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Social and Emotional Learning and Social Work in Middle School:

A Case Study in Community Partnership

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning is increasingly being recognized for its role in urban school reform despite current school improvement efforts focused on academic outcomes. This article presents a case study in community partnership between a middle school, a community-based organization, and a research university, to implement a social and emotional program in seventh grade social studies. Highlighted is the importance of trust and communication among all partners—including administrators, researchers, front-line staff, teachers, and students. It also suggests a framework to expand school partnerships to include schools of social work, especially when the focus is on social and emotional learning.

Key words: *adolescence, communication, community partnership, middle school, school reform, service learning, social and emotional learning, trust*

The pre-K–12 school environment has changed significantly in recent years. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Common Core State Standards, and other outcome-based movements have placed a significant burden on school administrators and teachers to focus on academic achievement in its narrowest sense (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Berzin, O'Brien, & Tohn, 2012; Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum, 2012). An unintended consequence of such initiatives is the low prioritization of students' social and emotional learning, which research suggests is critical for student focus and engagement in learning (Farrington et al., 2012; Pellegrini, 2002; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998, Ross, 2013).

In recent decades and particularly since the National Commission on Excellence in Education identified gaps in bringing research to practice (A Nation at Risk, 1983), school–university partnerships have expanded (Catelli, Costello, & Padavano, 2000). They are typically grounded in schools of education. While the theoretical models and partnership approaches vary, from the university's perspective the broad goals of the partnerships have often centered around providing practicum placements for students and educational research placements for faculty, calling into question the direct benefits for the pre-K–12 school environment or their students' academic outcomes (Catelli et al., 2000.; Ross, 2013; Thomas-Brown et al., 2010).

Funding opportunities have often propelled universities to connect with school districts in new types of collaborations, particularly in the traditional STEM fields where grant funding for higher education research provides an educational component for younger students (e.g., robotics research at an engineering college with an outreach component of supporting robotics clubs or competitions at the local schools). While these initiatives tend to be small and focused on the research, many school districts have welcomed the programs even if it is a one-time event, because it provides enrichment for students without straining limited school district resources. However, externally-driven grant opportunities have decreased in recent years, which creates a growing challenge for higher education to economically sustain school partnerships (Breault, 2013; Hansmann, 2013).

Furthermore, schools of social work are often absent from the literature about pre-K–12 school–university partnerships even though social workers have important supportive roles in schools (Agresta, 2004). School social workers and school counselors could make a preventative impact on students' social and emotional learning and development of healthy school environments, but are not often fully integrated into the school culture because they are directed into "reactive" activities that may not address issues essential for student success (Higy, Haberkorn, Pope, & Gilmore, 2012). They find their focus is targeted toward those students and families most at risk of failure (Agresta, 2004; Berzin et al., 2012), contradicting what we know is needed for nurturing developmental pathways (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Clancy, 1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

One way to mitigate both the resource constraints and the reactive posture is to leverage interdisciplinary community partnerships, particularly with higher education institutions that are responsive to the diverse socio-emotional and academic needs of students (Breault, 2013; Hansmann, 2012). Some universities are adopting an "anchor institution" approach to their community engagement, such that they are responding to community needs and voice by funneling human capital and other resources. These university–school or community school models (McDermott, 2008) offer an alternative to traditional and externally-motivated partnerships; these are more likely to be mutual, reciprocal, and focused on developing relationships over the long-term (Allen-Meares, 1998; Berg-Weger & Schneider, 1998; McDermott, 2008).

This article describes a university–school–community partnership where the university's model is based on the five principles outlined by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Lubbescu, & Easton (2010). They focus on (1) leadership as a driver of change; (2) parent–community–school ties; (3) professional capacity; (4) student-centered learning climate; and (5) instructional guidance (Ross, 2013, p. 65). The following outlines the key partners and their roles and responsibilities, the implementation context, and highlights unique qualities that schools of social work can bring to interdisciplinary university–school partnerships.

Case Study Context

The middle school in this partnership is located in the inner suburban ring of a mid-western city. The school serves over 650 students (6th grade through 8th grade). The student population is approximately 87% Black, 7% White, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Asian, and 69% are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The teacher-to-student ratio is 14:1 compared to the state average of 13:1. The middle school is the kind of struggling urban school that has been identified by federal policy as a "turnaround school," which targets the bottom 5% of schools in student performance with the hope of establishing new practices to quickly and dramatically improve academic outcomes (Herman, 2012)[1].

In the case of this particular school, much of the under-performance was a result of organizational dysfunction. In the last decade the school had a series of six principals at the helm, several lasting no longer than one year. Any renewed efforts to make progress toward school improvement would

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[1]The Office of School Turnaround in part of the U.S. Department of Education and monitors the administration of the School Improvement Grant programs. This effort focuses on the lowest performing schools in the country and supports multi-tiered improvement efforts (http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/ost/index.html).

have to contend with this history and the imprint it left on the professional culture of the school. This turnaround began with the hiring of a committed and energetic principal with a vision for academic improvement and in-depth knowledge of the community-school approach. She had a goal of developing a long-term, sustained partnership with a neighboring research university, which is also located in the same community as the school. The first phase of the work with this university–school partnership was an explicit focus on building relational trust and a community school reform model emphasizing student achievement (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006; McDermott, 2008).[2]

The partnership was forged largely through a shared vision with the newly formed university-wide institute for school partnership. This institute serves to leverage other university partners to address the school-identified needs, which in this case was social and emotional learning, thus, necessitating the engagement of the university's graduate school of social work. Joining the university–school partnership was an established nonprofit organization focused on adolescent development which was also based in the St. Louis area. The four partners developed a mutually beneficial partnership focused on the implementation of the organization's evidence-based, social and emotional learning program. The nonprofit organization needed trained facilitators to implement the program and they wanted research on the implementation and impact of the program when delivered within the school's curriculum. The school of social work saw this as an opportunity to enrich their masters of social work curriculum, by offering the certified training in the program and by offering practicum experiences to trained students.

A focus of the partnership was examining the process of implementing a social and emotional learning curriculum (Wyman's Teen Outreach Program® or TOP®) and its impact on the middle-school students. The curriculum was implemented within seventh grade social studies classrooms during the full academic year. This developmental setting is important because the middle school environment is a critical stage for students' development of positive views of their academic futures (Ryan, 2001; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999; Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Roeser et al., 1998). Some research suggests that it is not unusual for students' sense of school achievement to drop from the start of seventh grade to the start of eighth grade, raising concerns about youth beginning to disengage from school during this developmental year (Ryan, 2001; Roeser et al., 1998). One goal of the partnership was to catch students most at risk of failing during this critical stage and engage them in healthy socio-emotional developmental pathways.

When research is embedded within new program implementation a uniquely valuable opportunity emerges for all partners, especially when the research paradigm incorporates flexibility to respond to participants and monitor subsequent change. Roderick, Easton, and Sebring (2009) suggest five important commitments for research within such a partnership include maintaining accessible data; partner engagement; rigorous research with accessible results; longitudinal studies that build upon each other; and broad outreach with transparency to the public. Longitudinal school research designs in particular must be nimble enough to adjust to factors outside the control of the partnership while keeping the best interests of the children at the center. The approach allows partners to develop mutual goals and build trusting relationships, and when formal feedback systems are put into place,

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[2]For more information on community school reform, goals, and student outcomes visit the National Center on Community Schools (http://nationalcenterforcommunityschools.childrensaidsociety.org/faqs/on-community-schools).

provides a framework that makes research accessible to partners and facilitates strategic adjustments in educational approaches where necessary.

University and Community Partner Details

The three key partners working with the middle school are introduced in the following section explaining the needs met through the partnership and role played with the other partners.

Community-based organization and curriculum

The nonprofit youth development organization has been based in a Midwest urban area since 1898. It is also the home for the TOP Program or TOP which is a service-learning program that promotes the six principles of positive youth development (known commonly as "the six Cs"). These principles include Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring and the more recently added seventh C, Contribution (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005). These principles build on work conducted by Erikson, Ainsworth and others who identify the task of positive youth settings to offer opportunities for pro-social interactions and foster characteristics such as resilience, moral competencies, self-efficacy, future orientation, and positive self-identity (Catalano et al., 2005; Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, and Noam, 2010).

TOP is a national program with 65 partners in 33 states and Washington, DC and often is implemented in high-poverty neighborhoods. The program served more than 35,000 teens in 2013 in community-based, in-school, or after-school settings. The partnering middle school was keen to incorporate the program. Delivered weekly for one hour over the course of an entire school year, TOP focuses on helping students develop a sense of purpose, life skills, and healthy behaviors through three program components: (1) weekly educational peer group meetings; (2) positive adult guidance and support; and (3) community service learning.

In the partnering middle school, the youth have their weekly TOP meeting on one day during their social studies class period. With this model every student receives TOP once a week for the entire academic year and students discuss a curriculum that covers topics such as goal-setting, relationships, decision-making, peer pressure and influence, adolescent health and sexuality. They also engage in 20 hours or more of service which promotes community awareness. A trained TOP facilitator, guiding delivery of the program, works closely with administrators and social studies teachers. The community organization employs full-time staff to help with the program but also worked with the university partner to recruit MSW students as TOP facilitators and coordinate training. They also provided leadership with facilitating funding partners to implement and sustain the social and emotional program in the middle school.

University partner: Institute for School Collaborations

The Institute specialists were invited by the school district to work in collaboration with the school leadership team, to facilitate a healthy organizational structure for teaching and learning. They are now in their fifth year in the middle school incorporating strategies consistent with professional development and educational action research (Breault, 2013; Catelli et al., 2000; Thomas-Brown et al., 2010). These include participating in building leadership meetings, attending job alike meetings and data day-meetings where teachers collaborate to reflect on key goals, student performance and

teaching pedagogy; observing school events; conducting interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders; observing classroom instruction; and talking to teachers about the progress and problems in their reform efforts. This structural framework provided an important grounding that helped identify student risk factors that might be addressed by incorporating the TOP program and also advise on where within the organizational structure TOP might be implemented.

It is important to note that with such research partnerships there are often several studies unfolding during the academic year. The Institute served as a navigator for programs and studies being conducted by several different departments and worked closely with the school of social work during the research design, IRB review and consent process, and worked with school leadership to facilitate data collection associated with students' personal records.

University partner: School of Social Work

The school of social work connected to the partnership through research, graduate training, practicum placements, funding, and systemic support for the research. There was keen interest on the part of the school in advancing and studying a community school approach that was based in the needs of urban school districts and which included new roles for social workers, promoting students' social and emotional development. This partnership provided just such an opportunity.

Leading the effort was a faculty PI, a postdoctoral research fellow, and a doctoral student. MSW students were also included as research assistants. Working with the community nonprofit partner, the Institute, and school leadership, the social work research team led on the research design and implementation. Members of the research team were present in the school several times during the academic year to administer pre/post surveys, conduct adult interviews and student reflection groups, and observations. The research team also often called formal and informal partnership meetings to build trust, share perceptions, raise questions, and inform the research process. The school and faculty PI also provided all funding for the research, when additional resources did not bear out.

In addition, the school of social work provided support for the community organization to integrate their facilitator training within the graduate social work educational program, offering the training as part of the credit-bearing curriculum in the master of social work program (MSW). The students also received a training certificate in TOP an evidence-based practice, which is helpful with post-graduate employment. Those trained were then eligible for practica as TOP facilitators, which also counts as credit toward their degrees. Social work-trained facilitators were preferred for this role, because of MSW training in diversity, group work, and empowerment. Once placed as a TOP facilitator, the students were provided with a small stipend as well as further professional development in the organization's approach to evidence-based practice, the program's core goals and principles, and its role in the school environment.

Data Sources from Program-Research Partnership

A longitudinal, mixed methods case study design was developed to measure impact. During year one of the study (academic year 2012–13), 218 students in the seventh grade participated in the program. From this pool, 112 students obtained parental consent to participate in the research process. There

was also a comparison school that did not receive the TOP program. In this school, 106 seventh grade students participated in the pre and post-test surveys. Surveys contained approximately 100 items that included demographic and program participation questions and measures of social-emotional skills, academic engagement, civic attitudes as well as perceptions of possible moderating variables such as neighborhood factors, parental engagement, and peer influences. A subsample of approximately 40 students also participated in reflection groups representing approximately 30% of the total study sample at the program school. Social studies teachers, school administrators and TOP facilitators participated in 45–60 minute interviews. Student artifacts, grades, test scores and behavioral data are also included. These data are used as relevant below to illustrate key points regarding the partnership process.

This case study cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the mid-western, mid-size urban area in which the program school is located; the school itself represents a unique context for reforms efforts with an engaged board and leadership. Also, while the program was implemented for all students across the same grade level, participation in the research was voluntary and required written parental consent for each year of the study. Every effort was made to maximize participation each year the sample of students consenting was less than the total number of students participating in the program. However, collected data suggest that the participating subsample was representative of the student population. Additionally, the number of reflection groups was expanded in year two to maximize inclusion of students' diverse voices.

Key Findings

Key themes emerged through the partnership process, which provide insight to school reform efforts and relate to the five principles advanced by Bryk and colleagues (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Lubbescu, & Easton, 2010).The following expands on those five principles, providing data for illustration.

1. The partnership as a catalyst for change in the school

When it becomes apparent that a school is struggling, it isn't unusual for well-meaning organizations and individuals to offer various types of programs or support. The leader of the partnering middle school highlighted that these many offers can be difficult for the administrative team to navigate within the context of school reform goals. Also, ideas may come from influential members of the community where refusal could be viewed as ungracious. One benefit to this university-community partnership was the role the university played in helping intercede and provide coherence for diverse school reform ideas, research studies and programs being implemented with a view of maximizing impact around short and long-term impact as well as sustainability. Particularly for the partnering middle school, alignment of programs was a key goal and finding professionals able to mutually collaborate in the middle school environment had been a challenge. The school leader highlighted that her trust of the partnering organizations and their training and supervision of the staff were critical for impact and sustainability as she clarifies that *they are always very professional, always on top of their game.*

Since this school reform effort included programs other than TOP, the university institute staff provided important navigation of those efforts. They met with faculty and staff to discuss mutual goals and provided suggestions on how to facilitate several projects occurring within the same

district and school simultaneously. Some of the challenges were logistical and required both the university and school district to rethink their traditional approaches. For example, one concern was asking parents to sign multiple consent forms for different projects from the same university. Partners felt it would make sense to propose one consent form that lists the projects and descriptions, and provide that to the parents for consideration and signature. They approached the university Institutional Review Board with the idea, but this approach was not approved and researchers were required to provide separate consent letters for each project. However, the partners agreed to collaborate with consent letter distribution to minimize disruption for teachers and the academic day and in a manner that facilitated response to parents' questions. After consultation with the school principal, it was determined that for the TOP program—which was for all students across one grade level, sending copies home in the registration packets distributed in the summer and being available with information tables during on-site registration days in August would maximize opportunities to inform parents, respond to their questions, and obtain their written, informed consent. This process worked reasonably well and was further refined for years two and three. It also provided an added benefit of including the research team and TOP facilitators in the social culture of the school that is evident during registration when families, students, and faculty are reconnecting after the summer break.

The influence of the partnership further expanded through improved communication when a school-community committee was formed to bring the various programs together in one monthly meeting. This committee also included parent leaders, teachers, school staff, and eventually the TOP facilitators, thus providing community engagement and voice as well as distributed school leadership. The school leader also noted that as the partnership became more embedded in the school's organizational structure it helped assure sustainability or reform efforts when core faculty left – which is inevitable in all schools, but a greater concern in turnaround schools where high personnel mobility disrupts new professional relationships and programmatic efforts (Torre, Allensworth, Jagesic, Sebastian, Salmonowicz, Meyers, Gerdeman, 2013).

2. Enhancing parent–school–community ties through service learning

The service learning or community-based learning component of the TOP program provided new pathways for the students and the school community to connect to other organizations and people in their community. Service projects were conducted at field sites in the community and at the school itself as a service site. Students' field experiences were at neighboring locations such as retirement homes, food pantries, daycare centers, and immigration and migrant support centers. During year one there was skepticism by some adults in the partnership that the students could manage field trips or that they would have a meaningful impact. One participant was concerned about students going to a retirement home. "*I must tell you that I was apprehensive about going …I just didn't have a good feeling about that.*" However, she discovered that the activity went very well and the students were very interested in the elders' experiences learning *"some valuable lessons."*

School-based activities have included school fundraisers for families of disadvantage within the school community and advocacy efforts on issues that directly impacted some students, such as bullying and gun violence. A TOP facilitator highlighted that it is important to encourage adolescents to engage in service learning that is meaningful or "*resonates*" for them. Giving students' options or "*voice and choice*" were viewed as critical. Students incorporated posters around the school, social media, and a letter writing campaign to elected officials that also overlapped with the human

rights and political advocacy curriculum in social studies.

Qualitative data further support these findings, suggesting that the service learning activities were catalysts that connected at-risk students to the community. For example, one student from a family that moved frequently indicated that the service learning projects early in the fall semester helped her integrate into the middle school community, partly because of the team work with other students but also because of the field experiences at places like the retirement center which helped her feel connected, "…*it really had me relate and I find myself liking [the community and middle school] more because of the people at the center.*"

3. Building professional capacity through relational trust

Relational trust has been documented as one of the key levers in transformational school change. It leads to academic gains in the lowest performing schools because it facilitates healthy professional relationships (Bryk et al., 2010; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996). Qualitative results suggest that building trusting relationships between the adult facilitators of the TOP program implementation was important to set the example of healthy social and emotional interactions for students. This took time, but as one facilitator clarified, *"that very slowly we've developed that relationship that has been improving."*

Results from teacher and facilitator interviews suggest that there was some apprehension between the role of the teacher and the role of the facilitator in the classroom setting, especially when the TOP program was being implemented. One teacher clarified, "*I've just basically taken on a disciplinarian role. I don't get involved in their conversations.*" Another teacher indicated that she did jump in during TOP, but facilitators worried that the teacher's comments might discourage open student communication. Facilitators and teachers realized that through regular communication there was an optimal balance of teacher participation that encouraged full student participation, but it took time and a few missteps to find this "sweet spot".

Teachers also recognized that it was the first year for the facilitators and wondered what their plans were for the next year−expressing hope that the facilitators would stay and that by working together teachers reflected that, "*we see us[the classroom collaboration between teacher and facilitator] getting much better and more effective next year and years to come.*" Comments like these support the desire from veteran school faculty in low performing schools to build relational trust and reciprocity with those partners coming in from the community. Other important communication strategies are periodic meetings throughout the year with partners and an annual meeting with school leadership to report on the outcome of the research.

4. Implications for middle school students and improving student-centered learning

The impact of the partnership and the TOP program suggest several key promising directions for students' academic and socio-emotional growth. Results from pre and post-test surveys from the first academic year suggest that students from the program school were less likely to deliberately skip class than students from the comparison school, even while controlling for various individual-level factors (McBride, Robertson, Chung, 2014). Students in the program school were three and a half times less likely to skip class than students from the comparison school. Similarly, at the end of the first program year, there were significant differences in suspensions by school when controlling for

parent's education, household structure and gender. Students in the program school were almost four times less likely to report having suspensions when compared to students at the comparison school (McBride et.al, 2014).

Qualitative results provide additional context for understanding why students may stay in class and have fewer suspensions. Students' comments suggest that their service learning experiences supported their school goals. One student clarified that her conversations with several of the elders at the retirement homes were important because they showed that the elders cared about the students, insisted that they stay in school, and *"tried to tell us that gangs and smoking are bad."* Several students reflected that they remembered those conversations and were encouraged to stay away from negative influences.

Both students and teachers reflected on the relationships developed between the students and the facilitators noting that the facilitators' more informal, positive, and values-neutral approaches encouraged students' to discuss concerns before they got out of hand. In one example, students mentioned that they valued facilitators' views and when a student disagreement erupted in the hallway, the facilitator stepped in and advised that they *"shouldn't use violence."* The students listened and stopped. School faculty also suggested that there were fewer physical fights erupting from minor jostling in the hallways, suggesting that the school environment improved because students learned strategies to cope with behaviors that they previously viewed as aggressive challenges.

At-risk students may have received unique benefits from TOP's team approach. One teacher elaborates about a student identified with a learning disability who had no history of participating in group activities, choosing to participate in one of the facilitator-led activities to create a team circle. *"He walked around and he walked around like he wanted to join in until he was one step away…and he actually took that step and joined the circle … (other students) just took it as normal, they just accepted it… I was shocked."*

The survey results also highlighted positive shifts in at-risk students' engagement in school. Some students indicated in the pre-test that they had at least one risk factor e.g., either failed a course, obtained failing grades, received at least one suspension, skipped school, became or caused a pregnancy or had or fathered a baby (McBride, et.al, 2014). These students comprised nearly half of each school sample during year one. Sixty-six students from the comparison school and 65 students from the program school qualified for inclusion into an "at risk" sample (N=128). These "at-risk" students were not statistically different from one another in regard to gender, race, mom's education or household composition. The students considered "at-risk" were less likely to report failing grades and suspensions than students in the comparison group (McBride et.al 2014). Furthermore at-risk students in the program school indicated that they had more input into deciding about rules or activities in class than the students from the comparison school. They also noted that there were more people in their neighborhood who care about or might intervene if they were seen doing something wrong than students in the comparison school. These differences suggest that those most at-risk of academic failure were more likely to feel connected to their community after participating in one year of the program.

5. Social work partnership as a catalyst for instructional guidance on socio-emotional development

Faculty were clearly surprised by some of the changes they witnessed in their students. One faculty

participant said that the service learning activities, as well as the students participating in team activities during the TOP club, provided her with an opportunity to see, "*a different side of my kids that I don't get to see in the classroom.*" This new perspective on the students suggested that faculty gained a more holistic understanding of students' abilities that "*helps you build that relationship, bridge that gap.*" One faculty participant noted that when another teacher in the school asked her how she knew so much about a particular child, the teacher responded that "*…actually I know it from chicken-check-in…*" the activity at the beginning of the TOP club where students share something personal. The facilitators also became increasingly important as mentors for vulnerable students and both adult and student participants reflected on that role. Teachers and facilitators noticed that over time students felt comfortable stopping into the TOP office to discuss a service learning project or other issue with the facilitators.

Faculty and facilitators mentioned that the social studies curriculum was enhanced through beautification projects in St. Louis locations that also connected students with their history. A projects to the state's capitol engaged students in civic action and propelled one teacher to write a grant proposal to expand the state capital project for subsequent years. Rather than a one-time event, service-learning projects have evolved each year in a manner that builds relationships between the school community and the neighboring community.

Discussion

The results of the first years of this school–university–community partnership suggest that communication, interdependence, newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective ownership of goals, and reflection are key for urban school reform predicated on external partnerships. These processes were consistent with other research suggesting that increased trust helped solidify the partnership (Altshuler, 2003; Bronstein, 2003; Eason, Atkins, & Dyson, 2000). Yet, given the multiple demands upon pre-K–12 administrators and teachers and a sometimes turbulent history of school reform efforts, introducing a new type of partnership may be viewed with skepticism. Schools build relational trust in day-to-day social exchanges. Talking honestly with colleagues about what is and is not working exposes one's vulnerabilities. Without trust, genuine conversations are unlikely, particularly with veteran teachers hardened by reform efforts (Breault, 2013). When one adds into this a partnership with a university, there are additional power issues and cultural differences. Through words and actions, partnership participants show their obligations toward others, and others discern these intentions. Trust grows through exchanges in which actions validate these expectations. Even simple interactions, if successful, can enhance collective capacities for more complex subsequent actions. In this respect, increasing trust and deepening organizational change are reciprocal, but the commitment must be a long term one with multiple individuals involved at all levels of the organizations.

Comments from facilitators, teachers, and students support the notion that partnering on the program was helpful for creating regular pathways for communication between teachers and facilitators. Improved communication helped shift classroom culture to support student-centered learning and professional guidance around healthy socio-emotional development for young people. This included the school administration's and teachers' willingness to provide a mentoring or professional development role for TOP facilitators new to the school so that they could quickly connect to the school environment. Also mentioned was the positive impact for teachers and facilitators of consistency in facilitators at the school because it built trust and the ability to learn

from mistakes, which improved planning for future efforts. These regular pathways of interaction are critical for educational change (Thomas-Brown et al., 2010).

For example, with the service learning experience the ongoing collaboration with the same elders was viewed as important by both students and adults. It was also suggested that incorporating students' parents in service learning was important as a long-term goal that would help them become integral partners within the school community, which can be particularly helpful in ethnically diverse school communities (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010; Mapp, 2012; Youniss, 1988). This research is also compelling as schools strive to find ways to build camaraderie and strong community-school ties particularly at the middle school level where involvement has traditionally declined (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Epstein & Salinas, 2004, Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010, Mapp, 2012). The middle school in this study has already made gains in developing partnerships through their regular leadership meeting. They have also developed a Saturday morning program to provide additional study skills and enrichment for students and programs for parents.

The results from the research on this partnership supports ongoing efforts from institutions of higher education that include schools of social work. These partnerships may be uniquely qualified to enrich pre-K–12 systemic changes that embody ecological approaches consistent with healthy child educational and socio-emotional development (Allen-Meares, 1998; Bailey, & McNally Koney, 1996; Clancy, 1995). Embracing a common framework focused on the partnership as a catalyst for change—by building professional and instructional capacity and enriching student-centered learning—provides a meaningful foundation.

It may also provide an important pipeline for training social workers and educational professionals for culturally diverse pre-K–12 school environments (Catelli et al., 2000). Ongoing research embedded in the partnership effort could support a better understanding of the pathways for students' social and emotional development and the connection to achievement and relevant practice strategies within the school context. Research on these relationships between academic achievement and, for example, student efficacy, sense of belonging, or civic engagement is limited, particularly as it relates to schools that are ethnically diverse or have significant numbers of have significant numbers of low-income families (Hoffman et al., 2010; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999).

Finding better methods to identify impact and then the ability to translate research findings for wide use across disciplines and with practitioners is viewed as an important aspect of such partnerships (Roderick et al., 2009) and responds to the growing concern of bringing research to practice (Schneider, 2014). A partnership that revolves around social and emotional learning that can impact academic success may be a catalyst for revitalizing school communities reaping unforeseen benefits particularly in struggling schools or within ethnically diverse neighborhoods (Youniss, & Hart, 2005; Kahne, & Sporte, 2008; Hoffman et al., 2010). It brings institutions of higher education and schools of social work into the school reform effort in meaningful and impactful ways (Breault, 2010).

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