-identified students in grades 2–6 who were in need of extra support whether or not they were already identified for special education. Learning groups were typically 6–9 students. Teacher candidates were required to commit a minimum of 30 contact hours of service to the school partner.

The school partner identified for this service learning partnership was in an area with high need and low funding. The building principal jumped at the chance to provide free services to children while recognizing the great potential for growth in the teacher candidates. As it was clear that the direct supervisory responsibility for the program rested with the university faculty member and principal, the school-based teachers were anxious to nominate potential participants. Once the groundwork of the partnership was in place, it was time for the university students to meet the principal, tour the school, and meet the teachers. The reciprocal nature of the partnership was clear in that the students got extra help, the teachers got progress updates, the school got to provide a service to parents, and the teacher candidates got to experience a high degree of autonomy in a safe situation. Everyone wins.

Over the following two weeks, teacher candidates contacted parents to assess interest in the program and schedule face-to-face conferences. During the conference week, each team of teacher candidates were also in the process of completing classroom observations, meeting with teachers, and conducting initial assessments to identify student needs. They integrated key course concepts into each of these experiences. For instance, talking about collaboration with parents in class was very different than picking up the phone and calling them! This step was one of the first pivotal moments for the soon-to-be teachers. Additionally, they were actually using assessment measures with real live learners *and* using that data to plan theme-based units that would address the needs of all of the students assigned to their group. Finally it was time to start the program!

During 15 sessions of 90 minutes each, the teacher candidates delivered a series of thematic lessons addressing individual learner needs. Affording the students with highly engaging lessons was a priority as the program participants had already spent the whole day at school. While the university supervisor assisted with organizational items (e.g., snacks), reviewed lesson plans, and observed sessions, no grading of the field activities occurred. The teacher candidates were reconditioned to reflect upon student progress as a gauge of their own performance. This was another difficult transition for the teacher candidates. In addition to this step, they had to manage conflict on a variety of levels. While the supervisor supported this process, the teacher candidates had to actually confront issues such as peers not being prepared, teachers sending students to the afterschool program late, and parents who failed to show up to retrieve their child at the end of the day. Beyond the problems with collaboration, teacher candidates also gained insights regarding methods; they learned that some lessons flop and how to make instantaneous adjustments based upon student responses. To ensure that teacher candidates were making the connections between the content and the field, frequent opportunities for both written and oral reflection were provided.

The sense of responsibility that the teacher candidates experienced for facilitating student progress was expected. The bonus was the sense of responsibility they felt for the entire school community. The teacher candidates communicated regularly with their students' teachers and parents. They showcased their students' work in a celebration event so that the parents, teachers, students, principal, and university team could share in the progress the students had made. The teacher candidates emerged from this experience with the clear recognition that being an educator extends beyond the classroom to the greater community in which the students they serve live. When given a final reflective activity in which the teacher candidates examined this experience and looked

to their future, they invariably noted the deeper values of the experience and the importance of connecting academia with practice. Students frequently commented that this experience gave them the confidence to trust in their abilities as an educator.

Some examples of the afterschool program activities were as follows:

- Parent Conference Checklist—Each team of undergraduates invited the parents of each learner in their group to individual conferences. During this meeting they followed a checklist of items in order to be more prepared for this new experience. The checklist included reminders about (a) welcoming the parent to the program (e.g., introductions, thank them for coming), (b) gathering insights about the learner (e.g., What would the parent like the team to know?, What expectations does the parent have for the experience?), (c) sharing the intent of the program (e.g., skill development, not homework completion sessions, not playtime), (d) collecting of completed forms (e.g., consent, emergency, pick-up authorization), and (e) wrapping up the visit (e.g., Any questions?, remind of first session dates/times, thanks).

- Student Assessment—Each team of undergraduates completed student profile sheets based upon a review of records (including any existing standardized assessments and Individualized Education Programs, if applicable), observations, teacher interviews, and parent input. In addition to these resources, each team completed a diagnostic evaluation of each student in a targeted content area. For example, if the student was having difficulty in math, the team might administer the Key Math assessment to better target their instruction. Each student profile summarized critical information to highlight student strengths and areas for development.

- Lesson Planning—Each team was required to produce 15 lesson plans targeting the individual learners in their group within the context of an overall learning theme for the experience. The university supervisor reviewed the plans on an ongoing basis since this was a developmental process. Each team selected three plans to submit for final assessment (i.e., grading).

- Progress Reports—Each team produced a summative report detailing individual learner progress that was distributed to the child's teacher and parents at a final celebration event showcasing work samples produced during the 15-session afterschool learning experience.

- Reflection Log—Each individual teacher candidate reflected, in writing, upon the variety of activities and experiences of this block course situation. Comments regarding any aspect of the block were encouraged (e.g., observations of lesson successes/concerns, experiences with collaboration among team/school personnel/parents, questions about applying readings

to practice). Candidates did not need to write lengthy entries, but did need to show they were taking the time to reflect upon these opportunities for professional growth. The university supervisor reviewed the logs weekly and provided written feedback regarding questions and observations noted by the candidate.

Community Partnership Projects for Graduate Candidates

While this school-based block approach was effective for undergraduates, embedding projects within an individual course can be effective as well, especially for making connections within the greater community. The graduate course, *Consultation and Collaboration,* had previously followed a traditional lecture-and-discussion format. In order to provide authentic experiences to students this course was redesigned with an experiential learning focus. *Consultation and Collaboration* is a semester course (16 weeks with three-hour classes held once a week) required by the university for graduate candidates seeking a master's degree in special education or school psychology. Graduate candidates, 12–20 in number, typically took the course in the last semester of their program just prior to graduation.

The primary objective of the course was to provide candidates with effective strategies for working with colleagues, community agencies, and schools. Through the course, graduate candidates were to explore effective strategies for collaboration, build their collaboration and consultation skills, and then relate them to larger issues that currently exist in education. In the process the graduate candidates refined skills for effective communication, developed skills for effectively participating in difficult interactions, and grew in their awareness of how collaborative interactions vary among professional groups and parents. Graduate candidate objectives for the course included the following:

1. Identify the importance of collaboration within the school or social service setting.
2. Connect various theories and models of psychological consultation with collaborative problem solving techniques.
3. Discover strategies, techniques, and methods used by successful change agents and consultants.
4. Utilize and evaluate effective problem solving frameworks for use in collaboration.

The Community Partnership Project, the major assignment in the course, was designed to provide graduate candidates with a real life experience while meeting the course objectives and bringing theory together with practice in

community collaboration. Prior to the first class the instructor contacted local community agencies to request their potential participation in the project. Once the community agencies were identified and agreed to participate, they submitted a project proposal indicating their agency need or issue as well as the expectations for student participation within the community setting for the designated 25-hour service learning project.

During the second class of the semester, the graduate candidates were encouraged to self-select a community project that best fit their individual interests. Not all available proposals were selected; all agencies submitting proposals had been informed that they might not be chosen. Teams consisted of two to four graduate candidates and one to three community agency representatives. Due to the nature of this project, the graduate candidates and community partners were required to work together collaboratively in order to meet the determined agency need.

The community team (graduate candidates and community members together) first met to discuss the project direction and develop a work plan to identify outcomes, objectives, evaluation procedures, and sustainability options. The graduate candidates logged their hours and kept a weekly reflective journal. Each week during class the teams reported their progress and, together with the instructor and their peers, discussed issues related to collaboration. Several teams had serious conflict and communication issues that needed to be resolved. In class, the instructor and peers provided suggestions and role played how to deal with the issues. The graduate candidates then came back to class after trying some of the suggestions and reported what strategies were tried and how they had worked. At times the instructor needed to attend community team meetings to model effective strategies to the graduate candidates, thus decreasing the intensity of the issues or bringing the team to a new level.

This project included using the skills and techniques of consultation, problem solving, the process of systemic change, teaming, and collaboration which the graduate candidates had learned throughout the course of the semester. The project needed to be something that would be implemented in a school or social service setting over a semester to meet an identified need in the school or community agency. The project had to have a beginning and an end in 16 weeks time. Furthermore, the graduate candidates were required to systematically reflect on their project as well as on the course content and relate the information learned to their own personal perspectives and careers. As part of the required work plan the graduate candidates needed to develop an evaluation process to determine the effectiveness of the project. The community member was required to complete an evaluation survey as one component of the evaluation process. Lastly, in order to keep the project possibilities ongoing,

the team needed to develop a sustainability plan. This plan described what the graduate candidates would leave with the community agency so the project could be continued or replicated. Many graduate candidates developed a portfolio or video describing the process with a *lessons learned* section. This step in the process helped the community agency see that the university was not just using them as a conduit to teach the graduate candidates but was genuinely concerned about the civic responsibility of affording ongoing progress of the project. The graduate candidates' culminating activity was to invite all the participating community members to class to participate in their presentation of the project.

Some examples of community partnership projects were as follows:

- Oral Histories—A disability agency was looking for someone to help them capture the oral histories of elderly parents who raised their children with disabilities in the mid-1900s. They wanted to develop a spot for National Public Radio (NPR). Graduate candidates assisted the agency representatives with the identification of individuals who wanted to share their history, developed interview questions, prepared the interviewee, coordinated the interview process, recorded the oral histories, edited the records, and organized the stories in a retrievable manner. This was a project the agency had wanted to complete but did not have the time or expertise to do so. The graduate candidates who chose this project were special education majors with media experience. They not only completed the project but provided the agency with a book describing the step-by-step process of developing oral histories for NPR broadcasting as part of their sustainability plan.

- Promoting Awareness with Law Enforcement Regarding Individuals of All Abilities—A law enforcement agency wrote a proposal for students to develop training for their county's law enforcement officers on the identification of and strategies for working with individuals with disabilities. Graduate candidates met with a team from the law enforcement agency, developed a needs assessment, and sent it out to local law enforcers. Based on the results of the needs assessment the graduate candidates, together with designated law enforcers, developed, implemented, and evaluated the training program. As part of the graduate candidates' sustainability plan, they left the agency with all training materials, including a detailed list of how to deliver the training complete with a script that went along with the power point presentation. The team also provided suggestions to improve the training based on the evaluations.

- Promoting University Awareness of the Effects of Drinking on Babies in the Womb Health Fair Project—A Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Agency requested help with organizing a booth and recruiting students for a Health Fair on the university campus. Graduate candidates learned about FASD. They then worked with the agency to identify their needs, developed a brochure, made posters, and designed the booth. They developed activities for individuals attending the fair. They then spent time recruiting participants by developing a non-alcoholic drink contest involving sororities and fraternities on campus. Lastly, they contacted the media and passed out flyers to recruit for the event. On the day of the Health Fair the graduate candidates and the community members were present to share the information and answer questions. This team evaluated their event and left a detailed book with directions and suggestions for running the event again as part of their sustainability plan.
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Friendship Groups—A Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) support agency requested help in facilitating social groups for children who have been diagnosed as having Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder as well as leading support groups for their families. This team of graduate candidates studied about FASD before they started their project. They identified the curriculum and practiced running a group. They led a practice group while the directors of the agency watched and provided constructive criticism. They then led 10-week sessions, one group for children and another one for their parents. The graduate candidates reflected with the community agency representatives after each session and made changes as needed. They then evaluated the project and left detailed plans for sustainability with the agency.
- Teaching Advocacy Skills to Individuals with Cognitive Impairments— This project was requested by a disability agency. They needed the team to help them develop a curriculum for adults with disabilities to learn how to participate on committees and boards to advocate for themselves. This team developed an advocacy curriculum and solicited input from individuals with disabilities as well as board members to critique the curriculum. They implemented the curriculum with 3 adults with cognitive impairments. They then left the curriculum with explicit instructions with the agency as their sustainability plan.
- Transitioning Preschool Students with Autism into an Inclusive Setting—A preschool for children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requested a team to assist them in preparing staff from an inclusive preschool to meet the needs of their transitioning preschoolers with ASD. The team first spent time in the school with the students with

ASD who were preparing to transition and their teachers; then they met with the teachers of the preschool with typically developing children. The team then assessed the typical preschool's teacher training needs prior to the transition and, together with the administration at the preschool for students with ASD, provided the requested training. The team then helped identify issues and concerns once the children began the transition process. The evaluation of the project by both preschools became part of the portfolio left with both schools to help with replication.

Upon Reflection

While each of these two approaches to service learning were delivered differently, each met the requisite characteristics of service learning previously noted in Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition and by Novak, Murray, Scheuermann, and Curran (2009). Both are credit-based opportunities to connect academic content to a need in the field, either in a school-based setting or a community-based setting. Each experience required ongoing, formative reflection as a way to assess goal attainment and professional growth. And each afforded a reciprocal relationship that was mutually beneficial for the university students and the community partner. Beyond the definition, each program helped these educators recognize the power of community as a way to support individuals with disabilities.

The undergraduate teacher candidates learned that being a teacher is complicated. They were stunned at the work load they experienced and lamented the fact that this was work that could not be ignored. They also learned that it can be a challenge to work so closely with such a variety of people—general education teachers, parents, students, administrators, faculty, co-teaching partners, and the occasional Girl Scout troop that shared the common areas of the school. As they progressed through the experience, they learned that the techniques taught in class are most helpful when learned well enough to be second nature as there was seldom time to say, "Just a minute, I'll look up that great active listening technique and get back to you!" It was only at the end of the semester that the instructor provided the teacher candidates with a list of all of the activities they had completed as a reality check of the series of steps they had taken. The teacher candidates learned that the more holistic approach to monitoring their own progress had helped them to move beyond point-picking into real-life practice. As the teacher candidates prepared the written progress reports to share with the teachers and parents of their students, they learned that watching student progress and the reactions of people is the most valuable kind of assessment input a teacher can get.

From the real experiences working with the community, graduate candidates learned that collaboration is not an easy process. It required the very skills that paralleled the course objectives. Graduate candidates needed to effectively communicate with each other as well as with their community agency representatives. They needed to listen to the needs presented by the community members. When the communication broke down, the project faltered. The graduate candidates learned how to effectively work with community partners to reach a common goal. Graduate candidates also learned how to work with individuals with a variety of styles and how to deal with and work toward resolution of conflict. Furthermore, the graduate candidates were provided with an opportunity to build relationships with community members and now have not only valuable experiences but also valuable resources.

In both cases, the community partners were given an opportunity to provide input regarding the teams and the program itself. The school-based input came from parents, students, and teachers based upon how well the teacher candidates and the program structure had addressed the assessment-based needs of individual learners. The community-based input came from the agency or school partners relative to the specific projects they had helped to develop. In both cases, services were provided that would have otherwise not existed. The school partner in the undergraduate situation had no resources to deliver an afterschool learning program for its students. Similarly, the graduate candidates were able to assist the community partners in completing aspects of projects that they otherwise may not have had the time or resources to complete. At the conclusion of both experiences, efforts to communicate the approaches used and progress made were shared with the partners in writing. Teachers and parents in the school-based experience received written progress reports along with a presentation of work samples on the last day of the program. At an even higher level of depth, the community members were all left with plans so that they could reproduce the respective projects in the future. Each agency also had received recommendations from the team implementing the relevant project.

Projects offering substantial impact are rarely without challenge. The undergraduates' school-based experience required extensive organization, not to mention forms and procedures, to ensure that each child was safe while in our care. Managing confidential medical forms, contact information, and performance data for approximately 50 children was a challenge. Steps to ensure that all snacks provided were without identified allergens meant that the faculty instructor provided all snacks. A system whereby each team of teacher candidates had access to and responsibility for the forms was developed in tandem with a procedure for making sure each child was sent home only with an acceptable adult at the end of each session. Finally, facilities were a challenge.

Finding space to work with small groups immediately after school was difficult, as many teachers still wanted to remain in their classrooms. Moving to common areas such as the library, gym, cafeteria, or outside worked on most days. However, there were times when hallways had to do, and the teacher candidates learned the value of being flexible! Interestingly, none of these obstacles were mentioned in any of the textbooks used in the academic portion of the experience. Without the service learning component taking these undergraduate teacher candidates into a partner school that needed us as much as we needed them, the development of these future teachers would have been far more superficial, and the elementary students would have received far less individualized attention. Was it worth it? You bet!

Challenges for a service learning project working with multiple community agencies and many more community members are certainly worth mentioning. Connecting with agencies and obtaining proposals as well as providing direction to the teams required many hours of time. Occasionally a community agency proposal was unclear because the agency was not sure how they wanted to meet their need. When this happened the team needed to work together with the agency to determine the agency need and the work plan steps. Teams needed to understand that the original proposal and the finished product were not necessarily going to be the same. Change is a given, and students needed to work through this concept. Students also needed to realize that the process was the learning experience, not necessarily the final product. All of those concepts were (and still are) part of the learning objectives for the course but were not something that could easily be taught out of a text. The students were able to experience collaboration firsthand through not only its trials, but mostly through a very rewarding collaborative experience. The entire experience was worth the time and energy for candidates to take up their civic responsibility and for the entire experience to be a "win" for the candidate and a "win" for the school community and beyond.

Additional benefits from these programs could be rendered if a more research-based evaluation process had been utilized. While data were gathered in each program, no official consents to use the information for purposes beyond program evaluation were sought. Therefore, many questions are open for future study: (a) How did the community partners perceive the programs? (b) Did student success within the afterschool context carry over into the classroom? (c) Were the projects started by the teacher candidates sustained? (d) What impact did the service learning experience have on the candidates? Utilizing appropriate methods to document these types of service learning experiences could be used to encourage others to build community partnerships that allow teachers to develop their own skills while they support their community.

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