Developing School Leaders for Diverse Learners through Online Service Learning

Kym Acuña, Ed D
Associate Professor
Midwestern State University
4310 Taft Blvd, Wichita Falls, TX 76308
USA

Abstract

School leaders in today's society must be prepared to create and lead schools that are appropriate for diverse learners. A particular problem in school leadership development is that many of the principal candidates do not come from diverse backgrounds themselves and need to examine the culture and life experiences of those who are different from themselves. One way for principal candidates to gain this experience is through service learning. Historically, service learning has been place-based where a group of students serve a particular group together. A majority of principal preparation programs today have an online or hybrid format. The challenge lies then in designing appropriate service learning experiences for principal candidates who are receiving their preparation coursework through online learning programs. This study examines the design and candidate perceptions of a service learning project for online principal candidates.

Keywords: Diverse Learners, Service Learning, Online Learning, School Leaders, Principal Preparation

It is essential for our current leaders-in-training to develop their skills in cultural proficiency. The reality of todays K-12 schools includes a majority of diverse learners. Many of our up and coming school leaders, particularly in rural or suburban setting, do not come from diverse backgrounds themselves and/or have a limited experience with exposure with understanding of diverse cultures, socio-economic experiences, and or mindsets.

Service Learning (SL) is a teaching strategy that has been implemented in higher education and proven to be very effective. With the ever-changing landscape of higher education, particularly at the graduate level, challenges for the use of SL have arisen. As the percentage of on-line graduate programs rise, the possibility of implementing SL in its traditional form becomes more problematic. There is a need for finding flexible and creative ways to involve students who may live in different parts of the state or country in quality, research-based SL opportunities.

This study describes the design of a SL project in an online Educational Leadership Masters level course and examines its impact. The course is entitled Building School Communities for Diverse Learners. It is intended to help principal candidates prepare to create schools that support diverse learners and provide learning that is accessible to students from a host of different backgrounds and cultures. The challenge that often arose in this course is that many of the students themselves had not experienced a great deal of diversity.

Theoretical Framework:

Three areas of concern must be considered for this project: online pedagogy and SL, acquisition of diversity skills, and SL practices. Using SL in online courses "refers to an instructional approach by with students participate in community-based placements and complete associated coursework online" (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010, p. 154).

These placements can be predetermined and assigned or can be chosen by individual students. Seiver and Troja (2014) report students having a greater course satisfaction when they have an internal locus of control regarding their online learning.

In general, SL is considered to be a teaching tool which can link theory and practice for course learning objectives while making a meaningful connection with the community (Ogeyik & Guvendir, 2009). More specifically SL has also been linked the development of civic-minded graduates. One of the core elements developed through SL in civic-minded graduates is matured diversity skill (Hatcher & Studer, 2015; Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Terrel and Lindsey (2009) describe valuing diversity as one of the five essential elements for culturally proficient leadership.

Service learning is a teaching pedagogy that has been studied for its effectiveness in moral development and its effectiveness in accomplishing other academic objectives. While some propose that specific aspects of service learning design, such as structured reflection, are essential elements to its effectiveness (Winings, 2002; Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009) others believe that research has yet to establish that relationship (Hart, Matsuba, & Atkins, 2008).

Methods and Procedures:

Implementing service learning in an online Educational Leadership Masters level course presents challenges. Students in this distance learning course live in various cities, are usually working full-time in schools, and have varying degrees of experience with different diverse groups. So, the model of the SL project necessarily had to allow for a range of individual designs for service which allowed for the differences in learning needs, geography, and resources of each educational leadership student. A unique feature of this design was the addition of a self-analysis assignment to help each individual determine who they might serve as a part of their project that they consider as different from themselves. See student prompt:

> *Each of you will think about what group of people you feel like you would benefit from knowing more about. You may choose that group based on socio-economic status, race, religion, education, or some other difference that you can identify. Please be sure to choose based on your desire to learn more about their needs, struggles, strengths, culture, world vision, etc.*

Students had to think about a group or category of people that they had not had much contact with that they would like to learn more about. Some of the identified differences were racial, ethnic, socio-economic, cultural, and language-based, among others. Students were asked to choose an organization where they would perform 10 hours of service that would allow them to expand their knowledge of cultures different from their own.

After determining who they would like to serve, students then chose what organization met those criteria and arranged for setting up their service. They were given a service-learning directory created by a previous cohort of students in the same course. The service learning directory provides a listing of a wide range of opportunities for students to provide service to different groups in various cities. This structure allowed for each individual student to create a service learning scenario that would meet his/her particular needs. They documented their service using a service log in addition to a reflective piece discussed below.

Service learning is a teaching pedagogy that has been studied for its effectiveness in moral development and its effectiveness in accomplishing other academic objectives, such as, applying concepts in a real word setting. Some propose that specific aspects of service learning design, such as structured reflection, are essential elements to its effectiveness A SL reflection activity was created to serve this purpose of introspection regarding students' learning. Students had to elaborate on what drew them to the particular group they choose to serve, what they learned from the experience and how, and how that learning would impact their work as a principal in ensuring the school is a safe environment that is conducive to learning. The SL reflection questions were:

- *Discuss why you chose to do your service learning where you did. What did you hope to learn and what kinds of differences drew you to volunteer at that particular location or with that particular group of people?*

- *Discuss what you learned about others that you hadn't thought of before. Give a narrative of how you learned those things, what in particular happened that caused you to notice or reflect on it.*
- *How will this learning about/understanding of others impact what you plan on doing as a principal to help ensure your school is a safe environment that is conducive to learning? This should be something that you might not have thought of prior to this experience.*

Each semester, they express the depth of learning from the activity. In the service learning reflection required as part of the activity, students wrote the following:

- BA: …I am so glad that we had to do this project because I would not have learned nearly as much as I did. I plan on continuing my volunteer work with Habitat and hope to encourage my students and fellow teachers to get out there and volunteer…
- AD: Words cannot express what I took away from the food bank after volunteering there. Through this class and my experience at the food bank, I know that one of my priorities as a principal will be to provide students with the things they need in order to be successful, which primarily depends on a culturally proficient environment where I will be the one doing more listening than feeling.
- CB: This experience taught me a great deal about understanding the language of students and engaging them instead of dismissing and disciplining them.
- LF: The other thing I took away from this experience, that I will work on next year as a teacher, is getting parents more involved with planning now for their students' future education plans.

Each of the student reflections above demonstrates how they could link specific learning linked to the SL experience. One student was moved to continue volunteering; another determined to focus on students' needs and listening to students. Additionally, a student expressed that the SL activity helped her to focus on understanding rather than dismissing students, and finally another student learned about the importance of parental involvement in schools. The combination of these and other student reflections not mentioned, point toward learning being caused by this SL activity that was designed for students to each learn what was most they needed individually. The clear organization of the project that links abstract ideas and theory to practice serves as a motivator for students to explore the controversial topic of diversity at a pace they can digest.

In addition to the review of the service learning reflections and course reflections, students were interviewed and asked the following:

- Describe what you understand SL to be.
- What are the challenges you have faced in being able to complete this project?
- What is your perception about the number of hours of service required?
- Was the SL directory helpful for you?
- Can you think of any changes to the design of the assignment that might have made it more meaningful for you?

Results and Conclusions:

Some of the important findings for the continued development of the project include:

- Need for helping students to understand the nature of service learning
- For these students, 10 hours of service is on target
- Students choosing their own service location was important
- Establishing student expectations of benefit from SL project important
- Difficulties of completing project include: bureaucracy of some service organizations, time management
- Students would like to hear about classmates' experiences
- Continue to add to Service Learning Directory
- Importance of giving assignment at beginning of semester and following up on progress

The model of the SL project necessarily had to allow for range of individual designs accounting for the needs, geography, and resources of each particular educational leadership student. A unique feature of this design was the addition of a self-analysis assignment to help each individual determine whom they might serve as a part of their project that they consider as different from themselves. A sharing out component of the experiences among the students is important more for the individual student than for the shared learning.

Importance of Study

It is necessary to continue to examine ways in which educational leadership programs can strengthen aspiring administrators' cultural proficiency so that they might be more effective in schools. This study demonstrates one method that has proven to be beneficial for seven cohorts of students. The project could be easily replicable for other educational leadership programs.

References:

Bringle, R., & Steinberg, K. (2010). Educating for Informed Community Involvement. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 46,* 428-441. doi:10.1007/s10464-010-9340-y

Guthrie, K., & McCraken, H. (2010). Making a difference online: facilitating service-learning through distance education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 13* (3), 153-157. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.02.006

Hatcher, J., & Studer, M. (2015). Service-learning and Philanthropy: implications for course design. *Theory into Practice, 54*(1), 11-19. doi:10.1080/00405841.2015.977656

Hart, D., Matsuba, K., & Atkins, R. (2008). The moral and civic effects of learning to serve. In L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of Moral and Character Education.* (pp.484-499). New York, NY: Routledge.

Jenkins, A., & Sheehey, P. (2009). Implementing service learning in special education coursework: what we learned. *Education, 129* (4), 668-682.

Ogeyik, M., & Guvendir, E. (2009). Service learning in distance education: foreign language learning environments. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 10* (1), 9-20.

Seiver, J., & Troja, A. (2014). Satisfaction and success in online learning as a function of the needs for affiliation, autonomy, and mastery. *Distance Education, 35* (1), 90-105. doi:10.1080/01587919.2014.891427

Terrel, R., & Lindsey, R. (2009). *Culturally Proficient Leadership: the personal journey begins within.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Winings, K. (2002). *Building character through service learning.* Chapel Hill, NC: Character Development.