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Paper Title Service-Learning Through School-University Partnerships: Undergraduate Student Volunteers' Motivations and Experiences

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Service-Learning through School-University Partnerships: Undergraduate Student Volunteers' Motivations and Experiences

Abstract (120 words)

School-university partnerships is one major community engagement strategy used to improve learning opportunities for underserved students (poor, Black, and Brown students). As part of its commitment to local communities and based on teachers' input, Light University (pseudonym) implemented a service learning program in two urban elementary schools to improve language arts instruction and students' outcomes in the early grades. Undergraduate students served as literacy volunteers who worked with teachers and students. Drawing on a multisite longitudinal case study, the objective of this paper is to share undergraduate students' motivations for and experiences with volunteering in this school-university partnership program. Findings from this paper provide important information for the effective and sustainable implementation of service-learning oriented partnerships.

Service-Learning through School-University Partnerships: Undergraduate Student Volunteers' Motivations and Experiences (2003 words)

Background and Objectives

Despite ongoing education reforms, many students in urban schools are denied equitable learning opportunities. School-university partnerships is one major community engagement strategy that has emerged over the last three decades to improve learning opportunities for underserved students (poor, Black, and Brown). Responding to a needs assessment, Light University (pseudonym) implemented a service-learning program in two urban elementary schools to improve students' reading experiences and outcomes in the early grades. As part of this program, undergraduate volunteers worked with students and teachers in first and second grade classrooms to support language arts instruction. Given that volunteers play a vital role in the implementation of this type of partnership program, it is important to understand their beliefs and experiences in order to improve the effectiveness of this equity-oriented strategy. Drawing on a multisite case study, the objective of this paper is to share **undergraduate student volunteers' motivations for and experiences with working in this school-university partnership program.**

Theoretical Perspectives

School-University Partnerships and Service-Learning

Many universities around the country are becoming engaged with local schools and communities through partnerships. Individual and organizational-level support enhance the *overlap* between schools and universities and the schools' capacity to improve students' learning opportunities. School-university partnerships could play an active role in the daily functioning of schools by fostering collaborative sharing, reflection, research, and growth (Biag, 2017; Ng & Chang, 2012). These partnerships may also be a means of closing learning disparities and gaps in access to high-quality instruction between underserved students and their middle-income or White peers (Brabeck et al., 2003).

School-university partnerships have focused on different areas, including (1) teacher training and development, (2) co-construction and evaluation of curriculum, instruction, and leadership strategies, and (3) service learning. We focus here on *Service-learning*. This type of partnership is usually based on a critical need displayed by one partner, the school, and the ability of the other partner, the university, to address that need. Universities can offer a wide range of services (e.g., food pantries and health-services, tutoring, afterschool programs), to support the multiple needs of schools and students as part of their service-learning requirements (Walsh & Backe, 2013).

Service-learning approaches are increasingly following a participatory model where school personnel are actively engaged in designing the service-learning experience and involved throughout the decision-making process (Mitchell, 2007). In these cases, school stakeholders

not only participate in defining the scope of the experience but also become critical agents in refining and monitoring its implementation.

Schools and students are not the only ones benefiting from service-learning partnerships, these partnerships also provide important benefits for undergraduate volunteers. Service-learning opportunities enhanced university classroom learning with community experiential learning, so the opportunities for intellectual growth of undergraduates is more meaningful (Dewey, 1990; Freire, 1970). It also facilitates skill building, and critical consciousness development as undergraduate students are exposed to the complex realities of the “real-world” (Roberts et al., 2019).

One example of a recently created service-learning partnership program is the focus of this study. This program allows undergraduate volunteers to assist with language arts instruction at two schools. Early childhood teachers at these schools identified the recruitment of classroom volunteers as a major challenge and indicated the need for "extra hands" to support their teaching and learning. Through consultation with school principals, first and second grade classrooms were selected for participation in the program. Undergraduate volunteers worked with students and teachers in these classrooms two days a week for approximately 2.0 hours each day to support language arts instruction. A volunteer might assist with a whole-class instruction activity, work with small groups, provide one-on-one support to individual students, or assist the classroom teacher with developing and preparing instructional materials. Thus, undergraduate volunteers played a vital role in the successful implementation of the program as they worked closely with teachers and students to support instruction. In this paper, we explore undergraduate student volunteers' motivations for and experiences with volunteering in a school-university partnership program.

Undergraduate Volunteering

Volunteerism is a form of short or long-term prosocial behavior that is intended to encourage people to act in a way that benefits strangers and the larger communities to which they belong (Penner, 2002). It is often conceptualized as a form of action that seeks to address societal problems and can take different forms in different fields (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). About 23% of the US adult population have served as volunteers (USDL, 2016). Some of the reasons adults choose to volunteer is because of personal or career growth or because it can be a way to express their values (Miranda-Doza et al., 2020). Adults who volunteered were almost twice as likely to have also volunteered when they were younger (Marzana et al., 2015), indicating that volunteering early in life can be important to volunteering later on. Specifically for college students, research has shown there is a positive association between educational attainment and volunteering (Finlay & Murray, 2005), meaning that college students who are more likely to volunteer, then to persist in and graduate from college more than are those who do not volunteer (Smith et al., 2010).

There is not much literature on undergraduate college students and their motivations to get involved in a service-learning opportunity. However, a few studies have shown that one of the biggest motivators for undergraduate students is the opportunity to gain work-related skills and

qualifications that can help them in their careers (Eley, 2003). Students are motivated by the opportunity to put their volunteer experiences on their resume, to make new contacts that could help their career, and by the potential that getting one foot in the door may lead to future paid employment (Smith et al., 2010). Researchers have also found altruistic and social motivators, such as students wanting to help others, to work for an important cause, to relieve guilt over being more fortunate, and to gain a new perspective (Burns, 2006). Nevertheless, recruiting undergraduate volunteers is not always a smooth process as previous service-learning projects have demonstrated (authors).

Research Methods

We used a multiple case study research approach (when cases are examined in light of each other, Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) in two urban schools partnering with the university. Using a case study design allows for an examination of a contemporary phenomenon in its “real-world context” (Yin, 2014). By incorporating data from multiple sites, we also increased the potential for cross-site comparisons and generalizations.

Data were collected over a period of three years, beginning in AY 2019-2020 (In March 2020, schools shut down due to COVID-19, data collected during the second year were online). Data collection included 30-60 minutes semi-structured interviews with undergraduate volunteers and teachers from the two case schools (about half the interviews were conducted through zoom). Undergraduate volunteers and classroom teachers received \$30 and \$70, respectively, for each interview as a thank you. It also included classroom observations during the language arts instruction to examine teacher instruction, volunteer engagement, and teacher and volunteer interactions. In most cases, one volunteer was assigned to each classroom, but there were a few exceptions where two volunteers worked together in one classroom. This paper draws on 20 interviews with volunteers, and 32 classroom observations. Most of the volunteers stayed at the school for one semester due to scheduling conflicts; about 20% of stayed for two or more semesters. Around half of the undergraduate volunteers identified as Black (African American or of African descent; 55%) and 90% were women. Sixty percent were freshmen and 25% were juniors with the remaining being sophomores or seniors. Fifty five percent were majoring in social sciences or humanities, and 30% in natural science or mathematics.

Interviews with volunteers were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Classroom observations were recorded using hand notes and also transcribed. All transcribed data were imported into Nvivo software and then analyzed using an open coding approach. By taking this emic approach to coding, we centered participants' perspectives and understandings (Saldaña, 2015). Data analysis started with data collection. After each session of data collection, the authors recorded their thoughts and identified areas for further inquiry. In a series of meetings, the authors met to discuss emergent themes related to undergraduate volunteers' motivations and experiences. To refine the final narrative, we systematically triangulated data sources, identified key patterns, and considered contradictory evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Preliminary Findings

Motivations to Participate in the Service-Learning Program

Undergraduate volunteers joined the program for multiple reasons. Some had personal or professional interests in education or thought it could be an interesting experience. For others, it helped them fulfill a university program requirement. For a few undergraduate volunteers, having the opportunity to "serve" or "make an impact" was very important; they "felt passionate about social justice" and wanted to give back to their community acknowledging their "privileged" upbringing. For other undergraduate volunteers, although giving back was not an original intention, they "felt proud" to be making a difference in the lives of underserved students. The following quote reflects the perspectives of many of the LFP undergraduate volunteers:

It makes me feel really accomplished when I see that the kids are learning and that they are really interested. I was working with a Spanish-speaking student—whose English was not good. One time, I taught him how to spell 'sun.' He was so excited when he finally got it. He drew a picture of a sun, wrote S-U-N and showed it to the rest of the class. He was just so excited. It was nice to see that even with only a couple of hours that I was in the classroom, I was already making changes. (Volunteer H)

The sense of accomplishment that came from feeling they were *making a difference for students* positively impacted the undergraduate volunteers' levels of commitment. Volunteer E described their volunteering experience at School Two,

When we get to school. I feel like everyone [volunteers] forget about everything outside of the school. Everyone becomes very immersed in the kids and what they have going on. Everyone has formed connections with their kids. When they come in, some of the kids are in the hallway and they're always coming up and hugging the different volunteers...You could just see that they are very engaged teaching the kids different things.

Finally, the undergraduate volunteers valued the bonding experiences they had with students. Volunteer E shared, "I like the kids; they listen to me. When you build a relationship with kids, they just stick to you more. They pay attention to you more." Volunteer C added, I am excited to see my kids and I'm excited to work with them.

Experiences with the Service-Learning Program

Undergraduate volunteers recognized multiple positive experiences of their volunteer work, including working with children and making meaningful contributions to underserved schools. Overall, students considered that the program was an important learning experience. Volunteer F shared,

The best is you get to work with kids. You get to learn about yourself along the way too like your own weaknesses and your own strengths with kids. Working with different kinds of students [well behaved or those who don't follow instructions easily] helps you understand kids as a whole and it helps you become more patient and more understanding. When you are outside of your comfort zone, you learn a lot.

For those undergraduate volunteers who came from affluent backgrounds and were less knowledgeable about the challenges faced by low-income students or the schools they attended, participating in the service-learning program was an eye-opening learning experience. Volunteer G reflected how participating in the LFP expanded their worldview,

Significance

School-university partnerships have the potential to improve students' educational experiences, provide teacher support, and enhance service-learning opportunities for students in higher education institutions. Undergraduate volunteers are key agents for the successful implementation of service-learning partnerships. By using relationship-building practices, the volunteers develop connections with students, serve as positive influences, and foster linkages between learning and children's life experiences to support the development of multiple skills. The proposed project centers on the motivation and experiences of undergraduate volunteers as a way to elevate their voices and identify strategies that could then be utilized to improve recruitment strategies.

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