

A Proceeding from the 32nd Annual National Middle School Association
Conference, Philadelphia, PA. (2005)
Session 1827: Best Practices for College and University Faculty – Sponsored by the
National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education.

And Justice for All

A Community-Minded Approach to Democratizing Preservice Middle School Teachers

Mack T. Hines III
mth003@sbsu.edu
Sam Houston State University

Each year, middle level teacher education programs use prescribed courses of study and capstone field-based experiences to train middle level preservice teachers on facilitating multicultural learning communities (Manning & Bucher, 2000). Unlike other university programs, these teacher education units rarely provided community leaders with the opportunity to become directly involved in these experiences. As a result, many middle level preservice teachers graduate from their programs with a vague perception of how to serve as academically and socially just school leaders. This article will describe how the researcher used home, school, and community to assist his middle level preservice teachers with achieving this deed.

Theoretical Framework

This program was centered on social justice and democracy. Socrates once stated that the purpose of education is to examine situations in a manner conducive to fostering social justice and democracy in communities (Miller, 1999). Justice is the fair treatment of all people. Democracy is the continuous practice

of ensuring that all people receive equal rights, opportunities, and treatment (Miller, 1999). In short, justice can and should culminate into democracy. A just and democratic society can be seen in the unification of races, genders, and creeds to evenly discuss and resolve issues that affect the overall welfare of their communities (Miller, 1999). The underlying dynamics of these communities are collaborative and mutual reflections of diverse thoughts, actions, and beliefs (Miller, 1999).

Literature Review

Research indicates that most previous university/community partnerships primarily consisted of corporate donations to the institution (Nieto, 2000). Many of the current partnerships have begun to develop a community-centered framework (Duesterberg, 1998).

The reason is that many national and international colleges and universities have proactively developed strategies for implementing community engagement into their curricula (Smith, 2000).

According to Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2000), the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships collaborates with

community leaders to address the social problems that plague their surrounding communities. Australian Catholic University (2002) uses a similar conceptual framework to engage faculty, staff, and students in various community-minded activities.

Luke, Luke, and Mayer (2000) posited that teacher education programs must transcend their departments to participate in community engagement. They add these activities should require students to examine the cultural factors that affect student achievement. The students should then translate their analyses and interpretations into projects conducive to direct involvement in the curricular and instructional practices of schools. Dunkin (1996) related that teacher education programs should infuse community engagement into their curricula. That way, the students will develop an authentic understanding of how different factors affect children's potential for reaching achievement.

A recent study on community service in teacher education indicated that there is a strong need for diversifying this relationship (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thom, 2002). The researcher's program extended this assertion by uniting middle level preservice teachers with business leaders, parents, and public school leaders to provide collaborative instructional leadership for middle school students.

Middle Level Community Engagement

During the fall of 2004, the researcher involved his middle level preservice teachers in community engagement by exposing them to a special conversation. Dubbed "The Great Conversation" (Hutchins, 1952), this program was designed to increase the students' preparations for serving as culturally responsive school leaders. In particular, this program was designed to help the students to:

- Develop a community-minded understanding of how to collectively embrace middle level education;
- Collaborate with a diverse group of business and school leaders to address the issues that affect the academic and social development of middle school children; and

- Realize their moral and ethical obligations to inspire just and democratic middle school communities.

The underlying dynamics of this framework were "And Justice for All" (AJA) teams. Selected by the researcher, each AJA team consisted of two middle level preservice middle teachers, one middle school guidance counselor, two middle school parents, a middle school teacher, and one business leader. Under the researcher's guidance, the teams held bi-monthly meetings to discuss a specific instructional problem that prevented the teachers' students from reaching achievement. The middle school teachers then explained how the problem was affecting the overall development of the students. The business leaders and parents followed this explanation with a reflection on how the problem was impacting the home and community. Afterwards, the guidance counselors related their experiences in dealing with the issues. Finally, the middle level preservice teachers provided the groups with their interpretations of the issues. The teams then identified cultural issues that could possibly shape the students' achievement.

Next, the researcher provided the teams with literature that offered teaching strategies for solving the instructional problems. The teams then collaborated to realign the suggestions with National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2003) Standards for teaching and learning. They then traveled to the teachers' classrooms to use the strategies to meet the students' interests and needs. At the beginning of the next meeting, the teachers provided the team with an update on their students' progress. By the end of the semester, the students showed significant improvement in their achievement.

Methodological Questions and Findings

At the conclusion of the program, the researcher issued the business leaders, parents, middle school teachers, and middle school guidance counselors a questionnaire that measured their feeling about "The Great Conversation". The findings from the questionnaire indicated that the parents and community leaders gained more respect for the middle school teachers, middle school guidance counselors, and middle

level education. The middle school teachers and middle school guidance counselors reported that the parents and community leaders added diversity to the classrooms. The business leaders, middle school guidance counselors, and teachers, and parents indicated that the middle level preservice teachers would become exceptional middle school leaders.

The researcher was gratified with these results. The researcher, however, was still interested in analyzing the middle level preservice teachers' interpretations of this experience. Instead of issuing the students a questionnaire, the researcher organized them into focused group discussions. The researcher then asked them the following questions:

Question 1

How did you feel about working with the business leaders, parents, and guidance counselors?
Representative Answers:

A. "I loved talking to all of the leaders and hearing that they shared my vision for teaching middle school kids."

B. "I was astonished at how our community leaders felt about teaching education and how their thoughts reflected ours."

Grounded Interpretation:

Community engagement programs can expose preservice middle school teachers to other people who share their beliefs about middle school teaching and learning.

Question 2

What did you learn from working with these community leaders?

Representative Answers

A. "I learned that all kinds of community leaders can help children to learn."

B. "I have more respect for our community leaders. When I become a teacher, I want to involve them in my classroom."

Grounded Interpretation:

Community-centered teacher education initiatives can help preservice middle school teachers to appreciate the community's role in directly impacting middle level education.

Question 3:

Describe your experiences in working with the middle school students.

Representative Answers

A. "I felt very prepared and proud to work with my students. The reason is that everybody on my team had the same opportunity to give ideas on how to help them."

B. "The community leaders gave me that extra confidence to help the children. I was no longer afraid to speak in front of them."

Grounded Interpretation:

By engaging middle level preservice middle school teachers in community-centered instructional experiences, middle level teacher education programs can produce confident, well-rounded teachers.

Question 4:

What was your overall impression "The Great Conversation"?

"This program helped me to make up my mind about becoming a middle school teacher. I realized that middle school children need caring people in their lives. And I am going to be one of those people."

"The Great Conversation' is the type of program that will help you to decide about becoming a middle school teacher."

Grounded Interpretation

Community-minded middle level teacher education programs can influence preservice teachers to pursue a career in middle school teaching.

Discussion

This initiative involved the middle level preservice teachers in the creation of a unique university/community partnership. Instead of providing the middle level preservice teachers with financial scholarships, the program allowed them to collaboratively implement scholarship into schools and classrooms. Consequently, the middle level preservice teachers realized that they have an unlimited role in working with school and community stakeholders to:

- Contribute to cooperative learning environments in middle schools;
- Create and model collaborative learning experiences for middle school children; and
- Embrace and promote intergenerational middle school leadership.

Therefore, this initiative can be summarized as being an even interchange between the mystery of wonder and the mastery of wisdom.

Implications

The results from this program warrant further investigation into the concept of partnerships between middle level teacher education programs and their surrounding communities. Listed below are some questions and activities that can develop this inquiry.

Questions

1. What are the various ethical and democratic components of community-centered middle level teacher education programs?
2. How can community-centered middle level teacher education initiatives be justifiably and democratically sustained over a long period of time?
3. How can middle level teacher education programs develop a curricular framework that includes preservice community activities?
4. How can middle level teacher educators inspire their students to envision the use of their preservice training to democratize cultures, policies, and procedures?
5. How can the POMLE, NMSA, NCATE, and member institutions collaboratively encourage middle level preservice teachers to establish a long-term commitment to applying their experiences towards democratizing society?
6. What are the specific community-centered strategies for socializing middle level preservice teachers to the sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors that affect middle school student achievement?
7. What are the additional civic-minded methods for evaluating middle level teacher education graduates' use of their areas of expertise to inspire a just and democratic society?

Activities

1. Involve middle level preservice teachers in developing recruitment strategies for involving community leaders in their teacher education experiences.
2. Solicit community leaders to serve as mentors for middle level preservice teachers.
3. Invite middle level preservice teachers and community leaders to attend local, statewide, and national teacher education conventions.
4. Synthesize professors, middle level preservice teachers, middle school teachers, principals, parents and community leaders into leadership development teams. Then assign these teams to collaborate with surrounding schools to develop student achievement.

These questions and activities can collectively change the interactions between teacher education programs and community leadership.

Summary/Conclusion

Research indicates that there is a concomitant relationship between middle level student achievement and classrooms that resembles learning communities (Strahan, Smith, McElrath, & Toole, 2001). Consequently, the researcher's middle level preservice teachers can empirically support this idea. The reason is that they collaborated with numerous middle school stakeholders to form learning communities. In addition to collectively improving student achievement, the middle level preservice teachers realized that:

- conversation is a measure of communication that democratizes action, opinions and feelings (Hutchins, 1952);
- every person is a leader because of having the ability to serve others (King, 1955);
- education is an even exchange of diverse teaching and learning experiences (Piaget, 1969);
- transformational leadership is the primal ability to influence others to evenly contribute to a common goal (Bennis, 1994); and

- there is a concomitant relationship between action research and inquisitive leadership (Goleman, Mckee, & Boyatzis, 2002).

Equally significant, the middle level preservice teachers also experienced how these conclusions can facilitate their seamless transition into the role of culturally responsive middle school leaders.

References

- Australian Catholic University (2002). *Statement on Community Engagement, Quality Management Committee*. Australian Catholic University.
- Bennis, W. (1994). *On becoming a leader*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Perseus Books.
- Benson, L., Harkavy, I., & Puckett J. (2000). *An Implementation Revolution as a Strategy for Fulfilling the Democratic Promise of University-Community Partnerships: Penn-West Philadelphia as an Experiment in Progress*. Sage Publications, Inc. 29, 1, 24-45.
- Butcher, J., Howard, P., McMeniman, M & Thom, G. (2002). *Engaging Community Service or Learning? Benchmarking Community Service in Teacher Education*. Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Duesterberg, L. (1998). Rethinking culture in the pedagogy and practices of preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 14, 497-512.
- Dunkin, M. (1996). The future of teacher education in the USA: The third Holmes Group report. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 12, 561-566.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & Mckee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Hutchins, (1952). *The great books of the western world*. (1st ed.) Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica
- King, M. (1956). *Stride toward freedom: The montgomery story*. New York: Harpercollins Books.
- Luke, A., Luke, C., & Mayer, D. (2000). Redesigning teacher education (editorial). *Teaching Education*.
- Miller, D. (1999). *Principles of social justice*. Boston, MA: Harvard University.
- National Middle School Association (2003). *National Middle School Association's position statement on professional preparation of middle level teachers*. Retrieved December 10, 2004 from <http://www.nmsa.org/news/middlelevelteachers.htm>.
- Nieto, S. (2000). Placing equity front and centre: Some thoughts on transforming teacher education for a new century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 180-187.
- Piaget, J. (1969). *The psychology of the child*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Smith, R (2000). The future of teacher education: Principles and prospects [1]. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 28, 7-28.
- Strahan, D., Smith, T., McElrath, M., & Toole C. (2001). Profiles in caring: Teachers who create learning communities in their classrooms. *Middle School Journal*, 33 (1), 24-32.