

CULTIVATING A UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP THROUGH AN INNOVATIVE AFTER-SCHOOL ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Benita R. Brooks

Sam Houston State University

Burcu Ates

Sam Houston State University

Jannah W. Nerren

Sam Houston State University

Abstract

A large body of literature suggests that service-learning, or experiential learning, is an effective approach for preparing classroom-ready teachers. While a great deal of emphasis has been placed on preparing teachers to enter their first classroom academically and pedagogically sound, there has been less emphasis on preparing teachers who understand and are equipped for community engagement as a component of teaching. This paper will describe the approach taken by one educator preparation program housed in a college of education at a regionally accredited state university, in the hopes that other teacher preparation programs can glean information to inform their own efforts at preparing teachers who are both classroom and community ready. The collaboration between the college, the community, and the local school district resulted in an academic after-school program that engaged teacher candidates in experiential service learning, leveraged the expertise of university faculty and school and community partners in a program that provided valuable learning to both the schoolchildren and the teacher candidates. The paper concludes with a description of subsequent initiatives that were developed as an outgrowth from the after-school program.

Keywords: teacher preparation, community partnerships, classroom-ready, community ready, service-learning, experiential learning, after-school programs, tutoring

Introduction

In 2011, Jentleson claimed, “As major social institutions, which cannot readily move, university campuses must deal with the issues of the decaying physical environments, growing poverty and crime rates, and the failing public schools of their surrounding neighborhoods and communities” (p.5). It is also the responsibility of institutions of higher education to develop both knowledge and character in the next generation of professional leadership. In fact, the goal of higher education is not only to prepare students for productive careers but also to help students develop a sense of a heightened responsibility to others both locally and globally. This article reports how one College of Education aligned its curriculum with the university’s motto, “The Measure of Life is its Service.” It tells the story of how an after-school academic program supported by the college nurtured the development of classroom readiness and community readiness in its undergraduate students seeking certification to teach in K-12 public schools. The article also tells the story of how an after-school academic program led to opportunities for productive collaboration between the college, the community, and the local schools.

To tell the story, we asked, “How can we create a university-community partnership (UCP) that will mutually benefit K-12 students and their families as well as the teacher candidates?” The term university-community partnership is used variably to describe any effort in which academic institutions and their local communities are reciprocally engaged and involved (Lewis et al., 2016; Zygmunt & Clark, 2015). The value of reciprocal collaborations is profound and yet, the question of how to structure and organize such work remains confounding (Bowers, 2017). This article calls for teacher education programs (TEPs) to remain culturally and community responsive while preparing teacher candidates to become “the best our society has to offer our children” (Guillen & Zeichner, 2018, p.151). We first provide a brief review of the literature to define a classroom-ready and a community-ready teacher. Next, we provide a brief literature review on after-school academic programs, introduce the Huntsville Immersion Partnership After-school Academic Program (HIP) with an overview, and discuss the structure and organization of the program in the hope that it could serve as a model for universities and schools/communities who wish to initiate a similar program and alliance. This article ends with reflections from teacher candidates who served as instructional coaches and a conclusion on how critical service-learning projects enable teacher candidates to become classroom-ready and community-ready teachers.

Literature Review

A Classroom-Ready and Community-Ready Teacher

Tindall-Ford et al. (2017) describe a “classroom ready” teacher as someone who has “a sound understanding of the complex context that constitutes the ‘classroom’ in which they are expected to teach” (p. 193). In fact, Tindall-Ford et al. (2017) declared that immersion programs within initial teacher education provided authentic learning experiences for teacher candidates. While Tindall-Ford et al. (2017) placed emphasis on professional experience in classroom contexts, Salter and Halbert (2019) called for teacher preparation programs to equip teacher candidates to be “community ready” through critical service-learning projects (p.5). Salter and Halbert (2019) argued that balancing classroom readiness with community readiness in a critical service-learning project teaches teacher candidates how to teach in context as “...engaged global citizens” (p.5). In this context, Zeichner (2019) argued that when teachers got to know the families and communities in which their students lived and used the knowledge and the connections in ways that supported student learning, both students and teachers had a better chance to succeed. Tindall-Ford et al. (2017) described this type of teacher as someone who had the “know-how, know-what, know-why and know-when” (p. 208). In collaboration with school and community stakeholders, we established a weekly immersive after-school academic program to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to engage with the students beyond the brick-and-mortar walls of the classroom and to develop relational understandings and skills about the lived experiences of the students, and their wider community contexts (Salter & Halbert, 2019). To provide an opportunity for teacher candidates to learn how to balance classroom readiness with community readiness was one of the main goals of the program.

After-School Academic Programs

There is extensive literature regarding service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015) and university-community partnerships in the field of education (Guillen & Zeichner, 2018), yet the incorporation of after-school programs in teacher education-community partnerships remains underexamined. According to the Afterschool Alliance (2016), after-school programs have a critical place especially in rural, underserved and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Jentleson (2011) noted, “...middle- and upper-income families seem to be putting together a workable patchwork of after-school care, lessons, and extracurricular activities that minimize the need for daily structured afterschool programs” (pp. 25-26). Jentleson found “low-income children who are shown most able to benefit from after-school programs often have the least access to this [afterschool programming and recreational facilities] valuable resource. Recreational resources are often fewer and less appealing in lower-income neighborhoods” (p. 26). Jentleson further acknowledged:

Of critical importance is the afterschool program’s ability to serve as an intermediary social setting where low-income students and families are physically, psychologically, and culturally comfortable. A second benefit is

that structured after-school programs are able to support the school's academic mission by providing academic support and an intermediary role between school and community youth. (p. 26)

Program Overview

In this case, the after-school academic program was intentional and involved multiple stakeholders. In 2015, we embarked on a journey with a local community partnership to create an after-school academic program for youth, held on the university's campus, in hopes of propelling down the pipeline from school to prison for these students. At the time, the purpose of the program was to help students from the community envision a future beyond their immediate circumstances. In the beginning, the after-school program's name was associated with the local community partner. In 2017, we decided to expand the program and change the name to be more representative of this expansion. We agreed upon the program title Huntsville Immersion After-school Academic Program, or HIP, to represent the community and to emphasize the academic nature of the program.

In addition to supporting student academic success, HIP is designed to recruit and prepare teacher candidates to become engaged community teachers. For the targeted grades of HIP, student performance on state testing standards typically fell below state and regional averages in every category and for every student sub-population. In some areas, performance had been almost 50% below the state average, with passing rates below 15% (Texas Education Agency, 2016-2017). The need to prepare, engage, and retain teachers in the local community who can work with these students is beyond critical, and HIP is designed to meet these needs while also offering direct instruction and support to students. In other words, the primary goal of HIP is to directly increase academic performance among students needing support while simultaneously providing teacher candidates with opportunities to become classroom-ready community teachers as they volunteer as instructional coaches in this program. HIP after-school academic program is a united vision between the community, the university, and school partners.

Participation by teacher candidates in this program was voluntary. Most of them were enrolled in field experience courses and specialized in grades 4 through 8 (4-8) English Language Arts (ELAR) and Social Studies, 4-8 Mathematics, and Early Childhood-6 grade Bilingual. Each semester the faculty involved in HIP visited undergraduate courses, especially those with a field component to introduce the mission of the program and the responsibilities of the role of "instructional coaches". At the beginning of each semester, we held a retreat for instructional coaches to welcome them, to go over the expectations of the program, and to get to know the other coaches and participating faculty. During the retreat, each instructional coach also received a journal to record their weekly reflections.

All teacher candidates who volunteered from 2015-2018 sought Texas teacher certification in EC-6 or 4-8 content areas. In 2018, we decided to move HIP from the university's campus to the local Boys & Girls Club with the goal of making the program accessible to more students. In spring 2019, HIP began meeting at the new Boys & Girls Club building every Tuesday from 4 pm-6 pm. During this time, 18 teacher candidates served as coaches. As a coach, one of the responsibilities was to tutor students in the content area in which the teacher candidate sought certification. The coaches tutored 45 students. Of the 45 students, 24 students attended the academic tutoring sessions regularly. Due to limited after-school academic support for older students, we decided students in the upper grades would be the ones selected to receive assistance. In 2018, we sought teacher candidates from the Bilingual Course Block to serve as coaches also. All teacher candidates committed to serve as a coach for at least one semester.

For the spring 2019 semester, the students, the teacher candidates, and the organizing faculty from the College of Education met at the Boys & Girls Club. All students arrived at the Boys & Girls Club by 4:00 pm and the tutoring began at 4:30 pm. Both the lead faculty and Boys & Girls Club administration/staff spoke with parents and legal guardians about the expectations and details of the program. In one of the meetings, for example, parents were asked if they would allow their child to stay until 6:00 pm. If their schedules permitted, almost all of them agreed with this instruction time frame. The 24 who attended regularly exhibited a commitment to the program, as they were also the students who stayed until 6:00 pm.

We spent the spring 2019 semester adjusting to the Boys & Girls Club procedures and guidelines. During that period, small operational issues surfaced; however, by fall 2019, we learned how to organize the after-school academic program to operate more effectively and efficiently. In fall 2019, we had 20 regularly participating students in grades 6-11 and 12 volunteer teacher candidates. In spring 2020, it became necessary to suspend the program due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fall 2020, we offered an online activity for students and teacher candidates to maintain momentum. We discuss the online activity in the “Engagement Beyond Academics” section of this paper.

Academic Engagement

Grade Level Assessment

Before the program started, the teacher candidates (referenced as “coaches” hereafter) either administered the STAAR *Ready-Reading 5th Grade*, Rasinski’s *Three Minute Reading Assessments for Grades 5-8*, or *Texas Middle School Fluency Assessment (TMSFA)* for grades 6-8 to determine the student’s reading fluency and comprehension. The *Ready-Reading 5th Grade* assessment was also available in Spanish for students who preferred to read it in Spanish. In addition, the teacher candidates administered the *Student Math Survey* and the *Adolescent Motivations for School Reading Questionnaire (AMSRQ)*. The survey and questionnaire provided opportunities for students to express their opinions about mathematics and reading. After conducting the assessments and analyzing the data, the coaches used one of the following books as the primary textbook to tutor in the content area: *Everything You Need to Know to Ace Math in One Big Fat Notebook* or *Everything You Need to Know to Ace English in One Big Fat Notebook*. The primary textbooks are written in student-friendly language. We believed regularly participating students would meet the target passing grade of C for each content area of reading and mathematics. In spring 2019, of the 24 students who participated regularly, 15 were tutored in mathematics and 9 were tutored in ELAR.

Academic Outcomes: School Exam and STAAR Test Results

A guidance counselor from one of the partner schools collected data for the HIP program. Data consisted of grades on the students’ report card. We learned of the 15 who received tutoring in mathematics, 93% met the target passing grade of C or higher in the 4th nine weeks. All 8 students who received tutoring in ELAR met the target passing grade of C or higher. In addition, we hypothesized that tutoring the regularly participating students would increase STAAR test results in the content areas from the previous year. Of the 15 regularly attending students who received tutoring in mathematics in spring 2019, 80% passed the math section of the STAAR test. Of the 8 students who received tutoring in ELAR, we noticed 63% passed the reading section of the STAAR test. Some factors that may have had an effect on the ELAR results included: reading fluency and difficulty comprehending. Other factors that may have had an effect were that some students qualified as a student with special needs or were on a Texas 504 Plan for Accommodations. According to the guidance counselor, other factors such as socioeconomic status and attendance in school may have also contributed to the STAAR results.

Engagement Beyond Academics

Meet the Author

HIP provided opportunities for students to engage beyond academics. According to Jentleson (2011), after-school programs can support positive youth development by providing academic tutoring, social skills, and exposure to cultural enrichment activities. As such, the HIP program offered academic support and several cultural enrichment activities, such as a “Meet the Author” event. Due to the popularity of the movie, *Black Panther*, many students wanted to meet the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award winning children’s book author, Ronald L. Smith who is the author of Marvel’s book, *Black Panther: The Young Prince* (2018). The book captured the young protagonist T’Challa in his early years, and many of the students were interested in this character. In spring 2019, the students had the opportunity to Skype and interact with the author. We learned from the regularly participating students that this was the first time any of

them communicated with a children's book author. In fact, for many, it was their first time meeting an author. In fall 2019, award winning juvenile fiction author Ben Mikaelson was invited to visit the town. Mikaelson is the recipient of the International Literacy Association Award and the Western Writer's Golden Spur Award. His novels have been nominated and have won many State Readers' Choice awards. He is the author of *Touching Spirit Bear*, which is a book about bullying, the juvenile justice system, forgiveness, and healing. We partnered with a local middle school to do a book study on *Touching Spirit Bear* (2001).

We also partnered with a surrounding school district for this book study. The local middle school invited the author to the campus to speak to 191 students. All students who participated in the book study at the middle school received an autographed copy of the book. Additionally, the school district brought 200 students in grades 4-5 to the university's campus for an afternoon conversation with the author. The author also presented at the Boys & Girls Club. All participating students in grades 5-9 at the Club received an autographed copy of the book. A faculty member demonstrated for the students and the coaches at the Boys & Girls Club how to write their own readers' theater script about *Touching Spirit Bear*. Two groups volunteered to perform their script when the author visited, and coaches shared the "I Am" poems that they wrote capturing a character, object, or thing found in the book.

Due to the popularity of the movie, *The Hate U Give*, in fall 2020, we invited award-winning author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller by the same title (2017), Angie Thomas to Zoom with the students at the Boys & Girls Club. The students were highly engaged in the conversation about her process and the topics presented in the book. The discussion between the students and Thomas was open and friendly, so much so that one student asked Angie Thomas to rap, and she freestyled for the students. She shared with the group how much the students energized and inspired her. All students received a copy of Thomas' book.

Arts and Science

During the spring 2019 and fall 2019 semesters, we invited a professor from the Department of Art at the local university to host an Arts Day with the students at the Boys & Girls Club. In addition, we had Science Day in fall 2019. We invited a science professor from the School of Teaching and Learning at the local university to lead a workshop on the solar system. The professor is the NASA JPL Solar System Ambassador and the NASA Goddard Earth SYSTEM Ambassador. In response, one teacher candidate shared, "Today, I had so much fun at the HIP program...I also enjoyed the seminar we've had in science about the moons. I also got a NASA sticker. Great day."

Reflections

After each tutoring session, the instructional coaches wrote their weekly reflections in the journal that we provided to them. Each page in the journal had the following template (a) Today, I intend to... (b) Today, I will be mindful of... (c) Today, I am grateful for and (d) Today, I learned. One tutor from the EC-6 Bilingual Block wrote in her weekly reflection that she intended to "Be ready; be available; be alive to make a difference and teach." Her statement was the theme that permeated the tutors' weekly reflections. In support of this, one instructional coach from the grades 4-8 literacy methods block in her final weekly reflection wrote:

This program has shown me how to have patience when children get tired and has given me the opportunity to get to know children's hearts. I have seen the good days and bad and have come to love this program and everyone in it.

Other instructional coaches wrote in their weekly journals that they learned "how to tutor on the spot" and how to be "mindful of chaos." Due to the noise level at the Boys & Girls Club, tutoring was not an easy task. In the beginning, the instructional coaches complained about the noise level and considered it a distraction. Over time, several wrote in their weekly reflections that the chaos taught them how to ignore distractions and still teach.

It was evident in their reflections that volunteering to serve as instructional coaches prepared them to be culturally responsive teachers. The teacher candidates knew their content well, so they were classroom-ready. However, serving as an instructional coach taught them how to become community ready by making themselves available to get to know the students and the community in which the students lived. Throughout the semester, the instructional coaches also wrote reflection statements to detail what they learned. In her reflection, one 4-8 ELAR instructional coach wrote:

All my life, I have observed the challenges that Hispanic students like myself are faced with in my mom's very own bilingual kindergarten classroom. Working with the middle schoolers in the tutoring program this semester reminded me that those same challenges are prevalent in students of all ages and family backgrounds, specifically minorities who come from low-income households.

In another reflection, a 4-8 mathematics instructional coach noted:

Everything we do as a coach in HIP is helping us. We are getting hands-on experience with different types of students and even behavior issues, which a lot of future teachers don't see until they are in their own room. As the students learn, I am learning every time too.

In addition, a 4-8 mathematics instructional coach expressed:

Volunteering as a coach in HIP is a great opportunity for me as a future teacher. I enjoy helping students and seeing them succeed in their education. I hope each student learns a lot from us by the end of the semester.

One 4-8 ELAR/SS instructional coach captured the impact that volunteering as a coach had on her. She wrote:

I definitely believe that volunteering as a coach in HIP is preparing me as a future teacher because I have had little experience working with actual students. Even on the second day, it has been a huge eye-opener for me. The students are beginning to open up a bit more and are gradually becoming more comfortable with their coaches.

The overarching theme that emerged from the reflections was: it takes both classroom readiness and community readiness to become culturally responsive teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Powell Foundation awarded the College of Education \$47,000 to support the Huntsville Immersion Partnership (HIP) After-School Academic Program for the 2018-2019 academic year. We received notification from the Powell Foundation that they would fund HIP for another \$47,000 for the 2019-2020 academic year. The HIP program had a ripple effect, demonstrated by the 3 instructional coaches seeking certification in grades 4-8 ELAR/SS further developing their passion and writing a grant with faculty to receive funding to implement a social studies summer camp for youth in need of extra academic support at the Boys & Girls Club. In 2019, the students received \$8,000 to fund the camp and to present at a state-wide conference. Overall, interest in HIP at the university led to partnering with the university's Office of Equity and Inclusion to create a Diversity Certificate Program for undergraduate teacher candidates. This certificate program began fall 2019 with over 100 future teachers enrolled. We had 68 teacher candidates successfully complete the certificate program.

In sum, we share the story about the HIP after-school academic program and subsequent results, hoping it will inspire other Colleges of Education to find their own innovative ways to prepare teacher candidates to work in diverse and different school settings. We know the call for teacher preparation programs in the United States (Tinkler et al., 2013) and elsewhere (Mergler, et al., 2017) to better prepare teacher candidates is growing increasingly louder due to the possibility of students from underrepresented communities experiencing a deficit view (Muhammad, 2020), implicit bias (Sparks, 2020), exclusionary discipline encompassing a school-to-prison pipeline (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019) or a disproportionate assignment to special education (Thomas et al, 2020). We took this call to heart and felt compelled to tell our story about the HIP after-school academic program and its impact on nurturing the development of classroom-readiness and community-readiness in our undergraduate students.

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