"These Are Our Babies:" University Student Tutors, Urban Learners, Public School and University Staff Crafting Community through Service Learning

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Abstract

For nine semesters approximately 100 third through fifth graders have come by bus from their urban impact schools (Anyon, 2005) only a few city blocks away, to the campus of an historic Black university for tutoring. Pairs of university student tutors—typically freshmen, sophomores and juniors from multiple disciplines across campus—accept responsibility for groups of four to six children for two hours, two days a week. Service learning and social justice pedagogy (Chapman & Hobbel, 2010) ground their interactions. Findings to date indicate that the project supports public school efforts to reach and maintain Annual Yearly Progress, scaffolds child and tutor development toward critical literacy (Freire, 2004) and civic action, nurtures tutor dispositions for future civic engagement and especially teaching in hard-to-staff urban schools, and promotes collaboration and a redistribution power across members of the learning community that has emerged.

Keywords: Social justice pedagogy; service learning; critical literacy

Introduction

Every term since spring 2007, third through fifth graders gather with their tutors for two hours twice a week after school in the Student Union Exhibition Hall on the campus of North Carolina A&T University. A teacher from each of their schools, six to eight experienced undergraduate site directors and student research assistants, and university faculty volunteers coach the 12-20 tutoring groups. Located within a student-owned and highly visible space on the campus of an historic Black university (HBCU), the program draws supporters like bees to honey.

Student Union staff, student passers-by, and others notice the program and become participants, and the program has been woven into the fabric of university life. The young men's chorus Trick-or-Treated at Halloween, and came again to sing holiday carols. ROTC soldiers in uniforms and boots ducked their heads in to watch the children solving math problems with their bodies on a 10 X 60 foot runway, and signed up to tutor on the spot. During Greek Pledge Week, tutors took the children outside to observe the pageantry. At an end of the year celebration, Student Union housekeeping staff insisted on providing a giant sheet cake to celebrate the

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children's accomplishments. When a staff member was injured, one child wrote on his hand-made get well card, ―You are like a dad to me.‖ One tutor who plays classical violin took five minutes at the end one day to play for the children, a performance that led to a physics discussion when a child asked why the musician's fingers moved on the strings. Student Union staff members explain the program's nesting phenomenon best: ―These are our babies.‖

One focus of the program is meeting children's needs, but equally important is providing experiences that foster the development of ―generative teaching‖ ability in university tutors. Arnetha Ball (2009) defines generative teaching as the

> . . . ability to continually add to [one's] understanding by connecting . . . personal and professional knowledge with the knowledge that [teachers] gain from their students to produce . . . knowledge that is useful . . . in pedagogical problem solving (p. 47).

Ball (2009) argues that specific forms of ―efficacy, agency and advocacy‖ for urban learners are required of teachers who elect to remain in urban schools. (cf. NEA Reviews of Research on Best Practices in Education, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Michie, 2005; Berry & Hirsch, 2005; Brown, 2002; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002).

From its inception through spring 2009 the program, known by the acronym SMART (Service, Mentoring, Achievement, Responsibility, Teamwork), was funded by a Learn and Serve America grant. In August 2009 university students and faculty met with the principal of the elementary school that had been a SMART partner for the program's entire history, to explore strategies for sustaining the project. The infrastructure provided by the Learn and Serve funds included a culturally congruent library (cf. Ladson-Billings, 2004; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004) of children's book sets that reinforce state objectives for third through fifth grade math, science, and social studies, and support service learning (cf. Westheimer, 2005; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004); a handbook for tutors; and both consumable (markers, pencils, paper) and non-consumable materials (tabletop easels, rolling book carts, scissors). Of greater value, however, was the learning community that had emerged from those years of collaboration across university and public school partners and children. As Hargreaves and Fink (2006) argue, ―Sustainability is ultimately and inextricably about social justice‖ (p. 145).

A former tutor contacted the university's junior class to fund the children's snack, and the principal directed some school improvement funds to pay student site directors to run SMART at her school until we located funding to return the children to the program's nesting place on campus. University students and faculty joined with public school partners in grant-writing to re-fund the project at its original level, and have extended services to the children's feeder middle school through partnering with a campus student group, Young Men on the Move, that provides university mentors for all middle grade SMART children. We have hopes of developing a pipeline for urban children from third grade through high school, and providing university scholarships for SMART youth. We also hope to support graduating teachers who elect to teach in local urban schools.

Since spring 2009 through grants and other collaborative endeavors – school principals who value the program find ways to fund transportation to campus, university Black Greek

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organizations fund the snack for the children – SMART has evolved into a collaboratively sustainable community that offers a safe space (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2003) where fictive kin (Chatters, Taylor & Jayakody, 1994) gather to co-construct transformative practice.

Conceptual Framework

To ground this work we draw on a conception of learning as taking place within ―situated communities of practice" (Brown, Collins & Diguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991), in our case held together by bonds of affection (Baker, 1999). Learning to teach in an urban setting similarly involves membership within a community. Coursework and student teaching, however, often fail to provide the grounding needed to sustain an urban teacher. Novices place their faith in the teaching practices they experienced as learners in school, and in what they see in practice in their placement classrooms, above what they are taught in university coursework (Ball & McDiarmid, 1990; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Brown, 1992; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Hunter-Quartz & The TEP Research Group, 2003; Thompson, 1992; Wallace, 2005; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). Novices need an extensive series of *connected and connecting experiences* with urban learners, teachers, schools and communities (Hunter Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003). Studies of relationships among children and their teachers, the implications of these relationships for teaching and learning, and how these relationships are affected by teacher dispositions (Banks, 1981; Brown, 2002; Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Murrell, 2002; Oakes, 1985) point to a need for teachers who view urban learners as children *of promise* (Boykin, 2000), who develop the cultural competencies needed for work in diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2001), and who view themselves as efficacious.

The instructional sequence employed in SMART scaffolds tutors, most of whom have not yet taken teaching methods courses, in guiding children‘s development. Based on the research on best practices (Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde, 2005), the literacy instructional sequence employs four components adapted from Reading Recovery (Clay, 1991):

> **Read alouds** in which tutors model strategies that good readers use to get meaning from text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Miller, 2002; Parkes, 2000).

> **Word study** based on screening and individualized to teach the specific word patterns children need at a given time in their learning careers (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2007).

> **Guided reading** instruction to teach comprehension strategies (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Miller, 2002) while immersing children in affirming literature.

> **Writing workshop**, to support children in crafting meanings on paper for others to read (Atwell, 2007; Calkins, 2006; Christensen, 2000; Raison & Rivalland, 1994).

In 2009 at the request of one partner school, Pathematics (Driver, 2009), which anchors children‘s mathematical problem-solving in physical activity on a 10 x 60 foot runway, was added to the program, and SMART became SMART PATH. Runways are painted on school playgrounds, and two portable roll-out models can be used indoors. A similar instructional sequence was devised for Pathematics:

Math read alouds employing the finest in children's literature to introduce a math skill or concept.

Math concept link, in which tutors use manipulatives to draw out children's prior knowledge regarding the day's learning objective. Then tutors make adjustments prior to taking the children to the Runway.

Runway time, during which the 10 x 60' Runway serves as a giant game board for activities that engage children in concrete problem-solving.

Math on paper, in which tutors guide children in translating concrete understandings developed on the Runway into abstract representations that look more like the math activities in school contexts.

Childrens' service learning projects integrate literacy and math. Children need to make personal connections to concepts and information, to organize new knowledge to facilitate retrieval and application, and to metacognitively reflect upon, own and control their learning (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Instruction embedded in service gives children chances to engage in authentic, discipline-based work (for example, opportunities to learn how authors compose); to help learners ―uncover" difficult aspects of a topic or concept; and to engage learners affectively – to engage the heart as well as the mind -- in order to foster cognition (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Assessment strategies that support tutors in aligning learning challenges within a group's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), and the development of relationships within groups and across diverse participants in the HBCU/public school nexus, provide a culture-centered safe space (Chapman, 2007) to ground identity development and foster transformative practice. Tutors strive to craft learning experiences that are educative, participatory, socially just and caring (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan & Lipton, 2002).

In this context tutors come to know children who've been labeled ―at risk" in very different ways. Such experiences foster critical literacy—the ability to ―read the world" as well as ―the word" (Freire, 2004; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) – and a sense of self-efficacy in taking action. Service learning re-positions both tutors and urban learners as ―experts" to positively affect their levels of engagement, self-confidence and self-esteem (Berman, 1997; Berman & LaFarge, 1993; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Wade, 1997). The academic learning (Astin et al., 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Juhn et al., 1999; Strage, 2000; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), leadership skills (Astin et al., 1999; Driscoll et al., 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Juhn et al., 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), and mental health and well-being (Astin et al., 1999; Boykin, 2000; Driscoll et al., 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) of children and tutors is supported through involvement in inquiry that provides service to others. Service projects focus on a variety of efforts such as getting out the vote for the 2008 presidential election, authoring books to help elementary classmates deal with stress, celebrating unsung local heroes, and becoming English language penpals for fellow schoolchildren in Malawian classrooms of 100 or more who struggle to pass their own sets of high stakes tests. Working side-by-side, urban children, their tutors, and school and university staff form bonds of affection (Noddings, 1992) instructive to all participants: children form positive identifications with their tutors that facilitate learning; tutors engage the potential of urban children, and of their own efficacy in working with them; public school and university staff coalesce in the scholarship of engagement.

Documenting Project Outcomes

We employ case study (McCall & Wittner, 1990; Mitchell, 1983) and participatory action research methods (Borkman & Schubert, 1994; McIntyre & Lykes, 2004; McTaggart, 1991; Wadsworth, 1998; Whyte, 1991) to collect data on each cohort of tutors, children and adults. Layered evidence forms ―thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the shaping of attitudes, actions and knowledge bases in all populations. Photo-ethnography; video-ethnography; and conventional ethnographic techniques including the use of field notes (Gergen,1988; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), pre- and post- surveys, interviews (Briggs, 1986), and ―power sensitive conversations" (Bhavnani, 1993; Haraway, 1988), along with other artifacts, and forms of institutional documentation, provide data for qualitative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Participating elementary school populations are characterized as low income, approximately 88-90% free lunch, and scoring (on entrance to the program) at about the 25th percentile on state standards tests in reading or math. In 2008 partner schools performed at the 30.9th percentile on state tests, with 27.8% scoring on grade level. Elementary, middle and high school students from this sector who were retained in grade or dropped out totaled 1,764 for that year. Within the census tracts that feed into these schools, 91% to 97.1% of the population is Black and medically underserved. Based on data from 1990 and 2000, 33% live below the poverty line, with a nine percent decline across those years (CIGNA, 2005; Health Resources & Services Administration, 2009; Health Status of Guilford County Map DataBook, 2008).

University tutors identify their families as of low socioeconomic status (below $20,000 annual income), and a significant number self-identify as first-time college attenders. Tutors report high levels of experience with diversity as children and in school, prior to coming to the university. They complete the *Multicultural Efficacy Scale* (2005), and the *Annual Survey of Teacher Novices* (Hunter Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003) pre- and post- each semester, participate in focus group exit interviews, and provide critical shaping feedback to each new iteration of the program. Experienced tutors returning semester after semester emerge as leaders who take on responsibility for administering the program and securing its future.

Child literacy evaluation measures include one formal inventory, and tools for authentic assessment of performance. The Elementary Spelling Inventory (Bear et al., 2007) provides for targeted word study. Tutors learn to notice reading performance that indicates frustration (more than 90% words missed), and administer running records (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000) to check child reading levels. The Writing Developmental Continuum (Raison & Rivalland, 1994) is used to evaluate child writing samples and select teaching objectives. ―Books I've Read" lists in the children's portfolios document reading levels, and reading and writing surveys are completed by them at the beginning and end of each term. Child portfolio self-evaluation, goal-setting and planning for the next term take place at the end of each semester. Achievement data from the children's schools include state test scores, school-based benchmark scores, and report card grades.

Outcomes to Date

With tutoring taking place in the Student Union, volunteers are regularly attracted, and the number grows over time. Tutors are asked to give to 30 hours per term, but most give 45 or more. Tutors who initially participate for credit tend to return, selecting the program among multiple options for field placements. Tutors describe a gradual process of committing first to the children, and then to themselves as future teachers:

I might party the night before a test, but I would never party the night before tutoring. The kids need us to be ready (Group interview mid-semester).

I don't party the night before my tests anymore. Nothing is going to get between me and teaching career (Group interview end-of-term).

Pre- and post-semester *Multicultural Efficacy Scales* further indicate shifts in attitudes (see table 1). Pre- and post- *Annual Surveys of Teacher Novices* also note a shift in dispositions (see table 2).

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Semester Results from the Multicultural Efficacy Scales: Percent that Strongly Agree

Item	Pre	Post
Teachers should adapt lesson plans to reflect the different cultures represented in the classroom.	58%	82%
Teachers should provide opportunities for children to share cultural differences in foods, dress, family life and beliefs.	64%	89%
Curricula and textbooks should include the contributions of most, if not all, cultural groups in out society.	48%	83%
I can adapt instructional methods to meet the needs of learners from diverse groups."	23%	68%

Pre- and Post-Semester Results from the Annual Survey of Teacher Novices: Percent that Strongly Agree

Item	Pre	Post
I want to teach so that I can help to change the world and further social justice.	32%	78%
I have the skills and dispositions to be a good teacher.	37%	76%
I am prepared to design appropriate, challenging lesson plans.	18%	68%
I am confident in my ability to enact socially just practices in the classroom.	22%	89%

Tutor understandings also emerge in coursework, as one pair wrote:

Content alone is not enough . . . . Good educators should practice things like advocacy, service-learning, student empowerment, and integrity . . . Of these four,

the service learning aspect has probably been the most misunderstood. When we were in high school . . . a lot of the work we did was simply volunteer work, doing good deeds or helping out around the school . . . we didn't learn anything from the service that we didn't already know. The penpal project really revolutionized our idea of service learning because it was exactly what it was supposed to be: Service LEARNING. The students performed an act of service by writing letters to children in Africa but also learned about Africa and enhanced their writing skills in the process.

Another also reflected on his understanding of the negotiated nature of teaching and learning:

You learn to think on your feet, respond in the moment when you see what the kids need. Teaching is not, as I used to think, a yes-no right answer phenomenon, that it was up to the child and if he didn't learn he'd suffer the consequences. It takes time to know the kids, you have to learn them, they have to learn you, and then you figure out your way together.

Data from child portfolios document growth in word knowledge, reading levels and writing. Average year growth in word knowledge is one level (as measured by the Elementary Spelling Inventory across a continuum of 4 levels from basic sound-letter relationships to Greek and Latin roots), in reading 1.5 levels (one and one-half years), and in writing one level (as measured by the Writing Developmental Continuum across 6 levels from beginner to advanced).

After time in the program children begin to recognize authors of informational texts and historical fiction, and request books by those they know. A wave effect in books needed to accommodate the groups occurred, as well. In the first year half the groups needed books on levels 1-2. After a year more books on third grade level were needed, and in year three more than half of the groups read on levels 4 and 5. During the 2010-2011 year, two groups read all year on sixth grade level. The children tell family members and friends about their experiences at the university, and author texts about themselves as college attenders and graduates. The principal at one school characterizes SMART PATH as a major behavior incentive. For children having problems with self-control at school, a reminder about the need to trustworthy when they leave for campus is often sufficient to encourage needed changes.

To date all school partners have achieved Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) at the end of their first year. When the state test was re-normed, one school fell back that year, but with careful calibration of tutoring activities, regained AYP status the year after.

Discussion

Children in urban impact schools move often, with up to one third of the population new each year in the schools participating in this program. Teachers leave, too, because they lack the preparation to sustain them in urban schools (Haberman & Rickards, 1990; Ingersoll 2001). Urban children possess rich funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) but these can lack a match to school knowledge and ways with words (Heath, 1983). However, studies have shown that Athabaskan children's learning increased when their schools hired teacher aides from the children's communities as cultural interpreters (Ferdman, Weber & Ramirez, 1994).

Research further indicates that paraprofessionals with experience in urban schools, and teachers of color, are more likely to remain (Clewell & Villegas, 2001). Our research supports similar findings: tutored children appear to learn ―school stuff‖ efficiently when they have regular opportunities to engage in meaningful projects with tutors *who look like them*. Tutors whose families are not affluent appear to develop empathy, understanding and belief in the potential of urban children when they have extended time to work with them in a setting in which they have a high level of autonomy, and support for affirming teaching practices.

Implications

Our public school partners view SMART PATH as part of their school improvement plan. Our side-by-side efforts have melded us into an extended family of mutual support. When a bus driver forgot to return to take the tutored children home, tutors and university faculty remained onsite until every child was delivered into family hands. Tutors staffed school phones, coaching children's recall of phone numbers, while the principal and school staff drove others home. Tutors entertained children waiting for rides, or those whose lower lip quivered because they could not remember their phone number, or give directions on how to get home. Elementary teachers embraced the tutees' Malawi penpal project and suggested a sister school relationship. Student Union staff insisted on linen tablecloths for the program's spring ―graduation,‖ and paid for the cake. Such a weaving of relationships within and across educational settings ―increase[s] professional interaction and learning across schools, and for those who participate . . . , they generate excitement about teaching and learning‖ (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 175).

As state-wide pressure builds to graduate more teachers, university data from previous years indicates that nearly 50% of students who enter as education majors fail to reach graduation and certification, and the future of the HBCU, itself, is in question (Nealy, 2009). While it is too soon to make definitive claims, it appears that early, freshman year participation in SMART PATH supports tutors in making the discoveries that retain urban teachers: they learn to build on the strengths of urban communities, see themselves as change agents, and identify with other urban teachers as members of a profession (Hunter Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003).

Conclusion

Research of this nature informs efforts to provide support for children in urban schools, and for the preparation of teachers who will choose to teach and stay in those schools. It is critical to document those strategies that increase the awareness, sensitivity, and leadership capabilities of tomorrow's teachers so that they can advocate for urban learners and for methods that include service learning as an empowering pedagogy of hope. Our research holds promise to inform the growing knowledge base on urban education, teacher preparation and development, and literacy education. Outcomes like ours could include:

- Hands on experience for early program pre-service teachers, rather than just observing in classrooms that may or may not model best practices.
- Early program experience with service learning.
- Affective bonding between university students and urban learners that leads to advocacy for these children.

- Establishment of a community of learners among all program partners.
- Development of a sense of self-efficacy in teaching urban learners: tutors have been witness to success.
- University students who engage in critical discourse about urban learners and social justice.
- Leader development for university students.
- Pre-service teachers developing realistic goals for their learning in methods courses: they know what they want to learn.
- Likelihood of higher rates of retention in teacher education programs like ours, to graduation and certification.
- Higher rates of teacher retention in urban schools through the development of a cadre of new teachers armed with the skills, dispositions and self-efficacy to succeed and stay.

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