

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Oberg De La Garza, T. L. (2014). Serving the Latino Community Through Service-Learning Partnerships. *PRISM: A Journal of Regional Engagement*, 3 (1). Retrieved from <https://encompass.eku.edu/prism/vol3/iss1/5>

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Cover Page Footnote

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Serving the Latino Community through Service-Learning Partnerships

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This article explores an urban partnership in Chicago that is aimed at increasing the levels of Latino academic achievement by developing stronger Latino learning communities and preparing culturally responsive teachers, through a university-community service-learning project. This partnership honors the rich resources and expressed needs of all partners and is built upon the founding principal of mutual respect.

Keywords: Service-learning, University partnership, Latino, Literacy

The Latino population constitutes the largest minority group in the United States, and is the fastest growing segment of school-age populations (Fry, 2010). Latinos are the least educated of all ethnic groups and achieve at the lowest levels, academically (Gándara, 2010). This article explores an urban partnership in Chicago that is aimed at increasing the levels of Latino academic achievement by developing stronger Latino learning communities and preparing culturally responsive teachers, through a university community service-learning project.

Needs in the Latino Community

There is a “silent epidemic” of Latino youth dropping out from the American school system (Bridgeland, DiLulio & Morison, 2006, p. i). More than 67% of Latinos are without a high school diploma by the age of 29; and nearly 50% of Latinos fail to graduate from their public high school each year (Gándara, 2010). The decision to abandon school is ruinous, as dropouts are eight times more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, or go to prison, than a person with at least a high school diploma (Buchanan, 2005; Harlow, 2003). Contributors to the high rate of Latino education failure involve limited quality and quantity of teacher-student interactions (Foley & Valenzuela, 2004; Losey, 1995; Pizarro, 2005), teachers’ lowered expectations of students (Prieto & Zucker, 1980), and a lack of culturally responsive instruction and engagement in U.S. classrooms (Valencia, 2011).

Having a sense of belonging and value in the classroom is critical for student success (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Noddings 1992). Authentic relationships with caring teachers are important in supporting positive student outcomes and effective learning environments (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Noddings, 1995). For Latino students, teacher care includes: (a) provide scaffolding during teaching, (b) convey a kind disposition through actions, (c) ready availability to students, (d) demonstrate a personal interest in students’ well being inside and outside the classroom, and (e) provide affective academic support in the classroom setting (Garza, 2009).

One barrier that prevents authentic relationships and caring connections between Latino students and their teachers is cultural differences. The majority of teachers in public schools are white, middle-class female, whose perspective is dissimilar than that of poor,

multilingual and culturally diverse students (Nieto, 2009). A lack of diversity perspective hinders opportunities to relate to those of a different race, culture, or socio-economic status; or recognize and confront social injustices for citizens everywhere.

Schools have expanding populations of Latino students while the cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes still exist among school personnel, teachers and students. Teachers need to develop a varied culture awareness and understanding in order to become culturally responsive and create classroom cultures where all students are valued and afforded an equal opportunity to learn (Nieto, 2009; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2006). There is a distinct need for teachers to “unpack the invisible backpack” of privilege and learn how to be culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McIntosh, 2009; Nieto, 2010). One method which engages preservice teachers in developing cultural responsiveness, an appreciation of diversity, and an awakening to the experience of other groups (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), is to incorporate service-learning with diverse populations, into teacher preparation coursework (Amatea, Cholewa & Mixon, 2012; Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007).

Rationale for the Project

Service-learning is a teaching methodology that is generally defined as an “educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 38). Two critical components in service-learning models are the balance of service and learning in projects; and balanced benefits between the service provider and the recipient (Furco, 2003). Service-learning is a learning model that has been successful with Latino populations in the Texas borderlands (Robbins, 2012) and in minority language communities (Leeman, 2011). Implementing service-learning methodology in teacher preparation programs takes aim at challenging unexplored student bias, increasing cultural awareness, and examining social injustice (Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007).

Service-learning projects are mutually beneficial and collaboratively designed by each of the university and community partners involved in the project (Gay, 1997; Jacoby & Associates, 2003). Historically, universities and community partnerships have failed to address common problems – the partnerships were non-existent, unconstructive, or one-sided (Kysiak, 1986; Martin, Smith & Phillips, 2005). University-community organization partnerships have had an impact upon each partner – “for good and for bad, constructive and destructive, accidental and intentional, real and imagined.” (Seifer & Carriere, 2003, p. 2).

In the past 15 years however, a paradigm shift has occurred in which non-profit and for-profit organizations are recognizing the value of public problem solving through interconnectedness with the public sector organizations, stakeholders, levels of government and the public (Reddel, 2002; Salamon, 2002). Today, community-university partnerships have emerged in higher education as a vehicle for revitalizing communities, fostering civic engagement and realizing theory into practice (Martin, Smith & Phillips, 2005). The partnership described here deliberately designed a project to authentically reflect the needs, resources and directions of all partners.

Description of the Partnership

This project involves the participation of Roosevelt University College of Education (COE), Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), public schools, families, and students in the Logan Square community. This partnership honors the experience and knowledge of all parties with equal voice in identifying needs, designing service learning objectives interpreting the data, and determining conclusions of the project. The founding principal of this partnership assures an open exchange and mutual benefits.

Setting & Participants

Logan Square is located on the near Northwest side of Chicago and has attracted immigrant communities throughout history. In the past decade, Logan Square's population of nearly 83,000 has undergone a gentrified shift from predominantly Latino - 71% in 2005; to 65% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This blue-collar community struggles with poverty, language barriers, and underperforming public schools. In 2013, less than 30% of third graders at each of the local public schools had attained the Illinois Learning Standards in reading (Chicago Public Schools, 2010).

The LSNA is a non-profit, Latino community organization in the Logan Square neighborhood that, as part of its mission, forges solid relationships between the community and public schools. Since 1996, LSNA has operated a network of afterschool Community Learning Centers in the five neighborhood schools. LSNA delivers comprehensive adult, child and family literacy services to over 1,000 families yearly. Adults can attend English as Second Language classes, vocational training, or work on their GED. Their children participate in homework support, physical activities, and academic tutoring, which are deliberately linked through planning with classroom teachers.

The success of the centers is attributed to long term partnerships with other public agencies, administration support, and volunteers (Warren, Soo Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009). Centers are designed and governed through extensive community input. The planning and opening of each site involved parents from each school conducting door-to-door surveys to tailor programming to the community's priorities. Each center is governed by an advisory board comprised of the principal, teachers, parents, and community representatives.

Roosevelt is a private University located five miles southeast of Logan Square, in downtown Chicago. The College of Education has approximately 700 students, follows a strong tradition of social justice, and cultivates highly skilled educators who are responsible for social change. Parallel to national teacher demographics 82% White, 8% Black and 6% Hispanic (NCES, 2010); more than 74% of Roosevelt education students are from Caucasian backgrounds, and have limited experience with racial inequities.

Project Development - Balance

The service learning project that was developed in this partnership blends the rich resources of the Logan Square community, LSNA, and Roosevelt University with the needs of each partner: heightening cross-cultural awareness, refining instructional practice, and increasing literacy achievement. The initial step involved a series of meetings, during which the needs of the students, schools, and organizations were identified and explored.

The needs of LSNA and the Logan Square schools and community were to (a) improve the literacy achievement of struggling Latino students, (b) improve parent mentor instruction at home and in the classroom, (c) increase awareness of literacy in the homes and community, and, (d) explore ways to overcome the limitations of literacy access in the

Latino community.

The expressed needs of Roosevelt University revolved around expanding the pre-service teachers' instruction and diversity perspective; specifically: (a) improve and expand pre-service teachers' repertoire of literacy instruction methods and assessment, (b) increase pre-service teachers' awareness of print literacy access in Latinos' homes and community, (c) increase pre-service teachers' awareness of social injustice and educational inequities for diverse populations, (d) explore ways to overcome the limitations of print literacy access in Latino homes and communities.

Once the needs of partners were clearly identified, there was a flurry of brainstorming meetings, phone conversations and e-mails; resulting in a wide range of proposed activities. After discarding ideas that were not mutually beneficial, a multi-dimensional service-learning project was collectively tailored to meet objectives.

Description of the Project by Need

The service-learning project was embedded in a required, 16-week, teacher preparation course, *READ320 – Methods of Teaching Reading in Elementary Schools*, which was also taught by the researcher. To support elementary students' literacy skills, Roosevelt pre-service teachers would spend 2 hours per week for 10 weeks, tutoring small groups of elementary students (2-3) who had been identified by the school as struggling readers and writers.

To further develop pre-service teachers' literacy instructional methodology, preservice teachers would assess tutees' literacy skills at the beginning and the end of the project, using the 3-Minute Reading Assessment (Padak & Rasinski, 2005); and create tailored, literacy lessons that incorporated reading, writing, listening and speaking activities. Literacy lessons would feature a culturally relevant text (picture book, novel, poem, etc) and research-based strategies in vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Because the majority of the struggling readers would be either bilingual or English language learners, preservice teachers would need to dedicate a good deal of time to developing oral fluency and vocabulary concepts through the use of sight words, phonetics, context clues, and graphic organizers (Oxford, 2001).

To address the needs of and develop the literacy instructional practice of the LSNA parent mentors and tutors, Roosevelt faculty would present 2 half-day, literacy workshops addressing reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary skills, and research-based methods for teaching English Language Learners. These workshops would also be attended by Roosevelt pre-service teachers so they could exchange ideas about literacy experiences and instruction with LSNA parent mentors and tutors. We hoped that attending the workshop with Latino parent mentors and tutors would additionally give pre-service teachers an opportunity to expand their thinking, experience and perspective on diversity.

To increase elementary students' recognition of literacy, they would be given disposable cameras and instructed to take pictures of print literacy in their homes and community. Supported by their university tutor, students would add captions and text to photos, and create a Community Literacy Electronic Book (E-book). Students would use PowerPoint to create the E-books which documented the various ways Latino students obtain access to print literacy in their homes and communities. Those E-Books would celebrate literacy and be presented to the learning community within each school, at the end of the project.

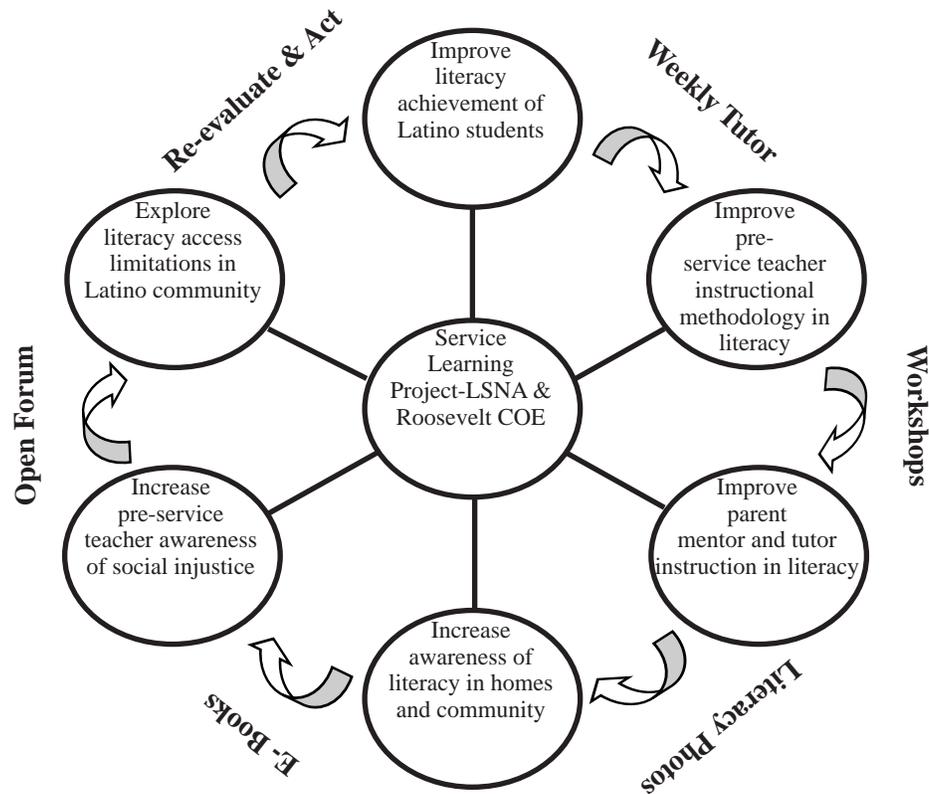
In a parallel project, the university students would create their own print literacy

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E-Books contrasting photographs of print literacy taken in their homes and community with elementary students' photographs. This project was designed to increase university students' awareness of social inequity. This comparison would provide opportunities for the university students to explore the extreme differences in literacy access and educational opportunities between Latino students in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood and themselves.

Finally, to address the limitations of literacy access in the Logan Square community, an open forum exploring themes identified in the Community Literacy E-Book project would be held to explore and discuss the differences between the two groups. This forum would provide the opportunity for daytime teachers, parents, school administrators, and community members to cultivate solutions and eradicate barriers. The interwoven web in Figure 1 below shows the alignment of partner needs to the service learning project activities.

Figure 1. Organization Web of Service Learning Project



Contributions of Resources

The underlying foundation of this partnership was the mutual collaboration in shaping the service-learning project. Because all partners stood to benefit a great deal from the project, each was willing to commit resources and demonstrate flexibility in altering the course when presented with obstacles. The LSNA provided funding for site coordinators, resources, site security, and training for parent mentors and tutors. Roosevelt University COE provided resources and faculty for the literacy workshops, undergraduate tutors and research analysis to further secure program-funding opportunities for LSNA. The participating public schools shared school building space, student referrals, and administrative support. In the center of the project were parents and their children who gave their time, effort and a great willingness to learn.

Tutor Preparation and Delivery of the Project

In preparation of the project, IRB consent and background checks on the undergraduates had to be completed. During those 4 weeks, preservice teachers engaged in intensive culturally responsive coursework (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that involved (a) reflective thinking and writing of unexplored beliefs about Latinos and students of color, (b) acknowledgement of advantages and disadvantages associated with their privileged membership in a specific group of society, and, (c) research of the history of Latino students in the United States. In addition, undergraduates developed skills in literacy assessments, differentiating instruction with students, research-based literacy strategies and selecting children's books that would appeal to Latino students.

Delivering the tutoring were 17 Roosevelt students who independently traveled to their assigned school site and conducted literacy lessons with a total of 39 elementary students in grades 2-8. Logan Square Schools' student population is predominantly Latino (86%-95%), so it wasn't surprising that all of the elementary students who participated in the literacy tutoring sessions were Latinos. More than 94% of the elementary students were bilingual and 56% were receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. As frequently happens with funding, the LSNA budget for the afterschool programs was delayed for several weeks; shortening the delivery time to 8 weeks. During the tutoring sessions, the elementary students engaged in research-based activities aimed at improving their reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and fluency skills.

Description of the Outcomes

Because the needs of all partners shaped the service-learning project, high-quality learning opportunities were available to the university students, LSNA parent mentors/tutors, elementary students, and administrators.

Parent Mentor/Tutor Workshops

Although there were no formal measures in place, the parent workshops had a positive impact. After the parent mentor/tutor workshops, several parents were very eager to share that they felt more comfortable teaching reading strategies to children. One parent tutor shared, "I can do these strategies with my kids at home and at school. Teaching reading was such a scary thing before, but now it's not."

Latino Student Literacy Skills

As expected, due to the shortened delivery period of just 8 weeks, no significant change of reading skills was demonstrated in elementary students' pre-to-post reading assessments.

The partners plan on extending the tutoring project for two semesters and are hopeful that with a longer, more focused time dedicated to the project, more demonstrable gains will be made.

Despite no measurable change in skills, the preservice teachers and the faculty member observed that children's attitudes and motivation to engage in literacy activities had improved markedly. We received feedback from LSNA coordinators and parent mentors that the students in the tutor program looked forward to sessions with the university students and frequently compared information about their activities with each other. The children excitedly shared stories they had read and the pictures they had taken with tutors and classroom teachers. Future measures of Latino students' change in reading attitudes would be measured by a pre- and post- Garfield Interest Inventory.

School Communities

There were unexpected outcomes within the school communities as the value of providing additional instructional support was observed. After hearing about the literacy E-Book project, one parent repeatedly asked the afterschool coordinator to admit her child into the program, despite the long waiting list of struggling readers who had been referred by their teachers for additional support. Another site coordinator reported requests by two principals for additional university tutors during daytime and afterschool hours.

Preservice Teachers Cultural Sensitivity

The pre-service teachers' cultural sensitivity expanded through interactions with parents at literacy workshops and students in tutoring sessions. As demonstrated in their weekly reflections, of the 17 university students, 12 shared new realizations that parents in the community desperately wanted their children to be successful in school but felt powerless to help. Prior to this experience, many undergraduates had assumed Latino parents didn't care about student performance in school. This self-examination revealed a biased opinion, which through critical reflection was corrected.

Participating in the E-book research project was also enlightening for the preservice teachers. After examining photographs of print literacy taken by children in the Logan Square community, undergraduates realized that the amount of printed text available to their Latino students was severely limited. The largest source of print literacy accessible to Latino students was street and business signs (30%). The second largest source of print literacy was text found on clothing (17%), followed by single books (13%) and television remote controls (8%). There were no pictures of libraries, computers or even multiple books. One preservice teacher expressed deep concern and frustration at the limited amount of books and technology available to her students, "I babysit for kids on the North Shore where they have entire libraries of books in their bedrooms, but these kids in Logan Square don't have a single book? Not one computer? How are they going to compete? It isn't fair."

Preservice Teachers' Instructional Repertoire

Because the undergraduate tutors were spread across five different schools, at different days and times, it was impossible for the faculty member to consistently observe changes in instructional practices. Students' lesson reflections indicated they progressed from summarizing and asking low-level questions following the reading of a book to an interactive process of implementing reading strategies such as making connections, predicting, questioning, synthesizing and evaluating the text. As time progressed, the undergraduates also began to create and utilize manipulatives such as sight word cards,

sentence strips, student-created mini-books, and sticky notes to record thinking. To explore preservice teachers' expansion of literacy instruction practices, future tutoring sessions would take place at a single site at the time day and time so that the faculty member can be present for more consistent observations and support.

Lessons Learned

Service learning partnerships are complicated orchestrations of communication, planning, and activities. We knew that having a solidified plan wouldn't preclude us to facing unexpected challenges – and it didn't! Due to the LSNA budget delay, our tutoring start date was pushed back week after week. This delay required subtle shifts in the university course syllabus, which were unsettling to many of the undergraduates, whose enthusiasm that was present at the beginning of the semester had begun to wane with each postponement. Giving additional weeks prior to the launch of future tutoring projects would need to be built into the schedule, to allow for unexpected delays and prevent student anxiety.

Placing university students in multiple tutoring sites and accommodating specific grade level requests was problematic. The burden of communicating, scheduling, and supervising was multiplied for the university faculty member and the site coordinators. To simplify the logistics of future service-learning projects, university participants would be assigned a grade level between 3rd - 5th grades, instead of requesting a specific grade level.

A third obstacle needed to be navigated when two university students refused to participate in the project for personal reasons. Because the service-learning component had not been listed in the course description, an alternative assignment had to be offered. Moving forward, the service-learning project requirement was always included in the course description, and an in-depth, alternative assignment was offered to students who had schedule conflicts and were unable to attend the selected time/day for the project.

Sustaining the Project

As with any relationship, partnerships must be frequently re-examined and adjusted to address the changing needs of partners. Mid-year, the partners met to discuss the unanticipated challenges, which had emerged, and restructured certain aspects of the project. To have a greater impact, university tutors would start the next tutoring project at one site on one afternoon per week, with their faculty instructor in attendance for support and guidance. To serve more children, each pre-service teacher would be responsible for assessing reading skills and tutoring larger groups of 4-5 elementary students each. Finally, the university would support future service-learning efforts by providing a teaching assistant to support the faculty member in facilitating tutoring sessions of the larger group of participants that was expected.

Conclusion

As educators, we have a responsibility to “make a difference in the civic life of our communities and develop the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference” (Erlich, 2000, p. vi). University – community partnerships are a vehicle through which change and quality of life can be promoted and elevated. Developing such partnerships involve complex negotiations of needs, resources, expertise, and visions. It is through this type of engagement that a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources can develop and aim towards a common goal.

Strong partnerships and active civic engagement emerge when partners are empowered with equal voice, mutual benefits, and a balanced contribution of resources. Each partner brings to the relationship a unique set of strengths and challenges; offering diverse perspectives in addressing the emerging needs of all parties. By engaging with each other, the learning community taps into a wealth of resources and can tackle problems that might otherwise go unsolved. Such engagement promotes social justice – fairness, equity in opportunities, and membership within a larger social fabric – for the good of the community.

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