A Contextual Examination of High-Quality K-12 Service-Learning Projects

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In the service-learning literature, there is limited significant evidence for understanding and describing the context of high-quality service-learning programs. For instance, only four of the eight K-12 Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice developed by the National Youth Leadership Council have adequate research to support the relationship between the standard and its impact. This qualitative study was conducted to describe the service-learning process in high-performing programs. Using a grounded theory approach, the researchers conducted structured interviews with nine service-learning project organizers to generate a model of an award-winning service-learning experience. From the data, a set of diverse and complex service-learning themes emerged that exceeded the Standards for Quality Practice. Most prominent among the analysis results were the themes of temporal influences, human capital contributions, locus of support, relationship to topic, and the development of a culture of service-learning. Temporal influences related to the time needed for students to understand and fully engage in the service-learning cycle. Human capital contributions included the skills and extraneous factors that participants brought to the project. Locus of support encompassed all the areas of support within the project. The participants' relationship to the project contributed to project success, buy-in, and continued engagement. The culture of support set the tone and expectations of the project. Overall, the study findings suggest that high-quality service-learning programs evolve over time and that the human element and social context of a service-learning project help to create a highly powerful setting, acting in concert with and going beyond quality standards. The article also identifies specific limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research.

Keywords: evaluation, service-learning, standards, high-quality, award-winning, context

Service-learning has been a part of the K-12 educational landscape in the United States for more than 30 years (Spring, Grimm, & Dietz 2008), serving as a pedagogical tool to promote positive youth development, enhance learning experiences, and increase academic engagement. Indeed, a review of K-12 service-learning literature reveals significant, positive impacts of service-learning on participating students' academic, career, civic, and psycho-social development (Billig, 2004, 2009; Davila & Mora, 2007; Shumer, 2000). Researchers have found that, in the academic realm, youth participating in service-learning projects have not only learned about the particular subject matter, but have also developed advanced thinking and gained problem-solving skills. Studies have also established a positive correlation between service-learning engagement and academic achievement (Meyer, Billig, & Hofschire, 2004; RMC Research Corporation, 2005; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004). In quasi-experimental service-learning studies, Hecht (2002) found a link between service-learning participants and enhanced motivation toward school while Brown, Kim, and Pinhas (2005) discovered a connection with increased positive attitudes and learning among service-learning participants.

Earlier studies have also shown that students participating in service-learning projects learned civic skills while connecting with their community. For instance, Yurgelun-Todd (2007) found that a student's

engagement in service-learning projects can result in expansion of his or her civic identity. In a study of low-income minority students, Kahne and Sporte (2008) discovered that service-learning and civic engagement strategies were the strongest predictors of civic participation and commitment, having more of an impact than school, neighborhood, or family factors.

Additionally, previous research has offered clear evidence of the personal and social impacts of participating in service-learning experiences, including self-efficacy, appreciation of differences, empowerment, and risk migration. Studies have shown that service-learning helps youth build pro-social skills (Billig, 2004 and provides an avenue for youth to connect socially with their peers and develop new peer relationships (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003; Flanagan, 2004). Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) found that service-learning assists young people in cultivating group social skills and promoting teamwork. In Flanagan's (2004) study, service-learning exposed youth to a variety of different people, situations, and issues in their community, resulting in an increased acceptance of diversity.

Service-learning has also been linked to career exploration, workplace preparation, and identification of career paths. Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) found that service-learning projects exposed students to career choices; through service-learning projects, students gained a better appreciation for the "real world of work." Students also increased their ability to apply the knowledge and skills gained through service-learning projects to potential careers (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

Despite three decades of research, relatively few studies have focused on the positive impacts of service-learning on academic success and life-skill development (Furco, 2013). In analyzing over 500 service-learning studies, Furco (2013) found that only 15% of them examined the impacts of service-learning on K-12 students. Service-learning advocates believe that service-learning positively influence student outcomes; however, researchers have argued recently that more rigorous methodology must be utilized to produce the evidence-based results that educational organizations demand (Billig & Waterman, 2003; Furco & Root, 2010). According to the National Coalition for Academic Service-Learning (2012), there is a significant variation in outcomes related to service-learning. Thus, a major challenge for the field is strengthening service-learning's quality framework and its effective execution so that it becomes a vital pedagogical practice to which schools can justifiably commit (Fiske, 2002). Service-learning programs that are operationalized within a framework comprising clear, tangible standards are more likely to result in positive impacts on students (Billig & Weah, 2008; Marzano, 2003).

Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice

To provide a foundation for high-quality service-learning programs, the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) (2008) developed the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, based on feedback from expert panels comprising a wide range of professionals in the field of service-learning. The eight standards of high-quality service-learning practice include: (1) meaningful service, (2) link to curriculum, (3) reflection, (4) diversity, (5) youth voice, (6) partnerships, (7) progress monitoring, and (8) duration and intensity. Meaningful service relates to service that is personally relevant to participants. Linking to curriculum refers to the use of service-learning as an instructional strategy connecting learning objectives and content. Reflection pertains to participants engaging in ongoing, diverse reflective activities that challenge them to think more deeply and more critically, and to explore their relationship to society. Through service-learning programs, participants gain an understanding of and respect for diversity (the fourth standard). Youth voice, another critical standard, is present throughout the process of planning, executing, and evaluating service-learning experiences. Mutually beneficial partnerships are important in addressing relevant community needs. Progress monitoring ensures that participants in a service-learning program are involved in an ongoing process to gauge project implementation quality, identify movement toward project goals, apply strategies for improvement, and promote sustainability. Duration and intensity, the final standard, refers to ensuring that the project has adequate time and robustness to meet community needs and accomplish the specified outcomes.

In 2012, the National Coalition for Academic Service-Learning (NCASL) published a guide to implementing academic service-learning based on the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice. Educators are encouraged to utilize this guide in planning, implementation, and evaluation of service-learning projects. The NCASL promotes "backward" curriculum design whereby the curriculum focuses first on student objectives, detailing what the students are expected to learn, and then on instructional lessons for achieving the identified objectives.

While the K-12 Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice and the NCASL guide provide direction for the creation and implementation of high-quality service-learning programs, there are limitations and gaps in the literature that necessitate a deeper understanding and articulation of the context of high-quality service-learning programs (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Of the eight K-12 Service-Learning Standards, only four have been researched extensively enough in previous studies to analyze the relationship between the standard and its impact. Moreover, in many of the service-learning impact studies that have been conducted, it is not clear if the NYLC standards were embedded within the service-learning experience. Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011) argued that significant evidence of impact is limited and that the standards are not clearly operationalized.

Background of the Study

The 4-H Youth Development Program is the largest youth-serving organization in the United States (Cassels, Post, & Nestor, 2015). The mission of the program is positive youth development through implementation of meaningful, experiential learning opportunities designed to support youth in reaching their potential (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Since the inception of 4-H over a century ago, community service has been a key strategy of the organization for positive youth development. In recent years, 4-H programs have focused on service-learning as a way to enhance community service with intentional learning (Hairston, 2004). In an effort to support high-quality service-learning programs, a state 4-H service-learning award was established in 2006 (Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, 2013). The award is given annually to a youth development faculty member (or members) in recognition of an innovative service-learning program contributing to positive youth development. The award application is based on the service-learning cycle, which includes needs assessment, youth and community ownership, planning and preparation, meaningful service, evaluation, celebration, application, and reflection. Award applications can include up to three pages of additional documentation including (but not limited to) letters of recommendation, newspaper articles, or photos. The award applications are judged by a cooperative extension service awards committee utilizing the extension professional awards rubric (Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, 2013) based on criteria supported by the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (see Table 1).

Table 1. State 4-H Service-Learning Award Criteria Alignment with K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice

State 4-H Service-Learning Criteria	K-12 Service-Learning Standards
Clear educational goals that required application of concepts, content, and skills from project work and that involved students in the construction of their own knowledge.	Link to Curriculum Progress Monitoring
Youth were engaged in tasks that challenged them cognitively and developmentally.	Link to Curriculum
Youth learning was enhanced through assessment, and the learning was evaluated and documented.	Progress Monitoring
Youth were engaged in service activities that had clear goals, met genuine needs and had significant consequences for engaged youth and others.	Youth Voice Meaningful Service
Systematic formative and summative evaluation was used for the improvement of the experience.	Progress Monitoring
Youth were involved in selecting, designing, implementing and evaluating the experience.	Youth Voice
The experience reflected diversity of participants, practices and outcomes.	Diversity
Communication, interaction, and collaboration in the community and with partners was an integral part of the experience.	Partnerships
Educational experience included orientation of the participants to include an understanding of the task, their role, required skills, safety requirements and interpersonal dimensions.	
Reflection was employed before, during, and after the experience and was instrumental in reaching the set objectives.	Reflection
Participants were engaged in multiple celebration/recognition efforts throughout the service experience.	

For this study, a purposeful sample of nine community-based service-learning project organizers was selected based on the participants' record of service-learning success as measured by their having received the state service-learning award. The participants represented projects conducted across the state within the first nine years of the award program's existence (2006 to 2014). They also reflected various levels of experience with service-learning and myriad project content areas.

Through this investigation, the researchers sought to answer two specific research questions:

- What does the service-learning process "look like" in high-quality programs?
- What elements of the service-learning standards are present and absent in these manifestations?

Method

This qualitative study examined service-learning experiences that had been held to the standards of quality practice in an effort to identify the factors and strategies that contribute to successful service-learning experiences.   These experiences provide a contextual value to quality service-learning practice within the award winning service-learning programs. To advance service-learning practice, this study identified and described critical themes that take into account perspectives not represented by existing

frameworks—that is, elements of the service-learning process extraneous to the traditional service-learning paradigm.

A grounded theory approach was used to generate a model of the service-learning experience as manifested in the award-winning programs (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Community-based 4-H youth development professionals who were responsible for service-learning projects that had received the state 4-H service-learning award were approached by the research team to participate in structured interviews regarding the strategies, successes, and struggles experienced during the planning and implementation of their respective service-learning projects. At the commencement of this study in 2014, nine local projects had received the service-learning award, and representatives from all nine projects were approached for participation in the study. The resulting sample included nine project leaders representing eight of the awarded projects, which addressed a wide variety of needs, including safety, health, career exploration, disaster relief, special needs, and school gardening.

Study participants' experience in the field of community-based youth development ranged from three to 23 years, in programs in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Of the nine participants, six were female and three were male. The majority (seven) of the participants were Caucasian, with the remaining two professionals being Hispanic and African American. The majority (seven) of the respondents held a Master's degree, while one had a bachelor's degree with some graduate-school credit and the other had received some college education but no degree. All respondents had received some training or education focused on service-learning.

Participants were interviewed regarding their experiences in their service-learning projects, including various aspects of their philosophy of service-learning in their specific contexts. The semi-structured interview format inquired specifically about participants' service-learning experiences (both formal training as well as "in the field" experience), approaches to presenting the service-learning cycle to youth and adult participants, the use (or lack thereof) of logic models, specific learning goals of the project and how they were set, approaches to needs assessments in the planning stage, role distribution among staff and youth participants, approaches to guidance and facilitation, focusing and evaluating the project, and general reflections on barriers to and promoters of project success.

Interviews were structured around the stages of the service-learning cycle, with each participant asked to reflect on these stages and discuss how they were manifested in her or his relative projects. Interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed by participants for accuracy. The interviews were coded independently by both members of the research team. Initial codes were refined through research team discussions, and a final round of coding provided initial findings assessed through cross-checking of resulting themes. A final stage of data analysis involved collapsing emergent themes, examining and further refining themes, and collapsing analogous themes into the key findings of the data (Saldaña, 2015). For this study, the award applications submitted by the service-learning projects were used as a measure of successful service-learning. The applications were reviewed to add to the context and structure of the service-learning experience.

An initial coding stage generated a comprehensive list of codes representing elements of all participant experiences and was followed by a secondary coding utilizing the initial codes to reevaluate all participant interviews. The resultant coding categories were clustered and organized into thematic categories in the axial coding stage. The emergent themes and overarching conclusions are discussed in the sections that follow.

Results

Initial analysis of the qualitative data provided insight into a number of diverse and complex service-learning experiences that occurred in a southern state in the United States. These experiences, however, shared a number of common themes beyond those addressed by the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, suggesting that a variety of factors extraneous to the standards contributed to the success of the projects. Most prominent among the analysis results were the following themes: temporal

influences; human capital contributions; locus of support; relationship to topic; and the development of a culture of service-learning.

Temporal Influences

Temporal influences presented themselves in a variety of ways and impacted multiple elements of the project. These influences included the time needed for students to understand and engage fully in the service-learning cycle; the time needed to develop a meaningful, youth voice-focused relationship dynamic between youth participants and adult leaders; the process of learning through failure; and the delayed impact of service outcomes. For all participants, the experience of engaging in the service-learning process provided learning opportunities for building the skills needed for successful project planning and execution. Participants were able to develop their understanding of the process from an abstract theoretical construct to an applied learning event.

The time required for youth participants and project leaders to understand and embrace the service-learning cycle laid the foundation for high-quality service-learning programs, specifically through the opportunity to learn through failure experienced by both the youth participant and project leaders. This process allowed the participants to test their conceptions of service-learning as they explored the logistics of the process but also allowed them to test the buy-in and interest of those involved in the service-learning project in their unique schools and communities. As one participant stated:

> I had attempted to conduct projects in the [county] I worked in at the time and they were not successful. They would never finish or the kids would not buy in to the projects, and that was twofold because I didn't know what I was doing and the participants didn't understand the process. [Later] I went in to the school system and partnered with them to do a project. Those experiences of failing prior to [the program winning the award] really helped me to understand the time commitment and how the cycle worked.

Learning through failure was not limited to the project coordinators adjusting their notions of management; it also applied to the student participants. Project coordinators promoted a constructivist model of learning throughout the service-learning projects by allowing students to engage in the process, recognize failures, and adjust future actions. Through this process, the service-learning experience served as a two-fold experiential learning activity—as an opportunity to learn simultaneously about the project content and the service-learning process.

Human Capital Contributions

In the context of this study, human capital contributions included the skills and extraneous factors that participants brought to the projects. Such contributions included, but were not limited to, training and education in service-learning topics or project subject matter (e.g., previous experience in service-learning project development or formal training through service-learning focused coursework).

Experience was an important factor in high-quality service-learning programming. Participant experience drawn from outside the service-learning project informed various elements of the topic and the project's successful planning and delivery. Project leaders lacking experience in service-learning practice and theory often brought with them subject-area knowledge that increased the level of depth and richness of content education and development for both students and practitioners. For example, one project leader's experience in conservation studies increased the depth of content and project conception possibilities that in turn strengthened the underlying logistical and educational foundations of the project.

Human capital contributions also took the form of knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of service-learning practice. Several respondents shared the impact professional development activities and formal college courses had had on their understanding of the functions of service-learning. Regarding the impact of a graduate-level service-learning university course experience, one participant stated that "completing this course opened my eyes to service-learning and allowed me to have a passion for

participating in service-learning projects rather than simple community service projects." For those who had participated in formal learning opportunities, the temporal element (which provided the "how it works" practical knowledge of service-learning logistics and best practice) was complemented and strengthened by the increased understanding of why the service-learning process works.

Training was not limited to project leaders. In addition to detailing the history of their service-learning experiences, many representatives of successful projects discussed the importance of providing similar training for student participants. Students' understanding of the experience, based on past work, was complemented by formal and in-depth review of the "why it works" content. This combination provided student participants with a holistic understanding of the projects, which not only increased investment and buy-in, but also encouraged stronger project development. One study participant commented on the influence of conceptual service-learning education on the project:

> I sent two of the students to a training that the state provided in service-learning. That was really neat because they got to do what I had been telling them, but they understood it on a different level. Because they understood it on a different level, learned it in a different environment, they took it a little more seriously than me talking about it because I found it interesting.

Locus of Support

Locus of support emerged as a theme across service-learning experiences, manifesting itself both within projects and within the social environments in which the projects were situated. Within the projects, staff and student participants worked collaboratively with one another. Adult project leaders provided the support and scaffolding needed for student participant development, from project conception to the end of service reflection so that "it didn't come from the agent, it came from the youth, and that was one way it was successful."

Various contextual elements surrounding the service-learning project team, such as community or school support, buy-in for the project, and the overall concept of service, promoted continued engagement and interest. Each project did not "belong" to the participants, but rather to the school and community as a whole. As one participant observed:

> We're at a rural school, not a lot of resources, but [the topic] was the heart of the community really and this particular project. First and foremost, my specific learning goal was to empower those kids and for them to understand that they have the leadership among them even if they are in rural area and they really don't think that there are problems that they can be effective.

As conveyed by this comment, students were supported and empowered by the project leader (i.e., within-project support) as well as within the community (i.e., external project support). The community became a foundation and driving force for the development and completion of the project, encouraging student engagement within the project team and with the social context of the project.

Relationship to Topic

Participant relationship to the project topic also contributed to project success by influencing participant buy-in and continued engagement. These relationships exceeded the standards of meaningful service by engaging with topics that connected to participants' personal experience. Meaningfulness alone—although vital to a true service-learning experience—was not consistently effective in relation to retention and engagement. However, adding the dimension of personal connection to the concept of meaningfulness generated a dynamic that not only increased buy-in, but also resulted in the students developing a deeper connection to the topic and continued engagement with the issue beyond the end of the project. The meaningfulness of projects arose from student participants' own personal experiences or

the experiences of individuals' whose lives were considered relatable by the participants. As one project leader shared:

> They switched to Hurricane [Name] because of the time they spent at [a wildlife refuge]. They had spent so much time with the victims. So then they started planning what they wanted to do—learn more about the stages of depression, to have some experience and activities of them losing things, having to relocate.… During that year, we went down there and toured the area by school bus, met some of the [County] 4-H'ers. Our kids' goal was to network and build a stronger connection to those 4-H'ers of [the County] and build life-long friendships. With the issue being so real to them, it was like a double impact … the personal connection that the kids had with the kids in [the County] and the devotion they had to helping those kids out. We've done service-learning since then, but it hasn't meant as much.

In this context, students were not only influenced by their own experience of evacuating a long distance due to a hurricane, but also by their direct experiential connections with school counterparts further south. Though a project focusing on homelessness in general would have been highly meaningful, focusing on homelessness within a context that was familiar to them provided a greater sense of connection and empathy that in turn manifested itself in greater buy-in and deeper reflection.

Culture of Service-Learning

Finally, successful service-learning projects grew out of an overall culture of service-learning that fostered each of the themes discussed earlier. Award-winning 4-H chapters adopted service-learning as an undisputed element of the organizational experience, thereby socializing new members to an ongoing culture of service-learning. Project leaders hosted retreats and training opportunities before the commencement of each project year for planning purposes but also to set the tone and expectations for that year in relation to service. Commitment to service as a central tenet of the organization's work was further supported by multiple enrichment activities and ongoing refinement of project implementation and goals, weaving the group's brand of service throughout the organization's operations. This culture of service-learning varied greatly among locations, growing and evolving with continued participation of students as they each tailored their own definition of service-learning. The elements of the service-learning cycle were reordered or adjusted based on the needs of the organization as service-learning youth and adult project leaders customized the process to the needs of their youth participants, resulting in the development of an approach that was unique to their organization and population. Although all study participants utilized similar steps and met the standards of service-learning, each addressed the steps and standards in a manner specific to the culture of service-learning associated with his or her location or setting. This culture in return evolved with the participating individuals, shifting and reordering the elements of the process to generate an approach to service-learning that fit the composition and goals of the organization.

Discussion

In this study, the emergent themes were neither static nor independent; rather, they overlapped and interacted with one another to support meaningful and successful service-learning projects. This convergence of contextual elements, we argue, serves as the foundation of successful service-learning experiences, as depicted by the model in Figure 1.
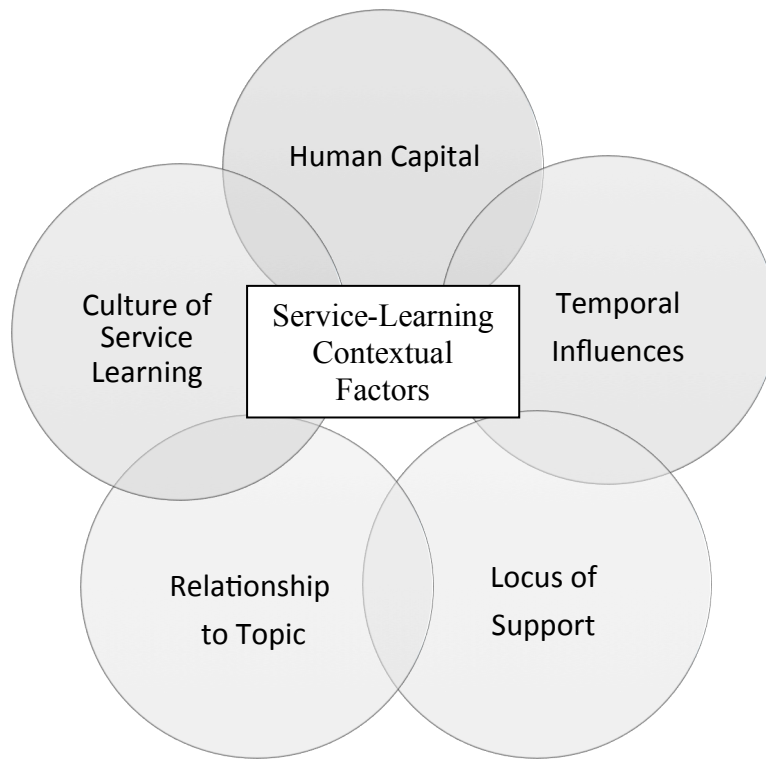
Figure 1. Emergent Theory of the Role of Context in Service-Learning Practice

Nearly all of the award applications addressed each of the K-12 Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice; however, those projects that emerged as most successful demonstrated a collection of contextual supports and extraneous factors that bolstered the design, implementation, and overall impact of the service-learning project. This suggests that while the standards of high-quality service-learning must be present for service-learning objectives to be met, the construction of a scaffold of contextual supports contributes significantly to the depth of the experience and its level of success.

In this study, the themes of locus of support, relationship to topic, and service-learning culture related to meaningful service, one of the eight K-12 Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice. In its broad sense, a service-learning project operates on a continuum—a project that satisfies the criteria meaningfulness may not, in fact, be as meaningful to a group of students in one area as it is to students in another area. Connections among meaningful service, links to curriculum, and youth voice in the award-winning projects were not only present, but manifested themselves in topics and subjects that related to students' personal experience and interest.

The standard of reflection was ever-present, moving from a disconnected, obligatory task to an informal and ongoing practice embedded within a culture of service-learning. In this study, reflection was an important aspect of all of the emergent themes.

Socialization of students and a focus on building human capital were inherent to the culture of service-learning. Characteristically, the K-12 Service-Learning Standard of youth voice was an unconscious element built into the organization itself rather than an element officially structured and addressed. Youth voice was manifested in ways specific to each location, as its use evolved within the group.

The themes of human capital contributions and development of a service-learning culture supported the quality standard of partnership identified by the K-12 Service-Learning Standards of Quality Practice. In this study, the partnerships extended beyond schools and service organizations to include families and

various community members who built a strong base of support for service projects. As a result, projects did not begin and end with the organization, but rather continued beyond formal organization service activities.

The standards of duration and progress monitoring comprised threads woven into the study's themes of temporal influences and the development of a service-learning culture. High-quality service-learning projects took time, attention, and monitoring. One service-learning experience flowed into another experience, in which success and failure played a critical role in promoting knowledge, commitment, resiliency, and quality.

While the K-12 Service-Learning Standard of diversity was not inherently present, this study did yield themes related to diversity. For instance, study participants reported that youth increased empathy and gained a greater sense of connection with others. An expanded understanding of critical topics such as homelessness or youth with special needs was reported as a result of service-learning projects.

The contextual model developed from this research and discussed in this article suggests that the standards of service-learning do not represent a one-size-fits-all format. Rather, the contextual model is an armature that should be formed into a structure that reflects the individuals comprising the organization and the context in which it is situated.

Limitations

Study participants represented a single statewide organization in the southeastern United States, and their experiences were governed and influenced by the overarching state entity. Other organizations operating within the state with differing approaches to the process of service-learning and its assessment may have exhibited differing results. Furthermore, this study focused only on award-winning service-learning projects and the contextual factors exceeding the service-learning standards that may have influenced their success. Research incorporating future awardees or awardees in other locations would deepen the understanding of the contextual factors of successful projects. Additional research into the manifestation (or lack thereof) of these contextual elements in unsuccessful projects would also greatly inform this model.

Conclusion

As most of the participants in the interviews indicated, creating a consistently superior project on the first try is not likely to happen; however, if the organization maintains a focus on the process, addressing necessary changes as they arise, successful projects will not be far from reach. There is no single model of an ideal service-learning project. Elements such as human experience, local culture, attitude toward service-learning, student experience, and various support structures within the particular school and community all form the contextual influences surrounding service-learning endeavors. Therefore, the standards of quality practice form only a part of the essential elements of service-learning success. The human element and social context of the project create a highly influential setting that both act on the standards and are acted upon by them.

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