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Revolutionary Education Engaging Students and Communities with Middle School Service Learning

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Author's Note

My 12th grade humanities class, *Citizenship and Social Justice*, eagerly absorbed lessons on poverty, feminism, racism, and ableism. We discussed city and state budgets and dissected speeches and literature. We learned from guest speakers, field trips, research, community partnerships, and student-led lessons. We were no longer passive students, bored and disinterested, waiting for the bell to ring. Through gripping lessons and hands-on service learning, our teacher empowered us to positively impact our world.

Before this class, I had participated in several service learning projects. This experience, however, was different. Not only had my teacher established partnerships with community organizations doing work related to our curriculum, but he'd also designed his curriculum to be responsive to our community and its needs. In that humanities class, we were learning from voices we respected. We discussed work we had both read about and participated in firsthand. Our class gave us the opportunity to hear from the director of the Health and Human Services Coalition, visit social service organizations, and research sources for additional funding. At the end of the year, we excitedly celebrated the Seattle City Council's recently approved budget. The passed budget was tangible evidence that our class was making a difference in the community. Unlike my more traditional classroom experiences, I could recall everything I had learned. Most importantly, I could explain why it mattered. Now as an aspiring middle school teacher, I want to provide a similar education for my future students—so that they too, can see the connection between their classroom and their community.

Introduction

The primary objective of middle school education is to provide a safe and supportive learning environment, while preparing students to become thoughtful citizens in an ever-changing world. Teaching social and emotional learning, including strategies for problem-solving and critical thought, must be prioritized alongside traditional subjects. One method proven effective in achieving quality middle school education is to blend service learning into the curriculum by integrating elements of core subjects, social and emotional learning, and citizenship. Engaging in community-centered service learning can help students to develop skills for handling and responding to interpersonal relationships, stress, and the world outside the school building. Service learning could revolutionize how we prepare students to become compassionate global citizens.

However, while service learning offers numerous benefits to students and partner organizations, it may become a burdensome challenge yielding suboptimal results. How to successfully implement a middle school service-learning program that benefits both the students and the community partner is a complex problem requiring interdisciplinary attention.

My research follows the Broad model of interdisciplinary research, as established by Repko and Szostak (2017). I consider two disciplines in my work: educational psychology and community studies. In the first section, I will focus on the combined discipline of educational psychology, an increasingly prevalent graduate-level program. Educational psychology provides insight into existing middle school service learning programs and the social-emotional, educational, and developmental benefits gained from participation in service. The second section centers on community studies, a field which draws from social work and sociology. Community studies offers tools needed to consider the perspective of partnering community organizations and guidance to establish effective school-community partnerships. Analyzing the two disciplines' perspectives reveals common ground between the fields. I will offer a framework for creating effective school-community partnerships by integrating the research from educational psychology and community studies. Finally, I will outline an example of a middle school service-learning project to demonstrate the framework in context.

Educational Psychology

This educational psychology section explores the ways service learning benefits middle school students. In order to achieve the best outcomes for each student, educational psychology notes that the focus must first be on establishing a healthy classroom environment prior to embarking on service learning projects. According to psychologists Richards, et al. (2013), service learning is "a way to engage students in the learning process by having them provide meaningful service to others, connect [the] experience with the students' academic curriculum, and, frequently, reflect on the process in some fashion" (p. 6). Service learning—often confused with community service, which is uncompensated work performed for the community's benefit—calls for intentionality and reflection. In schools, service learning builds upon classroom learning by adding a hands-on element. Richards, et al. (2013) found "service-learning programs had significant positive effects on participating students; students profited personally, civically, socially, and academically from participating in service-learning programs" (p. 6). Scholars and practitioners in educational psychology have found convincing evidence that service learning is beneficial to middle school students both at home and at school, now and in the future.

Across the United States, approximately 23,000 public schools implement service-learning programs of some kind. However, less than 10% of these programs target students below the ninth grade (Richards, et al., 2013, p. 6). Meanwhile, 59% of all service programs in the country are designed for college students (as cited in Richards, et al., 2013). My research focuses on middle school service learning in the hope of expanding the currently limited scholarship on that age group.

Classroom Climate

Prior to implementing a service-learning program, it is essential to establish a supportive classroom climate. Students must trust their peers and instructor. They must also see the classroom as a place where they can be vulnerable as they grapple with challenging topics and societal problems such as homelessness, hunger, or poverty. According to developmental researchers, teachers must be models for their students. They must teach by setting an example of active citizenship, contemplation, and curiosity (Bayram-Özdemir, Stattin, & Özdemir, 2016). Educational psychologists Guillaume, Jagers, and Rivas-Drake (2015) studied student perceptions of teachers and found that "when students feel they attend a school in which adults are supportive and in which their peers enjoy getting to know each other and working together, they are more likely to feel they themselves are part of, happy, and close to others in the setting" (p. 328). With a safe and engaging classroom climate established, students are prepared to participate in service learning under the direction of their teachers.

Academic Engagement

Involvement in the local community is found to increase school connectedness, academic self-efficacy, and perceptions of school climate (Guillaume, 2015). For instance, fewer conflicts between students and higher grades are reported in schools where students are engaged in community service. Further, community involvement led to students having more positive views of both their school and community. Service learning also helps students sustain their interest in academic subjects. When math students tutored younger students in the subject, it was found that the older students took greater interest in their own math studies (Banks, 2015; Hutzel, Russell & Gross, 2010; Reed & Butler, 2015). When students see real-world connections to their classwork, the material comes to life. Thus, students take greater interest in their studies, teachers see improvements in grades, and parents see prosocial behaviors develop (Richards, et al, 2013).

Adolescent Development, Health, and Wellbeing

McBride, Chung, and Robertson (2016) find service learning has a positive influence on middle schoolers' development. Middle schoolers benefit from support during the often-tumultuous physical, social, and emotional changes of adolescence. McBride, et al. (2016) studied how a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum delivered through service learning could reduce middle school disciplinary incidents and increase engagement in academics. SEL is defined as:

> the process through which children and adolescents enhance their ability to incorporate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks. These skills include

> recognizing and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible choices, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. (McBride, et al., 2016, p. 372)

When students have greater social and emotional skillsets, their futures are healthier overall. Adolescents involved in service are less likely to engage in substance misuse, perpetuate violence, drop out of school, or become pregnant (Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013; Ludden, 2011). From these findings, service learning has clear benefits across all areas important to middle schoolers' academic and social wellbeing.

Lifelong Service

Middle school is an optimal time to introduce service learning. As "adolescence is a time of civic, career, and social exploration, this developmental period is well-suited for the initiation of service programs . . . and may particularly benefit youth in early adolescence, during middle school years" (Richards et al., 2013, pp. 7-8). Civic engagement during adolescence is formative for habits exhibited in later life: nearly half (44%) of adults who perform service started as adolescents. Further, adolescents who engage in service are twice as likely to do so during adulthood (as cited in Richards et al., 2013). Today, many adults have negative connotations with their middle school experiences. From Richards's findings (2013), perhaps adults would feel more positively about their middle school experiences if instead they could recall the start of their service to others and the positive school environment it had fostered.

Community Studies

However, the many positive results for adolescent students and their schools from service learning may eclipse the key objective of service learning: to address identified needs of the community partners and their service recipients. If a partnership is to be mutually beneficial, it is critical to consider the perspective of the service partner in this conversation. The emerging discipline of community studies, encompassing social work and sociology, represents the needs of the community organization in the analysis of middle school service learning.

Community Impact

Service learning positively impacts not only the school community, but also the communities reached by service. Chupp and Joseph (2010) write "maximizing the impact on the local community requires engagement of community members, not merely as recipients of the service, but as partners in the design, implementation, and assessment of the activity" (p.

209). This approach stresses the importance of community organizations as deeply involved partners throughout the teacher's planning of the service-learning curriculum. A strong partnership between the educator and the partnering community organization is important. It ensures the best possible service learning experience for the students and community served, but it also confirms that both school and community organization are seen and heard.

Maximum Benefit

Political scientist Brenda K. Bushouse (2005) cites a framework for creating school-community partnerships. The framework values long-term, complex projects over short-term or one-off events. Divided into five categories, the levels of service learning are ranked from least to most valuable to community organizations:

1. One-time events and projects
2. Short-term placements
3. Ongoing placements, with mutual dependence between organizations
4. Core partnerships, with interdependence between organizations
5. Transformation, joint creation of work and knowledge (Bushouse, 2005, p. 32-34)

Deeper, sustained, and joint-guided efforts are the most highly valued to community partners. Less than 20 hours of service learning often lead to challenges in the eyes of community partners, who are skeptical about what can be learned or accomplished in such a short time. More critically, in some cases where young children are involved, sporadic or short-lived involvement could be harmful. However, with careful planning, many community organizations are eager to work with schools. For many organizations, the goal of creating a more just and humane world may be achieved through their involvement in the students' education.

Equal Partners

Service learning is impossible without the community partners. Therefore, it is essential to consider the needs, motivations, and perspectives of community organizations. Educators often portray community partners as the gateway for understanding another world or way of life outside of the school setting. For many students, their time spent with a community partner may be the first exposure to communities other than their own. Despite the known benefits of service learning, little scholarly attention is dedicated to the community side of the relationship. Education and community studies scholars Sandy and Holland (2016) conducted a case study of several community partners. Common themes emerged across the community partners. For example, the importance of "developing a mutually beneficial agenda, understanding the capacity and resources of all partners, participating in project planning, attending to the relationship, shared design and control of the project directions, and continual

assessment of partnership processes and outcomes" was frequently mentioned in the study (Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 34). Of these priorities, all community organizations identified "aspects of valuing and nurturing the partnership relationship" as their top priority (Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 34). In high-quality service learning, establishing an equal partnership between school and community organizations is of paramount importance.

Relationships and Commitment

In their responses, community partners identified the foundation of service learning: a relationship between school and community. In order to fulfill the goal of service learning—to learn from one another—community partners and schools must have an open, communicative relationship. Otherwise, the partnership is no longer centered on partners in service to each other. Instead, one group is performing an action for a recipient, more closely aligned to community service. Service learning requires both parties to be open and willing to receive the benefits and knowledge of each other's perspectives and experiences. Community partners "repeatedly stressed that educating college students was a more compelling reason for becoming involved in community-campus partnerships than more tangible 'transactional' short-term benefits to their agency or organization" (Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 35). By this logic, work with middle school students can be equally rewarding for community organizations, particularly considering the possibility that many middle school students may be engaged with the organization for years to come. If teachers view community partners as co-educators, with a desire for greater input in partnerships and a role in shaping students' futures, teachers may regard service learning as less of an undertaking. They may see service learning as an opportunity to gain new ideas and approaches to engaging their students. Ultimately, both parties receive benefits.

Open Communication

Sociologists Blouin and Perry (2009) researched the benefactors of service learning impacts and how community organizations perceive service learning. The scholars noted that while partnerships between schools and community organizations typically yield favorable outcomes, there are routine barriers and challenges that can be anticipated in the process of establishing an effective and reciprocally beneficial partnership (Blouin & Perry, 2009). They identified three common barriers of service learning courses: "poor student conduct, poor fit between course and organizational objectives, and lack of communication between instructors and organizations" (Blouin & Perry, 2009, p. 132-133). Despite these obstacles, Blouin and Perry (2009) have hope for effective service learning when educators communicate clearly with students and community partners, and they carefully integrate service learning opportunities

based on community partners' missions into their curricula.

A New Framework for School-Community Partnerships

In the next interdisciplinary research method step, I will establish common ground between the disciplinary insights of educational psychology and community studies. Educational psychology identifies the benefits and risks associated with student involvement in service learning; however, it does not consider the impact on the partnering community organization. In contrast, community studies weighs the benefits and risks associated with a service-learning partnership for *both* parties involved.

Integrating the disciplinary insights, I have developed a new framework that considers the needs of both schools and community partners. Both parties should view this framework as a memorandum of understanding and use the questions posed to spur discussion throughout the planning process. The result of this framework is a meaningful partnership between school and community partner, in addition to high-quality, effective service learning for students.

Table 1

School-Community Partnership Framework

1: Intentions and Desired Outcomes

School: What curriculum must be covered? What does the school hope to achieve?	*Community Partner:* How must the organization's mission statement be followed? What does the organization hope to achieve?
School-Community Partnership: What is the school and community organization's collective interest or goal?	

2: Curriculum and Instruction

School: What background information will the teacher provide the students? Which classes will participate?	*Community Partner:* What information or instruction will the community organization contribute?
School-Community Partnership: How will school and organization collaborate and co-teach?	

3: Timeframe

School: How much time can be spent on service learning in each class and throughout the school year? How long will the project last?	*Community Partner:* How long does the organization hope to have involvement from school? What resources are available and when?
School-Community Partnership: How long will project/involvement last? Who will do what and when?	

4: Materials and Cost

School: What can the school pay for? What materials can the school provide? Can teacher/school apply for grant funding or receive donations?	*Community Partner:* What resources can the organization contribute (money, staff, volunteers, etc.)? Can the organization spend part of its budget on service learning?
School-Community Partnership: What will school and organization solicit together? What costs will be shared?	

5: Communication and Accountability

School: How often can the school/teacher meet with the organization? What can they be responsible for? What is the preferred communication format?	*Community Partner:* How often can the organization meet with the school/teacher? What can they be responsible for? What is the preferred communication format?
School-Community Partnership: How will both groups agree to communicate? Who is accountable for what project element(s)? How will issues or conflicts be solved?	

6: Outcomes

School: What is the final outcome for the school/students?	*Community Partner:* What is the final outcome for the organization?
School-Community Partnership: What is the final outcome for the community?	

Planting a community garden at a middle school is an example of a service-learning project that demonstrates the School-Community Partnership Framework. In their handbook on creating school community gardens, Arden Bucklin-Sporer and Rachel Kathleen Pringle (2010) describe how community gardens provide many of the desired outcomes of service

learning and healthy adolescent development. Gardens also deeply engage students: "Traditional classrooms are often tightly structured and regulated by a school's mandate to teach to the education standards . . . but by nature [school gardens] are dynamic educational settings that provide numerous opportunities to expand upon the standards." (Bucklin-Sporer & Pringle, 2010, p. 26). The authors argue that "by learning through action and through stimulation of *all* the senses, the school garden amplifies and enhances subjects covered in the traditional classroom. Gardens also teach students that learning may take place everywhere, and especially so out of the classroom" (2010, p. 26). Thus, lifelong learning is encouraged.

Lesson Topics, Guest Speakers, and Community Partners Guide

A community garden is but one example of countless excellent service-learning projects. The example of a community garden is used due to its widespread applicability, relatively low cost, and simplicity in transportation logistics, amongst other benefits. The following guide illustrates how middle school teachers and administrators could develop a service-learning program. The Lesson Topics, Guest Speakers, and Community Partners Guides (Tables 1 and 2) suggest possible topics to be covered in school-community garden curricula.

Core Subjects: In the humanities, teachers will establish an overview of the local community. They will address subject of food insecurity, lack of nutrition, and global hunger with a special focus on populations within the community particularly affected. The project will be introduced in the humanities when the community organization visits the classroom to present their work and potentially invite the class to visit the community site. The humanities will provide space for student discussion and reflection. In science and math, students will have the opportunity to apply mathematical and scientific tools to the service-learning project. Science classes will outline plant biology, photosynthesis, plant selection, succession planting, and garden care and maintenance with the help of experts from the community. Math classes will be responsible for creating the garden's design, outlining and measuring garden beds with algebraic and geometric formulas and community expert guidance. By weaving the service learning into each core subject, students will begin to understand how food insecurity may be analyzed and addressed through an interdisciplinary lens.

Table 2 *Core Subjects: Lesson Topics, Guest Speakers, and Community Partners Guide*

CORE SUBJECTS			
Subject	**Lesson Topics**	**Guest Speakers**	**Community Partners**
Humanities	□ Overview of food insecurity and local organizations involved □ Make a newspaper □ Interview food banks personnel □ Industrial revolution and farming technology	□ Community organizations fighting hunger and food insecurity (e.g. food banks, shelters, CSAs)	□ Community organizations responding to food insecurity □ Food banks □ Shelters □ CSAs
Science	□ Plant biology, photosynthesis □ Research plants: germination and fertilization, maintenance, harvesting □ Plant and germinate seeds □ Learn about succession planting □ Plant selection □ Compost □ Irrigation	□ Plant Biologist □ Botanist □ Gardener □ Landscape Architect □ Conservation Biologist	□ Seattle Tilth □ Nurseries □ CSAs □ Established Seattle-area community gardens
Math	□ Create garden design □ Measure and design raised beds and garden plots	□ Engineer □ Mathematician □ Architect □ Landscape Architect □ Urban Planner □ Gardener	□ Collaborate with guest speakers and community partners to create designs and plans for garden

Electives: Elective classes may find countless opportunities for involvement in a community garden. Health classes may study nutritional values of the fruits, vegetables, and herbs grown in the garden, or they may research implications of malnutrition due to hunger, poverty, or global conflict. Art or language classes may seek student leadership and community involvement to decorate and beautify the garden, which also contributes to students' school and community pride.

Table 3 *Electives: Lesson Topics, Guest Speakers, and Community Partners Guide*

ELECTIVES			
Subject	**Lesson Topics**	**Guest Speakers**	**Community Partners**
Health and Sciences	□ Nutrition, dietary needs □ Traditional medicine (herbs and teas) □ Nutrition pamphlets to discuss uses of, health benefits of, and recipes for produce and encourage healthy eating	□ Nutritionist, dietician □ Organic gardener □ Non-traditional medicine practitioner □ Environmental scientist □ Local utility staff □ Waste/recycling expert from local government □ Chef or restaurant owner □ Small business entrepreneur (maker of soaps, condiments, pickled vegetables, etc.)	□ Public Health/ Nutrition programs □ Agricultural college Extension programs □ Seattle Tilth
Art	□ Decorate and beautify garden □ Tiles with plant names □ Donor/sponsor acknowledgement □ Photography □ Design plant labels □ Garden design	□ CSAs □ Artists □ Ceramicists □ Printmakers □ Textile designers □ Graphic designers □ Landscape designers □ Nursery owners	□ Artists: make clay pots, stepping stones, mural, tiles □ Dye fabrics to sell as fundraiser □ Donate floral arrangements
Language	□ Multilingual plant identification tags/ signs; Latin plant names □ Write from perspective of plant, bird, etc. in garden □ Give instruction for caring for plants in languages	□ Translators/ interpreters □ Artists □ Writers □ Musicians	□ Artists: plant identification tags □ Local authors: produce multilingual poetry □ Pottery studio: make multilingual stepping stones, ceramics

Out-of-School Time

With the foundation of service learning established during daytime classes, out-of-school-time programming may provide enjoyable extracurricular activities, such as gardening or cooking. Students interested in further garden involvement may choose to participate in a garden advisory board to help plan and oversee decisions about the garden. Clubs surrounding these topics may be created for student involvement outside of the classroom. Further, community members may want to participate during out-of-school time and during school closures and summer months.

Conclusion

The beauty of interdisciplinary work lies in its ability to hear to all voices, recognizing that the strongest and most comprehensive solutions stem from collaboration between disciplines. Repko and Szostak (2017) write that the final product of interdisciplinary research—new and unique understanding—"should be inclusive of each discipline's insights but beholden to none of them" (p. 365). By drawing from disciplinary thinkers in the fields of both educational psychology and community studies, I can ensure that the perspectives of schools and community organizations are recognized. Informed by interdisciplinary research and methodologies, my School-Community Partnership Framework will guide practitioners to meet the needs of all involved, from students and staff to service users and service providers. Middle school service learning is a beneficial investment for schools and service organizations, while also contributing to the health of the local community. When service learning is launched within the school-community partnership framework, both organizations operate as equals and become open to gaining valuable knowledge. The teacher may be responsible for the students, yet the community partner is responsible for providing an enriched educational experience that the teacher could not provide in the classroom alone. By exploring their respective pedagogical philosophies and instructional strategies and coming to agreement on expectations for student conduct and adult mentorship, both institutions gain clarity and establish common ground. Neither the school nor the community partner will achieve worthwhile educational and community development results without the other.

My School-Community Partnership Framework leads to two outcomes. First, it guides each collaborator through the process of advocating on behalf of the needs and desires of the school or community organization they represent. Second, the framework brings both groups together, taking their once separate goals and intertwining them to establish a new and mutually beneficial common purpose. I do not intend for the framework's contents to be exhaustive or address every possible scenario. Instead, I hope this flexible framework will serve as a guide for conversation and curricular development between schools and community organizations.

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