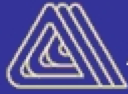
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Author(s) Angela N. Booker, University of California - Davis; Kindra F. Montgomery-Block, University of California - Davis; Bel Reyes, University of California - Davis; Zenae Scott, Sacramento City Unified School District

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How Service Learning with Social Justice Commitments Calls for Transformation of Community Responsibility in Schools

Angela Booker
School of Education
University of California, Davis

Kindra F. Montgomery-Block
bel Reyes
Center for Community School Partnerships
School of Education
University of California, Davis

Zenae Scott
Sacramento City Unified School District

Abstract
Much of the literature on service learning provides a clear picture of the outcome of projects, roles of educators, and implications for citizenship and schooling. With this paper, we are advancing the argument that what transforms a school must also transform the surrounding community. This mixed-method study was conducted over the 6-week period of a summer service-learning program emphasizing social justice concepts. The program provided a bridge for 532 incoming 9th graders from underserved communities to their new high school and engaged them with local community needs. What emerged as a core aspect of the program was the consistent activation of adult supporters' community networks and institutional access and the surrounding community's role in making schooling relevant for students.

Keywords: transitioning youth, service learning, civic engagement, youth development

Introduction

In 2007, Sacramento City Unified School District administered the California Healthy Kids Survey and found that only 13% of district 7th graders reported high levels of opportunities for meaningful participation at their school. This percentage decreased to 9% by 9th grade. This indicates that the majority of students in the district have found it difficult to establish meaningful connections in their schools, and that along with the transition to 9th grade comes a further decline in school connectedness.

Young people's ability to connect in meaningful, authentic ways with their schools and communities continues to be a critical concern for educators and students across the academic spectrum (Pope, 2001). Transition and connection are two sides of an integral process that transform youth experience. Much of the work of young people is in establishing space for themselves to participate and develop in a rapidly changing society (Erickson, 1968). Their environments for taking on this work – home, school, and community – interact in varying degrees to support or hinder their effectiveness in this effort (Barron, 2006, Eckert, 1989). Budget crises, indicative of the widespread economic struggles rippling through global, national, and local economies, serve to complicate the transitional work of young people even further. As parents, teachers, administrators, and community organizations face increasing stressors in light of decreasing resources, so do young people move through their transitions with the same set of increasing challenges and constraints (Rogers, et al, 2010).

Young people coming from underserved communities who are often labeled "at-risk" are the focus of an effort in a large urban unified school district in Northern California to form help them establish critical connections with their schools and communities and sustain them throughout high school. Transitioning 9th graders were offered a new opportunity to spend part of their summer on their new campus, or among their new peers, learning social justice concepts in a service learning model called Service and Social Justice[i].

What emerged as a core aspect of the projects was the consistent activation of adult supporters' community networks and institutional access. This paper addresses the ways in which this core feature of the service-learning model rewrites a relationship between the institutional responsibility of the school as educator and the surrounding community's role in making schooling relevant for students. That is, when social justice and service organize the work of learning, they also reorganize the role of school and community as inseparable with regard to the responsibility for educating young people.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

A Cross-Context Approach to Supporting Youth in Transition

Attention has been given to the practices taken up by schools to address the challenges of transition, in particular, as students move from middle to high school. These practices include development of small learning community approaches, cooperative and project-based learning, advisories, summer programs for entering 9th grade students, etc. (Legters and Kerr, 2001). Research addressing high school drop-out and push-out rates indicates that while factors such as positive peer-teacher relationships and strength of academic focus in the curriculum favor completion, large school size mitigates these positive effects (Lee and Burkam, 2003). In large, urban school districts, then, working to connect transitioning youth with their new campuses, teachers, peers, and course

expectations also requires careful consideration of the learning environment and what it can effectively support.

Outside of schools, scholars have also examined practices for learning across contexts that are culturally informed, taking place in homes, community organizations, museums, and schools (Bell, et al., 2009; Booker, 2010; Cassell, 2002; Civil, 2002; Gonzalez, et al., 2005; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lave, 1998; Rogoff, et al., 2003; Soep, 2006). Practices for learning and problem solving in these environments are related to school and disciplinary practices, while drawing effective links between them has proved challenging but not impossible (Goldman & Booker, 2009; Ito, 2008; Nasir, 2000). Learning sciences research highlights the importance for learners to access these cross-contextual links:

> "Learning to see heterogeneous – and often unfamiliar – meaning-making practices as being intellectually related to those in academic domains entails two related moves: expanding conventional views of these domains and deepening understanding of the intellectual power inherent in varied discursive and reasoning practices that youth from nondominant groups bring to school….To take up the intellectual resources embedded in youth's everyday practices requires us to reorganize school practices in ways that actually make explicit the linkages between everyday and school-based knowledge and discourse" (Nasir, et al., 2006).

Young people from underrepresented populations, in particular, are the focus of efforts to increase engagement in formal education and educational attainment. Transitional periods, as in the move from middle to high school, have been identified as particularly challenging. As young people continue to indicate a lack of meaningful connection with their schools, it is valuable for the educational community to develop a clear understanding of the practices young people are engaged with across the contexts they traverse, with particular attention to those contexts where they note a stronger connection.

Sustaining Authentic Spaces for Learning

Authentic social spaces are defined by their connection with the social life of the local community and the ability to participate as an active citizen (Dewey, 1997 [1938], Selwyn, 2002; Van Benschoten, 2000). Prior research indicates there are untapped opportunities to support learners across contexts, particularly in terms of access to authentic discourse and practice (Booker, 2010) and recognition of disciplinary knowledge in the home (Gonzalez, 2005; Goldman and Booker, 2009). Barab, et al. (2000) assert that authenticity cannot be prescribed by educators: "…authenticity is an emergent process that is actualized through individuals' participation in tasks and practices of value to themselves and to a community of practice" (p. 37). Activities focused on civic engagement and youth development provide a compelling combination of authentic experience with extended learning trajectories. They often provide an avenue for young people to engage in the politics of their communities (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Kahne and Westheimer, 1996), an opportunity that Gordon (2005) suggests can open pathways for engagement among marginalized and disenfranchised youth. Service and Social Justice (SSJ) builds on the current research trend uniting the fields of civic activism and youth development through authentic participation and guided developmental practice (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; James 1997). SSJ links the guided development of youth as civic participants (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Galston, 2001; Kirshner, 2008; Owen, 2000) with the process of establishing authentic connections between school and community so

important in supporting students sustained school engagement.

As Kahne and Westheimer (1996) highlighted, service-learning projects can exist along a spectrum of intended outcomes from developing a practice of charity and volunteerism to a practice of critical analysis of systems and circumstances for the purpose of change. With the Service and Social Justice (SSJ) program's goal of connecting youth more effectively to their new school community and acknowledgement that this has been a significant, ongoing challenge in the district, the program's stated intentions tend toward the latter. Still, with several community partners involved in delivery of the program and a variety of school and community settings where the program takes place, the variation is such that the full spectrum of approaches is present, just as Kahne and Westheimer (1996) indicated. Though this variation was present from one project to the next, at the institutional level, there was a consistent opportunity to change the way schools and communities collectively take responsibility for educating young people in the community. A question that arises is whether this transformation can be sustained beyond the summer program and who will sustain it?

Site & Participant Demographics

Data reported here come from Year 1 of a study conducted as part of the Service and Social Justice (SSJ) summer program in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). The program was designed to address the needs of youth from underserved communities transitioning to 9th grade. SCUSD enrolls 48,155 students in 88 schools, including over 3,800 8th graders. The district student population is primarily low- income, with 65% eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. The district is very diverse: 20.0% of the students are Asian, 32.8% are Hispanic/Latino, 21.0% are African American, and 21.2% are non-Hispanic White. Over 25% of the SCUSD student population are English Language Learners with 44 different languages spoken by the student population, including Spanish, Hmong, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Russian.

The total SSJ enrollment was 551. Five hundred fifteen participants were incoming freshman, 34 were middle school students in grades 6-8, and 2 were unknown. Fifty-nine percent of participants identified as male and 41% as female. Seventy-one percent of SSJ participants were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Based on participant data from the district, the Table 1 lists student participants by racial and ethnic students identification.

Table 1: Racial & Ethnic Identification of Participants

% of Participants	Racial & Ethnic Identification
35%	Latino(a) or Hispanic
22%	Asian American
21%	African American
13%	White
2%	Pacific Islander or Native American
7%	Other or Unknown

In addition to student participants, over 85 educators and youth leaders were trained to work with students in 2010 SSJ program. These included staff from after-school providers working in the district, students enrolled in district high schools, and participating

teachers.

Methods and data sources

This mixed-methods study was conducted over the 6-week period in Year 1 during which the SSJ program was implemented. Programs participants were served across 9 sites that included 5 comprehensive high schools, 2 small schools, and 2 community centers. Each site had two to four project groups working in themed areas that included "going green", cultural histories, immigration reform, juvenile justice, disaster preparedness, and campus improvements. In addition to the transitioning youth, study participants included adult site managers from 3 partnering community organizations, classroom teachers (on the school campus sites), adult facilitators, teaching assistants, and youth action team members (student ambassadors currently enrolled high school students).

Table 2: Qualitative Data Sites

Site Name	Site Type	Projects Observed	Approx. # of Students	Facilitating After-School Provider (ASP)	Teacher of Record Role
Babcock (BHS)	Comprehensive High School	Green Voices (4)*	60	ASP (A)	Liaison
		Morrison Creek (6)			Instructor
		Teen CERT**			Instructor
George Coe (GCCC)	Community Center	Black Voices	24	ASP (B)	n/a
		Latino Voices (3)			
		Native Voices			
Benjamin Williams (BWHS)	Small School	Community Garden	23	ASP (C)	Instructor / Liaison
		Reading Patio			
		Rhymes vs. Racism			
		Teen CERT**			
Jackson (JHS)	Comprehensive High School	Environment	70	ASP (A)	n/a
		Homeless Outreach			
Oakmont (OHS)	Comprehensive High School	Business Community	97	ASP (C)	Liaison
		ELL Project			
		Gulo Pond			
		Rooftop Garden			

Table 2: Five of nine total SSJ sites were included in the observations. Here, each of those sites is listed. Titles of projects taking place at the sites are listed, and a number listed after the project title indicates the number of groups working on a project in that theme. The facilitating organization is the after-school provider coordinating projects and in the majority of cases, providing lead instruction. The role for the Teacher of Record varied across sites between leading instruction and serving as a campus liaison who also commented on student journals.

*After-School Provider (B) collaborated with After-School Provider (A) to facilitate Green Voices.

**Teen CERT was led by the Teacher of Record at Babcock HS and by an local outside instructor at Benjamin Williams HS.

Data from the qualitative portion of the study includes field notes from roughly 80 hours of observation as well as artifacts of student work: written journal reflections and video journals, youth-produced videos, scripts, data sheets, process notes, handouts and whiteboard notes. Observations took place in 5 of the 9 (see Table 2) sites that were selected to represent the contexts in which the SSJ program was offered: a) three of the comprehensive high schools (227 students), b) the small school (23 students), and c) one community center (34 students) for a total of roughly 274 participants. Within each site, focused attention was given to one to three of the projects For example, at Oakmont HS, Business Community and Gulo Pond were the primary focus of observations while ELL Project and Rooftop Garden received less focused attention. In these cases, additional details were provided by site coordinators. Observations were conducted at 2 of the weekly site manager meetings held at the SCUSD district office. During these meetings program providers discussed progress at each site, weekly successes, and challenges to be addressed in the coming weeks.

In addition to the qualitative data set, pre- and post- surveys were distributed to approximately 400 participants at 7 sites. Most students (68%) who completed the pre-survey at the start of the program also completed the post-survey at the program's end. The post-survey participation rate ranged from a low of 57% School to a high of 87% across sites. The district had two overall purposes for the SSJ evaluation: 1) Improve program operations and 2) to determine the impact of the program on students. Items on the baseline survey dealt with attitudes and knowledge around one's community and environment. The post-survey assessment included the same items as well as a set of items not present on the pre-survey. These items required students to reflect on their specific experiences in the program. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the SSJ program on students' perception of the statements presented on the pre- and post- survey.

Results: Activating local campus networks

Before the actual youth project work commenced, the participants were entering a ready-made local network. For instance, on the first day of observations at Babcock, a comprehensive high school, as the site coordinator circulated, many incoming 9th graders called his name. As it turns out, his school year role was with an after-school program at the nearby middle school. So, when the students arrived on their new high school campus to participate in SSJ, they already had an established relationship with a staff member. That relationship, even if present only for the summer, allowed students to experience a new campus as slightly more familiar. This was the case at sites like George Coe and Jackson as well, where the facilitators or site managers had worked with some of their students at their previous schools.

The student ambassadors provided the promise of extending this role because of their continuing presence into the school year. They offered a sort of insider knowledge from the student perspective as well. During an observation at Benjamin Williams when students were learning how to do a head-to-toe assessment for their disaster preparedness certification, a youth participant had the following conversation with a student ambassador (SA) while they waited:

> S_g[ii]: Do I have to do this?
> SA: Yes, if want to get your service hours.
> S_g: How many did you have to do each year?
> SA: 100. (upbeat)
> S_g: I already have 8.
> SA: [unintelligible]
> S_g: (surprised) Oh, it has to be all during high school?
>
> --Field Note, Week 2, Benjamin Williams HS

In this exchange, the student ambassador was able to offer a sense of the expectations for community service at the high school and the incoming 9th grader showed a great deal of interest in understanding these new expectations. These types of conversations with student ambassadors, school staff, and teachers were common across sites, but quietly interspersed among the main activity of the projects.

Generating access to community networks

Beyond school walls, students became engaged with a variety of organizations that included the community living in a local housing project across the street from Benjamin Williams and the juvenile detention center across the street from Oakmont. At Oakmont, one of the projects focused on working with students who would transition from the detention center back to the high school. Part of their goal was to solicit local businesses for donations to fill backpacks with the keys to high school survival and provide them to transitioning students.

On one occasion, they called a local sandwich shop and were told if they came in to make sandwiches, the shop would share the proceeds. The youth didn't know what to make of this, so they bounced it up to their facilitator and site coordinator. About 20 minutes later, Mr. Graham returned with an update:

> Mr. Graham (entering room): Whose idea was it to call [sandwich shop]? (serious tone)
>
> Youth participants' point in all directions.
> S_g (points to Ms. Lupe): It was her idea.
> Ms Lupe: It was everyone's idea.
>
> Mr. Graham (crosses room, shaking head, sits on desk, with all eyes on him. Taps paper on desk): That's fundraising! Clap it up! (Loud applause).
>
> Mr Graham: I talked back and forth with the manager 3 times, and here's what she said…If we come over there for lunch next week and buy some sandwiches, she'll give us 5% of what we spend and 5% of what she makes for the entire day.
> S_g (to chuckling adults): How come that's funny?
> Ms. Lupe: It's funny because they want something from this, too. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. (To whole room) Good job you guys!
>
> --Field Note, Week 3, Oakmont HS

The students and adult facilitators worked with a community partner who offered the students a lesson in reciprocity. The students also had the support of the adult community partners to negotiate the deal and provide a means for processing the gift. This service

experience was only part of the picture, though. The students also wanted to understand the juvenile justice system, and in particular details about the detention facility across the street from their new high school.

> Ms. Lupe: ....Actually, I met someone from the county yesterday, and he's going to talk with you next week on behalf of the detention center.
> S_g: On behalf? Or is he actually from the detention center?
> Ms. Lupe: I think he's from there.

When it became clear the students could not visit, they sought a contact from the center. A direct representative was particularly important to the students, and Ms. Lupe put a good deal of effort into opening that contact.

These efforts to establish contacts and move students directly into action with powerful decision makers or local activists were consistent. Babcock students met with a farmworkers' advocate to discuss systemic inequality. Others went to the Mayor's monthly green economy meeting to interview him along with Van Jones, who spoke about connecting the green economy with urban communities. George Coe students interviewed a Sierra Club leader about political and personal actions to clean our environment. All of these connections were generated with the help of SSJ educators who activated personal networks, generated access and moved aside roadblocks.

Student Responses to Community Connections

Survey results affirmed the importance of community connections made during the program. Among students who completed both the pre- and post-survey, significant gains were observed in means for items relating to community connectedness. For example, the largest pre-post gain was for the item, "I know how to contact adults in my community to get information on community or environmental issues." Table 3 lists the items with statistically significant pre-post gains.

Table 3: SSJ Program Impact on Students

Indicators	Baseline Mean	Post-program Mean
I know how to contact adults in my community to get information on community or environmental issues.	2.22	2.56
I know where to find information on community issues where I live.	2.33	2.56
I am familiar with the kinds of organizations that work on community and environmental issues where I live.	2.38	2.61
Adults in my community value my opinion.	2.38	2.54
I feel like I am an important part of my community.	2.49	2.62
It is very important to me to do the best I can in school.	3.58	3.69

**Items are ruled on a four-point scale; the statistical significance for the changes from baseline to post is .000 for all items. Changes with a statistical significance of .05 or less are considered statistically significant. Data on participant outcomes are based on a set of 216 matched –pre and post-program participant surveys.*

Post-survey not included in the pre-survey, further clarify this picture. These items required students to reflect on their specific experiences in the program. Student responses to these items were overwhelmingly positive and indicated that students had a high degree of interest and involvement in their projects, believed that the projects themselves and their contributions to it were meaningful, worked collaboratively and effectively, perceived the connection of the project to academic learning, and perceived that their work resulted in connectedness and respect from their community. The results specific to community connections, academic connections, and meaningfulness to student participants are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Student Perceptions of SSJ Program

Indicators	% Sort of True or Very True
Meaningfulness	
I felt like the project we worked on was important	85.0
I felt like we had real responsibilities on our project	83.8
I felt like our project made a difference	81.6
Academic Connections	
Our teacher talked about how our project related to the subjects we were studying in class	75.6
We learned about public policy as a part of our project	68.9
Community Connections	
We presented and/or discussed the results of our project with one or more members of the community.	78.9
We met with people in the community in order to learn more about the problem.	72.9
Being in SSJ makes me feel like part of a larger, national movement to improve communities and the environment.	74.3
People in my school or community thought the work we did on our project was important.	76.5

Students engaged in a number of types of participation that included direct local action, public service education, social justice inquiry, and certification. Additionally, there was a range of practices for learning available to participants: internet-based research, interaction with guest speakers, off-site interviews, scientific inquiry, real-time and letter-writing outreach, media production, and formal presentation.

Students had access to a wide variety of community connections through SSJ. All of the sites found ways to connect students with relevant community experiences including field trips to local wetlands, farmer's markets, city government events, and community organizations. One of the highlights came when students attended Mayor Kevin Johnson's monthly Greenwise meeting, alongside hundreds of people, to address green economy goals. Van Jones was the guest speaker, and SSJ students were able to gain a press pass with the help of their facilitator. They filmed the event and were able to interview Van Jones and

Mayor Johnson, respectively, after the event. In another instance, students met repeatedly with a local wildlife biologist, discovered they were using similar tools for their work that she used for hers, and heard from her about the different ways to advocate for wetland protection. The after-school partners worked hard to meet students' needs, connecting them with people to interview like Billy Mills, the first Native American to win an Olympic gold medal, and Bill Magavern, the director of Sierra Club California.

Three of the observed groups did neighborhood-based projects that connected them either directly or indirectly with the residents, businesses, and institutions of the local community. In each case, there were moments of surprise for students as they became aware of the both challenges to their participation and surprisingly generous opportunities.

An additional thread of connection across the SSJ program came from the Sacramento Youth Empowerment Studio (SacYES) crews efforts to interview students about their projects as they were developing throughout the program. UC Davis staff similarly interacted with students at each site gathering video logs from students. These groups made students aware of other projects going on in advance of the final project showcase that brought students from all 9 sites together.

As evidenced in the survey, students learned about networks for community participation during SSJ, and in many cases they established direct interactions. There was richness in the number and quality of connections made both within the school community and in the surrounding and extended local communities. The question remains whether students will be able and supported to make use of these newly developed connections in service of their academic trajectories. Early focus group evidence is promising, and more data will need to be gathered as students proceed through their high school experiences.

Implications

> S_b: How can we help the buffer lands?
> Environmental Biologist: ….You can write a letter to your city supervisor….The city officials decide what happens with land management and funding. So, if you'd write a letter to your supervisor explaining your project here and what you've learned coming to the buffer lands, that would help.
> --Field Note, Week 5, Buffer Lands Field Trip

The youth participant who asked this question of a natural resource specialist at the buffer lands near Babcock High only had access to her because of Ms. Roclan, an SSJ classroom teacher. As it turns out, she grew up in the area, attended Babcock high, wanted her students to think about water quality disparities, and spent a year building relationships at the city and county that allowed her students access to the restricted wetland area. But the implication here is not only that teachers and other educators need to generate access to their own networks. The more critical point is that when students have access to contacts in their local communities at all levels (current students, teachers, neighbors, local professionals, etc.) who own the responsibility of engaging youth, *both* the school and the community are transformed.

Much of the literature on service learning provides a clear picture of the outcome of projects, roles of educators, and implications for citizenship and schooling. With this paper, we are advancing the argument that what transforms a school, must also transform the

school's surrounding community. In large part, the access work at this point resides with the educators—classroom teachers and youth workers. SSJ spotlights this valiant effort while also making it clear that the fruits of social justice service learning cannot be realized until the mighty effort it takes to generate community access for youth is shared by schools and the local community alike.

 anbooker@ucdavis.edu

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[i] Service and Social Justice is a pseudonym, as are the school names.

[ii] S_g refers to a female student. S_b refers to a male student.